AMBIGUITY—UNCERTAINTY—AFFORDANCE

Dragoş Avădanei
Assoc. Prof., PhD., „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi

Abstract:The paper comments on three works titled "Seven Types of Ambiguity" (William Empson's critical book of 1930, Shirley Jackson's 1943 short story and Elliot Perlman's 2003 novel), and another one titled Seven Modes of Uncertainty (2014) by Carla Namwali Serpell, i.e. four authors of four continents. Ambiguity is fundamentally rejected in science and philosophy, uncertainty is the subject of (drastic) "reductions" in communication theory, computer science, environmental studies, business/management, economics, engineering…, mathematics, and affordance is not as yet convincingly defined conceptually, but all three, as permanent resources of errors, imprecision, indeterminacies and unreliability, are richly and fruitfully present in literature; so the last author uses her modes of uncertainty to discuss ambiguity and affordance (less convincingly) and, paradoxically, uncertainty itself; consequently, this is a paper of uncertainty about ambiguity, uncertainty and affordance, after all.

Keywords: Empson, Jackson, Perlman, Serpell, ambiguity, uncertainty, affordance

Sir William Empson (1906-1984) must have been knighted in 1979 for achievements and qualities other than those elicited by his gruff, scornful, brusque and rather cold personality, his immoderate appetites for alcohol and the use of prophylactics (also found in his college room) or even his lax attention to personal hygiene—and other eccentricities and infractions (that got him banished from Cambridge, without even an MA in English of Mathematics, which he also studied; the Queen's counselors on the subject will have considered his eloquence and erudition, his clever, learned, aetherial and technically virtuous poetry and, most importantly, his critical work—over ten volumes—on Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton, Donne and Marvell, Fielding, Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce; and his superlative Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930), which he composed while not yet twenty-one (I. A. Richards was his director of studies in English) to "revolutionize our ways of reading a poem" (London Times), and soon become one of the most influential critical works of the twentieth century (it ushered in the New Criticism—in America—and determined Frank Kermode to describe him as a "critic of genius").

Still, before Empson's, we can look at the philosophers' ambiguity; appropriately enough, philosophical thinkers would rather do without ambiguity (associated with vagueness, inexplicitness, indefiniteness, imprecision, equivocation, incompleteness, indeterminacy, uncertainty, deviance and error, underspecification, dubiousness, and multiple interpretability) and thus speak of the need to avoid it; if considered at all, it is discussed as lexical, syntactic (structural) or pragmatic, and would rather be included among fallacies; sometimes even constructed/invented languages are invoked as primarily devised without ambiguities; anyway, in such fundamental works as Routledge or Stanford encyclopedias of philosophy Empson is not once mentioned, while Seven Types…, for instance, is not among the over one hundred bibliographical references in the latter; one conclusion here is that ambiguity is "too difficult to explain."

Sir William seems to have known that and taken it as a challenge; whence his early decision, as an undergraduate (with such readings as his professor's—and C. K. Ogden's—1923 The Meaning of Meaning…) to read (English) poetry as an exploration of conflicts within (the mind of) the author (already a form of cognitive study). With unreclaimed

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knowledge of Heisenberg (uncertainty principle, chaos theory…), Einstein and Wittgenstein (the linguistic turn in philosophy), Empson is keenly aware that "the act of observing changes the thing/text observed," and thus focuses not so much on understanding lines and figures of poetry as on discovering whole tracts of the mind; context, person, and purpose are his main targets; so, his subject, ambiguity, consists in "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions (our emphasis) to the same piece of language;" we have ambiguity when "alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading," and so the critic's job is that of teasing a rich variety of interpretations from poetic texts.

This may already imply that the types of ambiguity are many more than seven, only the author relies on a universally accepted tradition of the cultural-historical Biblical/fatidic number: the seven deadly sins (none of them literary), seven heavens, seven metals, seven days in a week, seven colors of the rainbow, seven seas, seven continents, seven wonders of the ancient world…; and seven types of ambiguity, represented by: the two meanings in a metaphor or conceit; two or more meanings resolved into one in two metaphors; one word containing two ideas that are connected through context; two or more contradictory meanings, making clear (sic) a complicated state of mind in the author ; the author discovering his idea in the act of writing (a "fortunate confusion"—infra); a statement that says nothing and the reader is forced to invent his own statement, often in conflict with that of the author; and two words that within context are opposites (full contradiction) and thus expose a fundamental division in the author's mind; and, to meet the philosophers' worry, these seven types are given on a scale of "advancing logical disorder."

