

Ambiguities and Performatives: and Performances, Too. Graham Hough; Chris Kraus/ Jenny Turner

Patrick Hutchings

Abstract

The most striking sentence in the late Graham Hough's essay 'An Eighth Type of Ambiguity' is: "...behind Empson's seven types of ambiguity there lurks an eighth – ambiguity between intended and achieved meaning" (p. 223). Hough illustrates the difference between *intended* and *achieved* meaning elegantly, in a series of pieces of literary analysis with which none of the old 'New Critics' could disagree, and which any post-Derrida, post-Theory (theory of what?) critic need not cavil at. For all the commonsensicality of Hough's literary analysis, it is not quite clear that Empson's seven types and Hough's eighth type are of the same *logical* type. This is a question to which I shall have to return. It is the issue crucial to what seems to be Hough's claim to add 1 to Empson's 7: If, indeed, that *is* his claim.

Introduction

The most striking sentence in the late Graham Hough's essay 'An Eighth Type of Ambiguity' is: "...behind Empson's seven types of ambiguity there lurks an eighth – ambiguity between intended and achieved meaning."¹ Hough illustrates the difference between *intended* and *achieved* meaning elegantly, in a series of pieces of literary analysis with which none of the old 'New Critics' could disagree, and at which any post-Derrida, post-Theory (theory of what?) critic need not cavil. For all the commonsensicality of Hough's literary analysis, it is not quite clear that Empson's seven types and Hough's eighth type are of the same *logical* type. This is a question to which I shall have to return. It is the issue crucial to what seems to be Hough's claim to add 1 to Empson's seven: If, indeed, that *is* his claim.

Extending Austin

Hough 'ostensively' defines 'intention' by reference to G. E. M. Anscombe's *Intention* (1957) and J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).² I offer a quick reminder:

1) Austin's first distinction was between *constative* utterances: 'The cat is on the mat'; or 'I hear rain on the roof'; 'No you don't, it's the dishwasher changing cycles'. *Constatives* are utterances which can be: True or False.

1.1) Austin later changed the term 'constative' and substituted '*locutionary*', which amounts not to a distinction, but only to a change of terminology as both terms mean the same thing.

Patrick Hutchings holds an honorary position in Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne.

¹ Graham Hough, 'An Eighth Type of Ambiguity', in D. Newton-De-Molina (eds), *On Literary Intention: Critical Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), p. 223. Hough never negotiated the difficulty with 'intended meaning' raised by W.K. Wimsatt's 'The Intentional Fallacy' in *The Verbal Icon Studies in the Meaning of Poetry Written in Collaboration with Monroe C. Beardsley* (London: Methuen, 1970). 'The Intentional Fallacy' is often reprinted in critical anthologies. There are useful remarks about 'gaps' between an author's intention and what gets written in Seamus Perry's 'With a *Da bin Ich!*' (a review of Frances Wilson's *Burning Man: The Ascent of D.H. Lawrence* [2021]) in *The London Review of Books*, vol. 43, no. 17 (2021), pp. 23-26.

² G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957); J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962).

2) The – radical – distinction is between *locutionary* utterances and *illocutionary* speech acts. The latter do not just remark on the lived world – ‘the cat isn’t on the mat, I let her out’ – and speech acts which make something *happen* in that world, ‘Please shut the door...then.’ **Door gets shut.** The *Italic* is illocutionary, the **Bold** is *perlocutionary*. (See 3).

3) If an illocutionary speech act has the intended consequences it is – in Austin’s terms – *perlocutionary*. For illocutionary speech acts to act at all, and so become *perlocutionary* there must be real-life, social conventions within which a speech act can be – properly – made. In the city of bikes, Oxford: ‘If you are buying a new one, I’ll offer you five pounds for your old one’; ‘Five pounds, right’. Both sides shake hands. Transaction completed.

The perlocutionary speech act changes the world – if it does – and in some cases the enabling structure may be vague: Such cases are always contestable.

There is a set up of five performative verbs: 1) Verdictives, ‘It’s in decent order – for an old bike’; 2) Exercitives, police constable, ‘You will have to move sir, this is a “no parking zone”’; 3) Comissives, ‘You may park your car in my drive, if you lend me a key so you don’t block my car’; 4) Expositives, ‘You’ll need to convince me that the mileage of this Mini is what is indicated on the dashboard – she looks at bit more worn than that: the tyres have almost no tread left’; 5) Behavities: ‘You can go to a May Ball in a black tie: where you have been invited to is very grand, so tailcoat and white tie’... ‘No you can’t wear a readymade bow tie – if you can’t tie your own, ask your girlfriend to do it – all women can tie bows’.

