

Article

On Empson [Book Review]

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**On Empson, by Michael Wood, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press,
2017, xii + 212 pp. \$22.95/£18.95 (cloth)**

William Empson (1906-1984) is generally remembered as a distinguished fellow-traveller of the ‘New’ Criticism, which dominated Anglophone literary criticism, especially criticism of poetry, from the 1930s to about 1960. Like many of its adherents, and its godfather T. S. Eliot, he was a poet as well as a critic. He stands near to the centre of the New Critical tradition in his insistence on intimate and patient scrutiny of literary texts, fiercely illuminating their specificity, only occasionally venturing –and often only in order then to subvert it– the kind of systematic generalisation (to be powerfully revived by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957) that situates the particular text in its relation to some general order or category. Yet, as Michael Wood demonstrates, Empson parts company with the formalist preoccupations of New Criticism in his insistence that unfolding the meanings of a text requires the speculative attribution of authorial intention, as well as the alertness to detect, even in the most disarmingly serene-seeming poetic utterances, interventions into larger discourses of class, history, or religion. Empson quotes a familiar stanza from Gray’s *Elegy* (“Full many a flower is born to blush unseen / And waste its sweetness on the desert air”) and remarks that

[w]hat this means, as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system or *carrière ouverte aux talents*. This is stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it.... By comparing the social arrangement to Nature he makes it seem inevitable, which it was not, and gives it a dignity which was undeserved.... The sexual suggestion of *blush* brings in

the Christian idea that virginity is good in itself, and so that any renunciation is good; this may trick us into feeling that is lucky for the poor man that society keeps him unspotted from the World. (*Some Versions of Pastoral*, London: Chatto & Windus 1968: 4)

Intentionalist interpretation, bold historical contextualisation, and plausible claims about reader response converge here, and whether we accept the analysis or not, we are unlikely to read the lines so innocently again. Yet, by Empson's standards, this is an unusually transparent and decisive passage of commentary. In general, Empson's criticism, like his poetry, is hard work. What is the reward for that work?

Michael Wood's celebratory book sets out to show us, rather than tell us. Indexless, and favouring obscurely-allusive chapter titles ("Large Dreams", "The Other Case", "All in Flight"), it moves to and fro between the criticism and the verse, following a roughly chronological path through both. The best-known critical works, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, *The Structure of Complex Words* and *Milton's God*, as well as some less familiar essays on Coleridge, Marlowe and Fielding, are visited and illuminated, with an almost unfailing Empsonian nuance and impartiality in construal:

Milton is "struggling to make his God appear less wicked, as he tells us at the start" [MG 11]. There is a small salutary shock in realizing that this is Empson's deadpan paraphrase of the line about justifying God's ways to men, since a whole sinister counter-story hovers in the air. Milton is thinking not that God moves in mysterious ways and will do what he can to explain them, but that God is an arch-criminal who

needs the best lawyer he can get. Empson doesn't mean to say Milton thinks this consistently, but the effect of his paraphrase is to place the poet somewhere between his own words and Empson's, between fervid faith and dark scepticism. (181)

Wood quotes Empson's assertion that Shakespeare's language creates "a unity like a cross-roads, which analysis does not deal with by exploring down the roads" (106-107). He sees that, for Empson, great poetry is not merely richer in meanings than the single meaning some critics will strive to uncover, but communicates something beyond the aggregate of all these meanings: something impossible to be "pegged out in verbal explanations" (106), yet requiring acknowledgement. The resistance of this something to verbal commentary helps to excuse the sometimes exhaustingly provisional, self-doubting, two-steps-forward-one-step-back character of Empson's critical writing, with its occasional lapses from confidence into vagueness.

Wonderland is a dream, but the Looking-Glass is self-consciousness. But both are topical; whether you call the result allegory or 'pure nonsense' it depends on ideas about progress and industrialisation, and there is room for exegesis on the matter.

(Some Versions of Pastoral: 257)

Empson's work shares the suspicion of comprehensive theory characteristic of his generation of critics, especially in England where the anti-philosophical particularism of F. R. Leavis, aggressively arguing from Arnoldian 'touchstones' rather than theoretical first principles, was at its most influential in the same period. Wood quotes from *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951: 6-7): "A poet is not building an intellectual

system... The connection between theory and practice, where both are living and growing, need not be very tidy.” (Wood 147-148.) “Where both are living and growing” has a touch of Leavisian uplift; “not very tidy” is more unpretentiously Empsonian. But Empson’s critical practice, as Wood shows, cannot be reduced to an easy-going eclecticism. If we have to concentrate hard to understand his thought, it is because so much is concentrated into it, not excluding ironic contradictions.

As for Empson’s poetic practice, Wood makes out the best Empsonian case for it. In an extended analysis of “Aubade”, about lovers in Japan abruptly awoken before dawn, he comments on these lines:

A bedshift flight to a Far Eastern sky.
Only the same war on a stronger toe.
The heart of standing is you cannot fly.

“Bedshift” is quite wonderful in its unruly meanings: it reminds us of the lovers being woken by the earthquake, evokes a night journey by plane, and suggests something makeshift about the whole situation. (117)

This is convincing, but a sceptic may think that the final line quoted (which in the poem bears the weight of a fivefold refrain) preserves the pentameter and the rhyme at the cost of an ill-composed metaphor that defies exposition or imaginative reconstruction –neither of which Wood attempts.

If Empson's ideal is the complex packed into the simple, his own writing presupposes both great patience and deep concentration in the reader, and (so far as the criticism is concerned) a range of literary and cultural knowledge possessed by few even of his educated contemporaries, and now barely imaginable even as an aspiration. Wood's essay mediates eloquently between this retreating world and the present. But there is an unavoidably nostalgic effect. Empson's legacy as a theorist survives in the wide and as it were unthinking acceptance of multivocal readings of literature and other artworks. (Even Homer Simpson can say "it works on so many levels!") Empson was not alone in suggesting this interpretative approach, but he advocated it more explicitly than any of his contemporaries. Yet the works in which he actually practises it are retreating into history. In their intense, persevering, unsystematic excavation of multiple worlds of experience and knowledge from a scatter of words on a page, they evoke an epoch of joyful bookishness, of libraries without computers, of seminar rooms free from mobile phones: lovers of poetry facing one another in friendly conversation and mutual enlightenment, as the campus quietens in the late autumn afternoon and the lights come on. That kind of happiness is, or was once, the reward for grappling with the Empsonian challenge. Wood does an excellent job of recovering it for us.

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