A disorder that still advances as we move to other writings of the same title; thirteen (not seven) years after Empson's book, Shirley Jackson (1916-1965), one of the most brilliant and influential authors of the century, publishes her story simply titled "Seven Types of Ambiguity"; "simply" because from a master of Gothic fiction, author of "The Lottery" (1948) and The Haunting of Hill House (1959—a model for Stephen King in The Shining), other one hundred stories and several novels, you expect a narrative of mystery and horror, of secret and sinister actions, of cruel and evil, even mad characters (sometimes treated with humor), involved in all kinds of ambiguous contexts, situations, and relationships.

What you get instead is an eight page story (true, the seventh position in her collection The Lottery and Other Stories, originally subtitled The Adventures of Mr. Harris, 1949), about Mr. Harris, owner and sales clerk of a bookstore in a funky basement room, who instead of selling Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity to young, intelligent, and educated Mr. Clark, ignores his promise and sells it immediately to a nameless, "bluff and hearty looking" man, who had come in with his meek, muted wife, and could not even comprehend the title of the book he bought only out of frustration and spite.

What one needs to do next is start looking for ambiguities (seven, in fact, according to the title) in Jackson's story; first, Mr. Harris—Mr. James Harris (sic!)—, a cunning manipulator and shape shifter (rural or/and urban, old-young, single-married, wealthy-dirt poor…), a delusive, untrustworthy trickster figure, who is more or less present in ten of Jackson's stories in the above-mentioned collection and also in her novel The Bird's Nest (not in "The Lottery" or The Haunting of Hill House though); never a prominent character and an insidiously unobtrusive source of evil, with an appearance that always signifies instability, even mental illness, Harris is a highly ambiguous figure, but mostly as a result of his presence in other stories.

He is so ambiguous that there is strong doubt as to his existence itself and, in fact, he is not actually seen by other characters; still, in "The Intoxicated" and "The Daemon Lover" he is described as a "tall graceful man in a blue suit," while in others he is just a name mentioned in passing, a locus of evil, who "doesn't have to exert himself to do harm" (a potential source of negative affordances in terms of later developments here—infra); from

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"The Daemon Lover" we also know that "he is a writer" (Empson as a source of ambiguities? In one of her other stories, "The Possibility of Evil," the sin is in the writing… of letters); as such, Mr. Harris provides some "semblance of unity" (L. Friedman) for these stories, while in "Seven Types of Ambiguity" he can read thoughts—perfect for one with a capricious and mercurial role, a seemingly innocuous bookstore owner and clerk, well-mannered and with a professional smile, lurking in the dark cold basement of his shop, where he mixes truths with lies, reality with pretence—a daemon or tempter, whose petty cruelty also mixes unreliability with delusiveness, or malice with commercial indifference.

There are, of course, other (types of) ambiguities in the story, which we think we might just mention: is the boy, Mr. Clark, an employee? All we are given is that he is a highly intelligent, well-read and educated student of eighteen, but there is ambiguity about his intent of buying Empson's book; the new customer is just a Big Man with feelings of inferiority and a malicious intent, who desires books by Dickens or books that look nice, on which he is willing to spend (out of anger and spite? frustration? an attempt to recover his past?) up to 200 dollars; but, up to the end, he remains, like his meek and speechless wife, nameless; finally, is the bookshop, with its staircase, a mythical warehouse of lent and purchased knowledge, where one can descend into the dark and cold unconscious (of dirty lamps and books—by the Brontes, Meredith, Thackeray, Austen… and Dickens—"standing silent in the dim light"?).

One may remember that Jackson expects (affordance?) that her readers are, Clark-like, intelligent, quick and sophisticated and fully capable of comprehending even books "with names like that" (Seven Types…); but other readers are represented in her own story by nameless customers, "quietly seething with resentment" and vainly struggling for a new past, who never read the Empson book; so the point we are trying to make here is that, in spite of the ambiguities in the story, Jackson herself almost ignores it completely and makes use of just that title; in other words, the book chosen by Clark for the man (and his wife)—or by Jackson for her readers—could have been The Meaning of Meaning, which would have been just as puzzling for the man and just as usable for Mr. Harris in his preparing for the "diabolical" moment of selling the book to the leas read man; a hypothetical experiment would have Jackson's story titled "The Meaning of Meaning," and the differences in response from various types (sic!) of readers could be insignificantly different from this point of view.