This list of five is open to amendments and additions. When we come to illocutionaries in literary contexts, appraisals in art criticism or art history, and so on we shall see why Austin did not want to go there. In literature the enabling-conditions of illocutionaries and perlocutionaries are often unclear – and attempts to make them clearer are – often as not – contestable. For more on Speech Acts see link in the footnote below.³ Hough has to handle the extension of Austin’s famous notion of *speech act* from the Ordinary Language Philosophy of the day, to the criticism of poetry, and so on, which Austin explicitly said would lie *outside* the realm of ‘speech acts’ proper. Austin’s lectures, the most witty and useful through which I sat, were concerned: 1) with demolishing epistemological ‘problems’⁴ – he was particularly scathing about a book of A. J. Ayer’s⁵ – and 2) setting up the logic of *speech acts*. His examples were – as examples were in Oxford in those days – homely. Saying ‘Done’ over a deal and shaking hands. Or saying ‘I do’ (twice) before a priest or an official empowered to marry people. Thus: the constraints of *speech acts* were: 1) tight; and 2) well known. We have all done a deal: some of us have married. And the religious/ civil establishment of marriage is so well known as to be in no need of explication. Austin could take for granted: getting married, or selling/ buying a bicycle.

Speech Acts as Performative Utterances

Speech acts such as ‘Done’ in the buying or selling a bike, or in marriage with its ‘I do’ – twice – Austin called ‘a performative utterance’. ‘Done’ and ‘I do’ are the utterances which switch on the real consequences of being married or exchanging of goods for money or as a swap. Among the necessary – and very well understood – conditions of clinching a deal or getting married are performative utterances ‘Done!’ ‘I do’ x 2. However without the institutions-as-conditions of buying/selling, getting wed, how would *performative utterance* behave? Very

³ Federica Berdini and Claudia Bianchi, ‘John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960)’, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2023). At: <https://iep.utm.edu/john-austin/>. Accessed 29/05/2023.

⁴ See J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962).

⁵ A. J. Ayer, *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 [1955]).

oddly at times: Lewis Carroll's 'what I say three times is true', is trumped by: 'I make a performative utterance (just once will do) and *eo ipso* something happens/is made to happen.' This in contexts in which the – absolutely necessary – conditional constraints are, often, totally unclear. 'Illocutionary act' and – more importantly 'perlocutionary acts' – get bandied about nowadays in a way of which Austin would not have approved. These are cases where the enabling conditions are vague. Buying or swapping a bike and getting married have clear and well-known conditions.

From the fact that Austin would not have approved of exotic or literary illocutionary acts⁶ it does not follow that he was any kind of Philistine. Austin was simply being: 1) careful in setting up the local logic of performatives and 'performative utterances'; 2) too careful to mix in with literary utterances, whose constraining conditions were – to him then and, possibly, to us now – not as *perspicuous* as buying (or swapping) bikes or getting married, *so due to unclarity, a not-meeting-all-the-conditions-of-being* 'performative utterances', some *seeming* performative utterance are still-born. The expression, 'performative utterance', in 'Theory' days and in post-'Theory' days gets used rather loosely. An example, which Austin did not use but might have, is 'heckle'. Heckling is a well-known thing. I myself have heckled political candidates, a tedious Vice-Chancellor, and so effectively heckled a couple of *apparatchiks* from the Ministry of Education in Canberra – tasked with telling us to knuckle down to University 'reforms', *soi disant* – that when they tried it on next day with our sister faculty, the members marched in, and said '*Seig Heil*', and promptly wheeled about and left the room. The heckle is an OK institution: and we all know the occasions and the rules. In *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, Michael Ignatieff tells us that J. L. Austin was a heckler, in particular of politicians who favoured the appeasement of Hitler.⁷ What would be the constraints of speech acts outside 'obvious' institutions? What would the constraints of *speech acts* be in literature?

What are Speech Acts in Literature? Is Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick*⁸ a Long Speech Act?

I have been surprised by the various extensions of the expression '*speech act*' in both literary criticism and in highbrow journalism. A recent example from *The London Review of Books* serves as a neat instance, from 2015. In a review, by Jenny Turner of *I Love Dick*, a book written by Chris Kraus, one finds Turner using a not-quite-Austinian notion of '*speech act*'. Kraus' book which Turner – if obliquely – calls '...a bit unpleasant' contains not just Turner's, but also Kraus', use of the expression 'performative philosophy'. The term 'speech act' is used by Turner, but not by Kraus. We need the full quotation:

So, yes, it's true that shaming is predominantly something that men do – or try to do – to women. And yet it's also possible for individual men to be shamed as well, and let's be honest about it, Kraus's book would not be so powerful and

⁶ Hough, 'An Eighth Type of Ambiguity', p. 225.

⁷ Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Vintage 2000), pp.72-73.

