Medicine as poetry

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Before I studied medicine, I did an English degree. It was at a time when cultural studies had not been invented and close reading of literary texts was still in fashion. There were a few books on this topic that were considered to be classics, and one of them was by a writer called William Empson. It had the title ‘Seven Types of Ambiguity.’ Empson was something of a legend because he had come up to Cambridge to study mathematics in the 1920s but changed to English literature, wrote the book aged 21 while still an undergraduate, and was then expelled without a degree after a servant found condoms in his college room. He subsequently became a scholar of Chinese literature and a poet of distinction in his own right, while leading a colourful personal life. The reason his book became a classic was because of the way he argued that great poetry depended not just on its capacity to express complex meaning but to convey several different meanings at the same time.

The seven types of ambiguity that Empson described in his book are not exhaustive. Instead, they represent points along a scale. At one end of this scale are straightforward devices like the use of metaphor, which is almost universal in poetry, and simply calls to mind an inter-

NATURE OF LANGUAGE

Komesaroff is not arguing in favour of muddled expression and miscommunica-
tion. Instead, he sets out a more profound and sophisticated view of the nature of lan-
guage than the one that dominates medical thinking, where one word or phrase is gen-
erally believed to represent only a single meaning of the word.

The most common example of this is probably a novel by Henry James called ‘The Turn of the Screw’, where a child’s governess describes events that are might be either real or imagined, and the author never resolves this uncertainty. In between these two extremes, Empson describes a range of other types of ambigu-

REFERENCES

1 Empson W. Seven Types of Ambiguity. London, Chatto and Windus, 1930