Not really so with Seven Types of Ambiguity (2003), Australian Elliot Perlman's second novel, "a bustling, kaleidoscopic, Rashomonian" one in the description of Daphne Merkin, who also thinks that the title is "a lift," or, at most, both a homage and an ironic appropriation of Empson's (or of Jackson's story, for that matter, with which it shares the main character's inability to step away from his past—so thirty-two years old Simon Heywood and Jackson's frustrated customer); however, Perlman seems to be genuinely—even though kind of ambiguously—interested in ambiguity; his first of the seven narrators (of the same event-s—the effects of the brief abduction of six- or seven-year-old Sam Geraghty by Simon Heywood, his mother Anna's ex-boyfriend, nine years after their breakup), the Czech-born highly committed psychologist Alex Klima had one patient who gave him a copy of Empson's book, so he gets to be (like Perlman?) more intrigued by the "ambiguity of human relationships" than by the semantic and syntactic ambiguities of poetry: "There's ambiguity in most human relationships. A relationship between two people, just like a sequence of words is ambiguous if it is open to different interpretations. And when two people have different views about their relationship—I don't just mean about its state, I mean about its very nature—then that difference can affect the entire course of their lives;"(p.12) and Klima takes it up in his journal: "Fundamentalism, be it religious or the market variety /an important theme/, is everywhere and everywhere there is a reaction to complexity, an attempt to ignore the contradictions and conundrums of our existence…/so/…any blurring, any ambiguity is

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viewed with hostility"; paradoxically somewhat, ambiguity is the very "quality" missing from Perlman's characters.

Consequently, the individual stories' attempts at Empsonian hermeneutics (the self-justifying abductor rants about truth, literature, and post-structuralist theory + one comment on the ruinous influence of deconstruction on the study and appreciation of literature) are far from compelling, the same ground is covered again and again with slight shifts of perspective (hence the comparison with Akiro Kurosawa's 1950 Rashomon, with its four versions of the same incident), resulting in much "repetition with a difference…" (see Namwali Serpell, infra), many "annoying digressions" (Daphne Merkin) in a "marathon of a book" (Kate Kellaway), that is often monotonous (due to the similarity of tone in the seven parts) and even tedious; it seems that the only great mystery and real ambiguity refers to whether Simon kidnapped Sam or Anna gave him permission to meet him out of school—but one ambiguity is not enough for the title—or for Empson; nonetheless, Perlman is faithful enough in his commitment to seven angles, seven subjective versions, seven distortions and thus seven types of ambiguity; moreover, the seven voices include that of distressed Simon, an alienated out-of-work Melbourne school teacher, who loves his dog Empson, has "an immoderate appetite for alcohol" (see supra), is one of Angelica's regulars—"the prostitute with a heart of gold" who loves him (sic), and laments the loss of the cultural values that underscored Empson's study of the value of poetry in this "dysfunctional love story" in an age of obsessive materialism; a psychological thriller insistently circling back, again and again, to the ugly truths that surface in most relationships (see quote supra).

The Rashomon precedent (Merkin's parallel) is meant to emphasize the uncertainty of factual accuracy: Kurosawa's alternative, subjective, self-serving, and contradictory versions (the bandit's, the wife's, the dead samurai's, and the woodcutter's) of the same incident may have provided Perlman with uncertainly as an attractive and constant theme; as early as 1999, in his first collection of stories: "You were trying to tell me something and I was trying to tell you something else. We didn't trust each other and that was reason enough to make each of us right." ("The Reasons I Won't Be Coming")