⁸ Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (London: Tuskar Rock Press 2015 [1997]). See Elaine Blair, 'Life and Letters: A Female Antihero: Losing in Love but Winning in Art', *The New Yorker*, vol. XCII, No. 38, 21 November (2016), pp. 42-47. There is a photograph of Kraus on p. 42. The article contains an interesting account of the novel. The Tuskar Rock Press edition has an 'Afterword' by Joan Hawkins titled 'Theoretical Fictions'. Kraus spent an early part of her life in Wellington, New Zealand, and has a BA from my old College. She is unenthusiastic about NZ. The novel is full of mentions of Theory, but is totally accessible to those not up in it. My favourite quote is: "... critical texts are unstable, are signifying chains which feed off themselves. Even critical texts can be / should be seen as "fiction" (p. 256). Frank Kermode would like this: he writes: "To talk about literature is to give a rhetorical performance about rhetorical performances..." See Frank Kermode, *Not Entitled: A Memoir* (London: Flamingo/ Harper Collins, 1996), p.196. Science has the Atomic Table. Literary criticism has nothing of the sort. Nevertheless, it sometimes pretends to. 'Theory' had tickets on itself, but *ILD* mentions Theory more often than it uses it.

entertaining if Dick were not an actual person, as capable as any woman of getting hurt. ‘I think of our story as *performative philosophy*,’⁹ Kraus writes at one point and she’s right. The entire book is a *gigantic speech-act*, and not a kind one, revealing the common love-rat in all his pink-skinned pathos. Perhaps one day Dick will publish some sort of *Birthday Letters* project, letting us know what this has felt like.¹⁰

Dick’s *Birthday Letters* project being not forthcoming, did *I Love Dick* elicit a reaction? If it did, the speech-act of *ILD* could be – if a little obliquely – perlocutionary if Dick bit back. And he did. Joan Hawkins in her ‘Afterword: Theoretical Fictions’ (bound into *ILD*) writes:

The New Yorker magazine revealed that the “Dick” of the book is Dick Hebdige, and rumor had it that Hebdige tried to block the publication of *I Love Dick* by threatening to sue Kraus for invasion of privacy.¹¹

So Dick bit back: *ILD* was – if obliquely – perlocutionary. It was a perlocutionary speech-act: and a fizzer. The book was published. Austin would sigh: And shrug. He would have been content to leave messy and marginal cases to essayists, in literary or art criticism. Or: set up a game of ‘spot the dud’. Or: ‘Spot the look-alikes which are not Austinian’.

Let us look not to a *faux* Austin case, but at one about someone ‘having performative fun’ well outside Austin’s usages. There are uses of the word/notion ‘performative’ which are outside J. L. Austin’s rules. This can be confusing if: a) they are parasitic on; or b) are pseudo-Austin uses; or, c) if they are both, as when a)>b). On the other hand Austin had no prescriptive right to the word ‘performative’: it may be used in non-Austinian ways without breaking his rules, as (α) language changes or (β) in contexts where Austin’s usages are not relevant. Here is an example from *The Sunday Age*, a Melbourne newspaper. It is from an article which touches upon a young woman, who shall remain nameless, who was sniffing cocaine from a plate and was photographed in the act. The photo then appeared on social media. The journalist wrote: “To many of us, it is strange that such a video would have been taken in the first place, let alone uploaded to Instagram. But the rules of that game have flipped – for some, it is far stranger *not* to video yourself *having performative fun*...” The journalist, Jacqueline Maley, is in another part of the forest from Austin, and her usage is legitimate. It is a (β). The novel *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus would reward someone interested in teasing out real Austinian uses of ‘performative’ from pseudo-Austinian ones: and counting up Maley-Type instances.¹² As an Austinian I cast an eagle eye on uses of ‘performative’ in highbrow publications, the London and New York *Review[s] of Books*, *The New Yorker* and so on. Some are rather rum: or, perhaps, just α .

Shaming as in the Kraus novel one must admit is an exercise with enabling, conventional conditions: one is not quite clear about the expression ‘*performative philosophy*’. Under the ‘meaning<use’ rule, I found out when I read the novel that as a speech act it is very complex, and very funny. Of course, the *Dialogues* of Plato, and David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* could be called, if one chose, ‘performative philosophy’. Nevertheless I do understand the expression ‘a gigantic speech act’. In the present case it is a – lengthy – satire on a real, living, Dick. And the originator of the philosophical term ‘speech acts’, Professor Austin, *did*, in a sense, ‘performative philosophy’. His witty and lucid lectures on speech acts, and his scathing demolition jobs on stale epistemology, were so well attended

⁹ ‘I think our story is performative philosophy’, Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 195. See also, ‘performatist self-portraits’, p. 200.

¹⁰ Jenny Turner, ‘Thanks for being called Dick’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 37, no. 24, 17 December (2015), p. 35 (italic added).

¹¹ Joan Hawkins, ‘Afterword: Theoretical Fictions’, in Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 254.

¹² See *The Sunday Age*, 12 September (2021), p. 14.

that the University of Oxford had to hire the Oxford cinema to hold all the people – gown or ticket only – who wanted to listen to him. And he did not lecture: he truly *performed*.

The highpoint of the performance always came when Austin, holding a text by Ayer away from his body as if it were infectious, proclaimed “Our Author says that human beings seen from a height, look like ants. They do not. They don’t scuttle about with what Kant might call ‘purposeful lack of purpose’, they still appear to be walking on two legs rather than on many feet, four or six – you will recall that Aristotle miscounted the number of legs on a spider – and, and this is crucial – they are insufficiently wasp-waisted.” The words ‘wasp-wasted’, were pronounced in a waspish tone.

Austin’s lectures were about performatives but, arguably, did not contain any live ones, only – as it were – bracketed ones. Examples of what could be performatives are not themselves active ones. This is an interesting logical point.¹³ In a review of a book on Thomas De Quincey, Nicholas Spice writes of the small, ever-talkative, opium addicted but excellent essayist De Quincey, “... whatever his subject, he *performed* himself in every sentence he wrote.”¹⁴ Austin’s put-down of a book by Ayer in the Oxford cinema was not the only occasion on which Austin – if dryly – dramatized. One might say that he too ‘performed himself’, on occasion. The wit was part of the man: and the wit was performed: but not – I think – a performative. But the point is debatable, and as I say, interesting. Performatives differ from performances, but a performative could fit in to at least some kinds of performance. A Constitutional Monarch performing the ritual of the opening of parliament could, after reading the script given to him by the Prime Minister suddenly announce: “At this moment I/ We abdicate.” This would be a clear performative within a performance. I do not recall how Nixon resigned as President, but he could have given on the TV an *ad hoc* ‘State of the Union’ speech, and then said: “I hereby resign.” If you want an *outré* example, in a world become dystopic, fried up by climate change, an Anglican, Episcopalian or Greek Orthodox Priest might perform their own Marriage Service, reading the accustomed ritual as priest, then both ask the priest’s accustomed ‘Do you...’ and reply as bridegroom ‘I do!’. This no doubt would be irregular, but logically possible nevertheless.

Of Satire and Background

Applying speech-act theory to a literary text Hough deals elegantly with Donne’s:

Goe, and catche a falling star
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me, where all the past yeares are,
Or who cleft the Divels foot,

¹³ Austin’s principle does not apply to just any use of the word ‘performative’. A usage of ‘performative’ close to Jacqueline Maley’s I encountered in a recent *The New Yorker* in Clare Bucknell’s review of Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar Wilde: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2021). One finds: “Wilde grew up surrounded by performative personalities. His father, Sir William Wilde was a surgeon, a polymath, and a philanthropist whose terrific energy masked private bouts of depression, his mother Lady Jane Wilde, was an Irish-nationalist poet who wrote under the pseudonym Speranza (‘hope’ in Italian). She liked to claim that she was descended from Dante... both parents were dazzling talkers; Wilde became one too...” See Clare Bucknell, ‘Split Verdict’, *The New Yorker*, vol. XCVII, no. 32, 11 October (2021), p. 68, “Wilde made his image into a performance...”. The ‘performatives’ here do not in any – clear – sense become *perlocutionary*: this even though his parents obviously influenced Oscar.

¹⁴ See Nicholas Spice, ‘The Animalcule’, a review of Frances Wilson’s *Guilty Thing: A Life of Thomas De Quincey*, *The London Review of Books*, vol. 39, no. 10, 18 May (2017), pp. 3ff. At: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n10/nicholas-spice/the-animalcule>. Accessed 01/06/2023. See also, “De Quincey, for whom autobiography was not about the ‘mere facts’ of an inner life but about the public performance of the self,” p. 8. Kraus had a precedent for her self-performance in *ILD*, although she may not have read De Quincey.

Teach me to heare Mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envies stinging
And finde
What winde

Serves to advance an honest minde.

Hough writes: “We can indeed recover the illocutionary act performed by this utterance. We can identify the intention in writing it – to satirize the falsity and corruption of the world. But this is not to interpret the stanza.” He then goes on elaborately to interpret it.¹⁵ As to Donne’s impossible command in the poem ‘Goe and catche a falling star’, Hough writes “[It] is not really a command, only the imitation of a command.” He goes on, “From Austin’s point of view this is a special ‘etiolated’ use of language; and the literary exegete has to content himself with this dusty answer.”¹⁶ But – as the rest of Hough’s essay shows us – it’s not so dusty, after all. Hough then asserts that Donne’s whole poem, from which he has taken a stanza is: “a satire on the inconsistency of women.” Of such satire, Hough says, “it is a vulgar and time-honoured theme in mediaeval and renaissance literature.”¹⁷ He develops his exegesis at length.