High time to briefly turn our attention to Communication Theory (with its more specific emphasis on "Interpersonal Relations and Communication" and "Uncertainty Reduction Theory") and Cognitive Studies; taking their main theme from Fritz Heider's 1958 The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations and Leon Festinger's 1954/1959/1962 work on "cognitive dissonance" and "social comparison" (individuals look to feedback from others to evaluate their performance and abilities), Charles K. Berger and Richard J. Calabrese (1975) propose a "Developmental Theory of Interpersonal Communication" and an "Uncertainty Reduction Theory" (URT); uncertainty is defined as "the number of alternative ways in which each interactant might behave"; they start from seven (sic) communicative and relational-focused concepts (verbal input, non-verbal warmth, information seeking, self-disclosure, reciprocity, similarity, and liking), develop seven (sic) axioms (each of them a relationship between a communication concept and uncertainty), and further elaborate twenty-one theorems of URT; central to all these is the supposition that in initial interactions, an individual's primary concern is to decrease uncertainty and increase predictability regarding the behaviors of the self and communicative partner; later uncertainty reduction research (1995: Sally Planalp and James Honeycutt) also pointed out that communication can serve to increase uncertainty when information conflicts with past knowledge; so uncertainty reduction becomes problematic (especially in literature) because of people's lack of knowledge (about themselves, the information as such, the environment) and people's self-perception about one's own cognition and ability that cause uncertainty.

Perlman's and all these views on uncertainty—given by the number of possible alternatives in one of the quotations—are further explored and also applied to literature by

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Zambian-American professor, fiction writer and critic Carla Namwali Serpell (b. 1980); one of her (cognitive) assumptions in Seven Modes of Uncertainty (2014) is the unknowable nature of otherness (in all types of writing), so the mere encounter/interaction with an other (literature included) implies risks and threats (infra) that could become the subject of an uncertainty increasing theory; so she uses the opening of Nabokov's Lolita (1955) to find "aspects… /Sartre, Faulkner, Beckett, Didion are also invoked/… of the agonistic, participatory reading experience that I call a mode of uncertainty" (p.1)—which she sees as a synonym for ambiguity; an uneasy, elusive and perpetually shifting mode, testifying to a reading experience that is basically the experience of being unsettle or disturbed by a literary text—a unique kind of literary ethics: "an intense, structured uncertainty can refract… an ethical disturbance;"(p.2) in the wake of Empson, Namwali Serpell believes uncertainty to be crucial to ethics because "it pushes us beyond the limits of our own experience," and has the capacity to perplex, unsettle, bewilder us; with the supreme force of Hamlet as an "exemplary of uncertainty," Namwali Serpell advises the reader to dwell in what uncertain literature affords (n.b.)—not the consolation of certainty, fixity, stability, but "the positive and troubling modes, the risks and the threats…" (p.302) that human beings assume when they enter into any relationship, not least with literature; what she proposes is an ethical criticism which "…analogizes literature and life. But this book uses the broader conceit of resonance…/from Empson onwards/…to account for the rhythms of relation other than the mimetic or reflective." (ibid.)

Her second assumption—literary uncertainty emerges from the reader's shifting responses to structures of conflicting information—provides the opportunity of establishing "Lolita's lineage" (p.10), i.e. the post-Nabokovian texts that all share an "ethically disturbing content" (all focus on horrors of human existence, i.e. conspiracy, infanticide, rape, murder, kidnapping, terrorism) and a "radically structured uncertainty"; in Naomi Mandel's review, all of Namwali Serpell's (sic) novels reify the unspeakable, register trauma, condemn violence, but "leave undone the disturbing and unsettling work of parsing these effects"; and the three narrative structures that constitute the bone of her book are mutual exclusion (the presentation of opposed explanations to the same events—familiar ground), multiplicity (different perspectives), and a structure of repetition (also present in Empson, Jackson, Perlman, and Serpell) that establishes the continuity of events and frustrates our ability to follow the story.

After introducing the concept of affordance from cognitive psychology (infra), the critic pursues her seven case studies, corresponding to the seven modes of uncertainty, distributed under the three narrative structures thus: mutual exclusion ("an opposition between two explanations or sets of events, one tagged as real or true, the other as illusory or false…"(p.41), with two modes—oscillation (between the two, as in Pynchon's 1966 The Crying of Lot 49) and enfolding (the original impression folded back into its revision by disnarration or unnarration, as in McEwan's 2001 Atonement); multiplicity (presentation of conflicting views about an event or a person) with the modes of adjacency ("disparate entities are set beside each other in an enclosed space allowing them to brush up against and interrogate each other"—p.133, as in Morrison's 1987 Beloved, itself a word of seven letters, each chapter beginning on a number containing seven, and seven parts in the second chapter—sic); accounting (as in the three eponymous texts already presented—supra and infra); and repetition (which "interrupts, halts, and flattens reality, troubling the boundaries of the reading self…," p.191), with the modes of vacuity (as in Easton Ellis's 1991 American Psycho), synchronicity—a recursive loop of self-reference, with an affective expectation present (as in Tom McCarthy's 2005 Remainder), and flippancy—"the belatedness of literary uncertainty," p.269 (as in Foer's 2005 novel on the attack on the Twin Towers, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close); in a hurried evaluation, Namwali Serpell's uncertainty looks