On all this I wish to make two, rather different, points: 1) The review quoted a few pages above, of Chris Kraus’s novel *I Love Dick* makes sense in the light of Hough’s reading of Donne. It is a satire, particular and not general, on a living person: and it is a ‘feminist’ satire. It reverses that usual – historical – fashion, making a man the butt of satire usually directed at women. Thus 2) Hough reaches his neat analysis of the Donne lines by referring to what I as an undergraduate in New Zealand in the 1940s called ‘Basil Willey stuff’. Willey wrote ‘background’ books; the seventeenth century one, the eighteenth century one, and the nineteenth century one. We had less use for the nineteenth century ones than for the others. Our University Libraries and the Parliamentary Library were full of nineteenth century books. But until Willey introduced us to the Cambridge Platonists, we had not heard of them, and probably could not have found any of their texts in the whole Dominion. This, even if we were up to reading them.

For Hough “Any written text is to some extent a *palimpsest*,” layers are superimposed on layers of previous writings, plus on ‘Basil Willey stuff’.¹⁸ He goes on to write, ‘The manifest layer [of a text] consists of the illocutionary acts of the author – intentional by definition... But any text also includes unrecognized assumptions and beliefs – those that the writer shares so thoroughly with his age as to be unaware of their presence, those that belong to the unexamined background of his personal life... the interpreter even of a historical document, who believes himself to be recovering the pure intended communication of the author,¹⁹ cannot afford to neglect them.’²⁰ Intention floats on culture, not on pure ‘I will say this’, but on a lot of things

¹⁵ Hough, ‘An Eighth Type of Ambiguity’, pp. 225ff.

¹⁶ Hough, ‘An Eighth Type of Ambiguity’, p. 226.

¹⁷ Hough, ‘An Eighth Type of Ambiguity’, p. 227.

¹⁸ Hough, ‘An Eighth Type of Ambiguity’, p. 235.

¹⁹ The present passion in the United States of America for an almost universal availability of firearms – even for clinically insane purchasers – is ‘justified’ by the Second Amendment. It reads: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” This clearly/ ‘clearly’ means: if you want to keep guns at home, join a Militia (if there is one). In the absence of Revolutionary War Militias or Wild West Sheriffs’ posses it would seem obvious that the right to bear arms – let alone the right to keep machine guns under the bed – has lapsed. But try telling that to the Supreme Court. The gun is no longer a legitimate – part time – soldier’s weapon. It has become a fetish. Properly to understand the present state of gun laws in the US would require more background history, and writing, than a foreigner could be expected to do. We need an American Basil Willey, *The Ballistic Background*.

²⁰ Hough, ‘An Eighth Type of Ambiguity’, p. 235-236.

said already, intended already, and not intended by the present author who with, ‘I will say this’ then goes on so to do.

There have been a lot of satirical novels, and no doubt the constraining, institutional, conditions of their being speech acts, and even performative utterances, could be carefully set out. “This will really offend Dick, read this and see!” Someone – but not me – might dig into Classical precedents – if any – or into the history of novels, *Pamela* and *Shamela*, and so on, down to now.²¹ The Ancients had plenty of satires, but few novels in any usual sense of ‘novel’. Beyond *The Golden Ass* I can’t recall one. The constraints and contexts of satirical novels being extended-speech-acts may be numerous, but not innumerable.

Ambiguity Between Intended and Achieved Meaning: #8

The heading above indicates what would have been for Hough his eighth ambiguity, to add to Empson’s seven. Did Hough successfully add his eighth? The trouble is, 1) that Hough said his eighth *lurks behind* Empson’s seven. He does not – unequivocally – say it could be added as a final member of Empson’s set *to* that set. And, 2) we could not analyse the “ambiguity between intended and achieved meaning” by making use of Empson’s seven or by way of finding an Empson-neutral procedure for deciding, between ‘intended and achieved’. But we could use quite another way. I suggest another way at the end of this article. Neither Hough nor myself would try the Derrida-Dada way.²² We were/ are both left-overs from the ‘New Criticism’ days. We would write, now, rather in the manner of the – living – American critic Charles Baxter. In current idiom, and with as few technical terms as possible, we would do what we could.

Does Achieved-Intended Meaning Float on a Sea of Culture?

The answer to this question is ‘yes’. If we read Hough’s article it is full of ‘Basil Willey stuff’: without – I reckon – any need on Hough’s part to reach-down copies of Willey. Hough’s readings of Donne and Shelley and his glancing reference to ‘Lycidas’ are clear, and carry conviction. There is no ‘New and Improved Factor X’. Far from it. It’s all plain, informed, stuff. His remarks on Milton go deepish through the laid-down strata of meaning at the base-line of ‘Western’ – and English – Literature.

Are Hough’s #8 and Empson’s 7 of the same Logical Type?

This is the question which I promised on page 1 to return to. It is by no means an easy one to answer. First: are Empson’s ambiguities²³ themselves of the same logical type? Look at them:

- 1) First type ambiguities arise when a detail is effective in several ways at once e.g. by comparisons with several points of likeness, antithesis, with several points of difference...
- 2) The second-type ambiguities two or more alternative meanings are resolved into one...
- 3) The condition for third-type ambiguity is that two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously...
- 4) In the fourth type the alternative meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author...

²¹ Morris Golden, ‘Public Contexts and Imagining Self in *Pamela* and *Shamela*’, *English Literary History*, vol. 53, no. 2 (1986), pp. 311-329.

²² *Pharmakon*: Derrida rightly points out that this can be construed as ‘poison’ or ‘medicine’: So? Consult your GP. Or Liddell and Scott. Again ‘let’ in ‘I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me’, *Hamlet*, Act One, Scene One is at odds with Shakespeare’s ‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment’, Sonnet 116. See also Sonnets 25, 36, 105. My first passport was *Hamlet*-ish: ‘...to allow to pass without let or hindrance’. So?

²³ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966 [1030]), ‘Contents’.

- 5) The fifth type is a fortunate confusion...
- 6) In the sixth type what is said is contradictory and the reader enforced to invent interpretations...
- 7) The seventh type is that of full contradiction, marking a division in the author's mind...

The obvious question is: are these seven of the same logical type? Number 7 has always been a scandal to the philosophical mind. One is inclined to say: 'Not of the same logical type, but has a family resemblance – with 7 as the black sheep of the family'.²⁴ This said, the question: 'Is Hough's #8 of the same logical type as Empson's 7?' lapses.

What remains is: 'Is Hough's #8 in the same "family resemblance" set as 7 is?' This, again, is a difficult question.

- 1) One would be inclined at first sight to say: 'No', because Empson's 7 give procedures; 'Look for any or some of the ambiguities on the list: and decide whether they are discrete or merge or overlap in any given case'.
- 2) Whereas 'Look for the ambiguity between intended and achieved meaning'²⁴ gives no – even implied – technical instructions.

I now have a German car, which came without a handbook, only a brochure with photographs and arrows pointing to this or that part. When I drove Rovers (90s and one 110 Special), there were handbooks, and under the glove compartment a little drawer full of simple tools. Open the bonnet of my current car and one cannot identify anything. Hough's implicit command, 'Find the ambiguity between intended and achieved meaning' is addressed to specialized literary 'motor mechanics'. He himself was one of these. Empson is an, 'eyes on the text' man: Hough was a private eye who soon found out where to look, and for what. He always takes the cultural *lake*, the cultural *underlay*, 'the thing *behind* the Empsonian 7' as needing as much attention as the text. If you like: being behind, or at home in the underlay, he is more 'in the know'; he has visited the actors' dressing-rooms; he has used the lead-line; he is more profound.

One is for purely personal reasons disinclined to deny Hough his #8. We often lunched together. We sat on the same end of the sofa at – the late – Frank Kermode's evening meetings in Kings College, Cambridge, at which postgraduates high on 'Theory' read, e.g., papers proving that Henry James' *The Aspern Papers* was 'really' another version of, 'the wood-cutter and his three sons'; and things of that sort. 'Beautifully done, but why did you do it?' was a typical Hough response. I was less noisy, but ran the Oxford line 'I don't *quite* understand what you mean by...!' This did not work as well as it had in the other place, some years before. 'Theory' was impermeable to plain logic. When he had riled even Frank Kermode – a difficult thing to do – Hough would make a *faux* Philistine crack: 'My Antipodean friend and I, what

²⁴ At the University of Edinburgh in the 1970s I taught on R. G. Collingwood's *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938). The author was throughout raising the issue: How can an artist himself be sure that his work adequately realizes the first idea or intuition as it was in his mind? In a review of Clarice Lispector's *Complete Stories* (New York: New Directions, 2015), Colm Tóibín wrote "In an early story she allowed her main character to feel... helplessness deeply and articulate as best as she could the idea, as Beckett would have it, that she was resigned to fail better, but fail nonetheless: 'Something beneath my thought, deeper and stronger, apprehends what happened, and in a fleeting instant, I see it clearly. But my brain is feeble and I can't manage to transform that vivid moment into thought'." Colm Tóibín, 'She Played with Happiness', *The New York Review of Books*, vol. LXII, no. 20, 17 December (2015), pp. 61-63. [This passage is *not* to be found in the Katrina Dodson translation from the Portuguese which Tóibín was reviewing]. The nearest equivalent to the cited-but-absent passage that I have found is: "Angela thought: I think if I happened upon the truth, I wouldn't be able to think it. It would be mentally unpronounceable." (C.S. p. 434).