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much like Empson's ambiguity writ large, while admitting that Empson's book must have had such affordances as Jackson's story, Perlman's novel, and her own exploration of uncertainty.

The fourth mode of uncertainty, which we have also been struggling with above, is titled "Accounting: Interreading William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930), Shirley Jackson's 'Seven Types of Ambiguity'(1943) and Elliot Perlman's Seven Types of Ambiguity (2003)"; this lengthy title may first imply that Empson's is one of many affordances (not Namwali Serpell's explicit observation), just like, for instance, Mr. Harris in Jackson's stories is a character of many affordances; the concept—describing an object's, person's, environment's (or text's) potential uses—is borrowed by Namwali Serpell from communication studies, AI and/or cognitive psychology; it was coined by James J. Gibson in 1977—"The Theory of Affordances" and developed in 1979 (see references), probably under the influence of Gestalt psychology, and represented a "radical departure from existing theories of value and meaning"(p.140); in fact, a departure from traditional theories of disembodied cognition (our brains are the only thing we use for thought and action) and a move toward embodied cognition (as an active relationship between environment, body, and brain, or as the product of an interplay between neural and non-neural processes).

What attracted Namwali Serpell seems to have been the idea that the nature of an object/person/text informs—offers/yields affordances of—how it should be used/interacted with/read; so Empson's fifth type of ambiguity, "a fortunate confusion, … when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing…," suggests that the idea was not in his mind, but was afforded by the situation (of his writing, focusing on an-other's text, being thus carried away by "an action possibility" available in the poem); similarly, the three intertexts "account for the uncertainty afforded by the collision of incommensurable values, how they each manifest a mode of accounting…, how incommensurability can inhere in a structure of multiplicity at various textual levels…"(p.171); hence the uncertainty afforded by interreading multiplicity; their values, meanings, and interpretations multiply and collide, producing the "agonistic, participatory reading experience" she wrote about in her "Introduction."

Still, we have to mention that the use of the word "affordance" has long been associated with difficulties: it often fails to account for diverse subject-artifact/text relations, and there is no agreement so far on a conceptual definition; this may have started with Gibson's own hesitation: affordances are "what things furnish for good or ill" (1966, p.285); what he proposes, without saying it (at least to literary scholars) is that all objects an environments may be viewed as texts, with "meanings" that are released to the appropriate "readers"; so what we basically have here is a metaphor shift, where interaction stands for reading and affordance for (latent) meanings; what one can easily notice is that Empson's ambiguities had been there, in all of the texts he closely reads, as affordances, for as long as the texts themselves (like his book on Harris's shelves); what was absent, until 1930 (or 1943) was the appropriate reader/buyer…; so the quasi-mystic (and thus challenging) concept of affordance is (only) a way of transferring Ogden and Richards's "the meaning of meaning" (which Richards's student must have read very "closely") onto "the meaning of affordance"; we are, of course, not aware of how Gibson may have read this 1923 book; what we know for sure is that Empson decided to change it into the "meaning of ambiguity," and Namwali Serpell into "the meaning of uncertainty"; for the latter, the point of her book is "to change the way we look at ethics, infusing it with time, contradiction, disturbance, darkness…" (p.39)

What we finally get is that ambiguity, uncertainty, and affordance can all be reduced, increased, taken as such, exploited or wondered at and that all afford errors; which are human, whence Terrence Cave's "endless affordances of human literature…, a pool of resources accumulated over centuries, adapted, and manipulated, transformed…" (p.39) by

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skillful thinkers/readers/critics intent on …Putting Mind, World, and Body Back Together (Andy Clark's 1997 title); leaving one wonder about the existence of negative or anti-affordances, that seem to drive people away from literature (though, in "The Daemon Lover," Harris can be evil even in what he fails to do).

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