we like is a rattling good story, like *The Thirty-nine Steps*'. While Hough and myself were as a matter of duty getting – more or less *up* – on 'Theory', Kermode was publishing or commissioning a series of handbooks on each Theory guru as they turned up. He wrote far better than they. Hough said to me one day – 'Kermode is the cleverest man in the trade in England'. This was so. But to return to *The Aspern Papers* and the woodcutter and his three sons: Kermode raised the question – which I had heard somewhere before – of the inspiration for the Henry James story: 'It may be based on the idea of someone's going off in search of hitherto undiscovered papers of the Shelley Circle'. Whereupon Hough asked the unfortunate author of the essay just read out, which 'reduced' James to a mere *folklorist*, 'Where does Claire Clairmont²⁵ fit in?' It was obvious that the author of the paper just read had no idea at all about Claire Clairmont, who she was, and how she fitted into the Shelley Circle. Hough gave the slightest of smiles. Kermode kept the poker face which he used when Hough deliberately irritated him. Nevertheless he took the point. In his memoir *Not Entitled*,²⁶ Kermode wrote:

To talk about literature is to give a rhetorical performance about rhetorical performances. This secondary rhetorical phenomenon develops its own independent laws and interests. Modern rhetorics, as taught for example by Paul de Man, are extremely sophisticated and *tend to be self reflexive*, to be *performances about themselves*. One way and another, *the direct experience of literature is largely neglected*: on both sides, thus to borrow from a sad sonnet of Shakespeare's, is simple truth suppressed. [Sonnet 66?]²⁷

Kermode is dead right about this. It may be in the end of more use to know about Claire Clairmont and her place in the Shelley Circle, than about Paul de Man. The importance of a 'direct experience' of Shelley goes without saying. In a, disastrous issue of *Sophia*²⁸ I made the point about vitiating *self-reflection*, and about the eye not focussing on the literary object. I did this by recalling a story about the superb comic writer James Thurber. The young Thurber went to a State College in the United States which required students to enrol in at least one Science subject. Thurber chose Biology. However, because of his already bad eyesight he could not make out – and so draw – what he was supposed to see through the microscope. One day he *did* draw something. The biology teacher looked at Thurber's sketch – 'You have drawn a picture of *your own eye!*'

For Hough, the schemata of 'special' ways of reading are not at all what one should reproduce. A literary critic should know literature, first: and quite a lot of 'Basil Willey stuff'.

Hough: *Behind or in the Empson set of 7?*

From what I remember about Graham Hough I suspect that he valued Empson above the fashionable 'Theory' people on whom Kermode wrote very well. I can not recall Hough's making any much use of these theorists. Nor, for that matter do I recall Kermode's making significant *use* of them, beyond writing – with great clarity – *about* them. (Though I might be wrong about this)²⁹ Both Hough and Kermode knew a very great deal about literature and 'the Basil Willey stuff' So: I would be tempted to situate Hough's 'ambiguity between *intended* and *achieved* meaning' – as he, modestly did – *behind* Empson, rather than making him #8 on Empson's list of Ambiguities.

²⁵ Claire Clairmont (1798-1879) was the daughter of Mary Clairmont who became William Godwin's second wife. She accompanied Mary Godwin on her elopement with Shelley.

²⁶ Frank Kermode, *Not Entitled: A Memoir* (London: Flamingo/ HarperCollins, 1996). For Hough's tendency to rile Kermode see p. 167. Kermode calls Barthes "the prince of modern critics," see p. 217.

²⁷ Kermode, *Not Entitled*, p. 196 (italics added).

²⁸ Patrick Hutchings, 'Why natural theology, still, yet?', *Sophia*, vol. 30, no.1 (1991), pp. 3-7.

²⁹ Kermode edited the very useful 'Modern Masters' series. Proofreading for Kermode produced instant understanding, and his memory was phenomenal.

On the other hand Hough might make #8. There are cases in literature where *intention is manifest* and not problematic. Early and late ‘improved’ Wordsworth would make material for a study of intention and achievement: one would mostly find that the earlier lines seemed closer to the – putative – intended meaning than do the amended ones. On the other hand, Wordsworth’s later versions of his earlier poetry might have indicated that he had not done justice to his first intentions. If the revisions do not seem to us improvements – and there is no way of ‘splitting the difference’ – then we must incline to the view that there are intended meanings not quite caught. And these are – so – irretrievable, by anyone. The quest for intended meanings is fraught, and sometimes impossible. If an author cannot, quite, write down his intended meaning, how can we?³⁰

Many years ago under the spell of Kant’s and S. T. Coleridge’s notions of Imagination,³¹ I analysed the Keats poem ‘Ode to Autumn’, charting its moves towards becoming an organic unity, by examining the cancelled words in the drafts, and noting how the new words put in their stead increased the poem’s inner resonances, and made it a whole.³² The move from Hough’s *intended* meaning to his *achieved meaning*, can be laid bare fairly easily in the case of this poem by Keats. There are, no doubt, many other cases which could be analysed in this ‘look at the corrections’, way, given the evidence available. In the Keats case I do not use any Empson. Hough’s injunction ‘to watch for manifest intention and look out for ambiguity of achievement’ (I paraphrase) keeps our eyes on the object. On the object rather than any method of dealing with the object. I wish that Hough were still alive and I could talk all this through with him.

However – copying his own mild bloody-mindedness – I’d bring the lunch table, or to Hough’s Grantchester afternoon tea table – a copy of a book by a poet whom I much admire, John Ashbery. What manifest-intentions? What ambiguity! ‘What – against all odds – *achievement!*’ If Hough really wanted to be Empson’s #8 I would – almost but not finally – grant it to him. His claim is so interesting – and inspires as much, or more, *reflection on the object*, as does going down Empson’s check-list. But it is a reflection on the object of a kind different from Empson’s. Indeed of a different logical kind, if one attends to the topical logic.

A saving metaphor for Hough’s claim on #8: #8 is a kind of *continuo* playing under Empson’s 7. You can not have Bach without the *continuo*, whatever other figures you get over it. ‘*Continuo*’ cashes out here as: the numerous words, and the numerous text and contexts, which any serious student of literature needs to know. Despite the temptations of auld acquaintance I cannot, quite, accept Hough’s eighth type of ambiguity as part of Empson’s set of seven. Type-difference remains. You can use Empson from cold, on any text. Hough wants you to get *behind* a text. This is – usually – just not possible.

Conclusion

³⁰ The well-known case of Ezra Pound’s input into T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* raises unusual problems about intention. They are beyond the scope of this article.

³¹ See Paul Wright (ed.), *Poems of John Keats* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1994). The interesting ‘Introduction’ Wright (Trinity College Carmarthen) references *imagination*, pp. xvi, xvii, xviii and also *imaginative transcendence* xx. There is discussion of ‘To Autumn’, pp. xx-xxii.

³² Patrick Hutchings, ‘*Imagination: “as the sun paints in the camera obscura,”*’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. XXIX, no. I (1970), pp. 63-76. See Helen Vendler, ‘The Poet Remakes the Poem’, *The New York Review of Books*, vol. LXIII, no. 4, 10-23 March (2016), pp. 40-42. I sent an old offprint on Keats’ amendments to the Ode ‘To Autumn’ to Professor Vendler and was gratified by her positive response. However she did *not* agree with my claim that my paper might be a quasi-empirical ‘proof’ of Murray Krieger’s or my theories of ekphrasis.

Two of Empson's texts have recently been re-issued in critical editions: *Some Versions of Pastoral*, edited by Seamus Perry, and *The Structure of Complex Words*, edited by Helen Thaventhiran and Stefan Collini, both under the Oxford University Press imprint in 2021.³³ They were reviewed by Colin Burrow in *The London Review of Books*,³⁴ in an essay 'The Terrifying Vroom'. Empson was from the landed gentry, so might have driven a veteran Bentley – hence 'vroom'. Colin Burrow is at All Souls, and, so, the review – although judicious – is rather *de haute en bas*. And it is Empson who is more under – retrospective – review than the editors of the new editions of his texts. And it is Empson who is more under – retrospective – review than the editors of the new editions of his texts. One nice sentence runs "... flashes of strategic vagueness are vital elements of Empson's style" (p. 7 col.⁴).³⁵ That the man who gave us 'seven types of ambiguity' could himself be occasionally ambiguous is not very surprising. This may invite further interest in and analysis of William Empson. We shall see.

When Hough, in 1976, claimed that he might add an eighth to Empson's seven types of ambiguity Empson himself had faded a little into the background noise behind 'Theory'. Now that 'theory' has been seen to be a dubious metaphysical affair, not empirical, not pragmatic enough for British literary criticism – although the Americans may still enjoy its mystifications – Empson, and the down-to-earth Hough may enjoy a revival. I rather hope so.³⁶

³³ Colin Burrow, 'The Terrifying Vroom', *London Review of Books*, vol. 43, no. 14, 15 July (2021), pp. 7ff. At: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n14/colin-burrow/the-terrifying-vroom>. Accessed 01/06/2023.

³⁴ In the next issue of *LRB* 12 August (2021), in the *Letters* there are on Burrow's essay, useful comments, two, and one, privileged, gossip about Mrs Empson's carryings on in a tent erected in the drawing room.

³⁵ Burrow, 'The Terrifying Vroom', p. 7.

³⁶ J. L. Austin in the end loosened his rule against performatives mixing in with mere fictional language. On this see the very interesting essay by Jeffrey Hershfield (Department of Philosophy, Wichita State University), 'Declaration and Bestowal: A Love Story', *Sophia* (2022). At: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-022-00900-9>. Accessed 01/06/2023.