Introduction to *Critical Essays on William Empson*

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Critical Essays on William Empson: Introduction

William Empson (1906–1984), the most extraordinary British critic of the century, was already famous in his early twenties as a poet and personality. 'The Empson cultus is ubiquitous. Public readings of his poems are given, as you probably know. Leavis mentions him in every lecture. Some poem of his is to be found in nearly everyone's rooms; even in the possession of people who would not dream of reading the work of an ordinary poet.' This letter from Randall Pope to E. E. Phare was written not in 1935, when Empson was an international name in criticism and poetry, but in late 1929,[1] when he had published only a few poems and articles, and, with the exception of the poems in *Cambridge Poetry 1929*, all of these had appeared in undergraduate magazines. But he was already a name of remarkable prominence amongst his contemporaries. The undergraduates anticipated the adult academic world in treating him as a licensed fool, a genius who was to be revered and patronized. The example of the cultus included in the present selection is by far the funniest of any of the pieces in the *Granta*'s regular series of University portraits. These were usually anxious jibes at glib Presidents of the Union or stalwart secretaries of the various sporting clubs, so both the choice and the manner of the Empson piece are slightly unusual. One couldn't say, on the basis of this piece, that he was the cause of wit in others, but he does seem to have cheered his interviewers up and allowed them to write at ease and with pleasure.

On arriving in Cambridge in 1925 Empson had set out to make a name for himself, and attempted to do this through debating, something he had done with distinction while at Winchester. But he seems to have been only a mediocre Union speaker ('Not much good on a platform' I. A. Richards was to tell T. S. Eliot when recommending him for work[2]), as the facetious exaggerations of *The Granta* profile, reprinted below, makes clear. Contemporary reports, such as *The Granta*'s of the debate on the motion that 'This house deplores the prominence given to questions of sex in the novel', confirm that he was difficult to hear, adding that there were other problems:

> Mr. W. Empson (Magdalene), forgetting to welcome the visitors came immediately to the motion. He said that the full effect of the novel could not be produced without the introduction of questions of sex, for the business of the novel was to illustrate the public's attitude of mind; the modern novelist being a member of the public, was qualified, and justified, to write as he did. It was difficult to follow Mr. Empson's argument because besides being at times inaudible, he entirely failed to establish contact between himself and the House, for whom he was altogether too subtle.[3]

A year later, speaking against the motion 'That this House sees nothing but degeneration in the literature of today', he had so far improved that the reporter could say 'His matter was profound and his manner delightfully weird, and both were sufficiently esoteric to make the result obscure'. But the problem of audience relations seems to have remained, since 'The Union was not unnaturally baffled, and we sat with our faces flat, blank and unmoved.'[4] These early problems in conveying points through expository prose were of

great importance for Empson, and it seems possible that they directed him towards the colloquial prose style now regarded as his hall-mark. In discussing the wealth of his undergraduate journalism, Martin Dodsworth has said that the style 'leapt into the world fully formed' (it is interesting to note how often critics are drawn to talk about Empson in terms of deities), but it is not until the essays in the first edition of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* that it begins to show signs of its later form, with its characteristic self-deprecations and elegant head-scratchings to reassure the reader that nothing too clever and difficult was going on. It is a manner with affinities with the popular science of his day, and in particular with the writings of J. B. S Haldane, who knew the undergraduate Empson while University Reader in Biochemistry at Cambridge.[5] Reviewing *Possible Worlds*, Haldane's first collection of journalism, Empson singled out qualities which in fact also re-appear, modified in line with the requirements of his subject, in his own prose:

> It is impossible not to find it amusing and exhilarating; the scientist, innocent, cocksure, pretending not to notice the elaborate, long-ripened toes he treads on, answers any eternal questions that turn up, and hob-nobs briskly with the stars.[6]

What particularly impressed him was the way 'the precision of the wit' ('the stars falling from heaven, for instance, being like a million elephants falling on one fly') 'saves this graceful stuff from the extreme thinness of the scientific imagination'. There is an echo here of I. A. Richards' argument in *Science and Poetry*, but perhaps more importantly Empson makes it clear that he thinks such wit a proper rhetorical device for prose attempting to deal with difficult and serious matters, and it is worth remembering that *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951) suggests that it is the colloquial not the official language which articulates the thought of a period. That book even comments on this matter in relation to another great writer of popular science, Sir Arthur Eddington: 'I should like to add that I have a very great respect for the way Eddington could carry on a profound discussion in this apparently popularizing language; any good scientist, I strongly suspect, conducts his formative thinking in this kind of way, but few of them have enough nerve to say so afterwards.'[7] This style, then, is not a popularization of literary criticism, or even of Empson's own thought, nor is it an example of 'that sort of jocosity whereby the undergraduate mind is apt to excuse itself for treating of serious things', as Lascelles Abercrombie said in an otherwise genial review.[8] It attempts, rather, to be fully candid about the nature of his thought. That it was not a straightforward matter of 'automatic writing' we may guess from the letter in which he refers to the 'absurd amount of time' spent 'trying to write decent prose, so that the reader can get the point without bother'.[9] His difficulty was not to simplify the complex but to avoid the temptations of pompous exposition. It is obvious, however, that this style does not produce books of crystalline transparency, indeed in the case of *The Structure of Complex Words* the colloquialism leaves the reader floundering through its technical chapters largely because Empson did not see that an abstract argument is better set out with a clumsy explicitness than with an apparently spontaneous welter of pronouns. This limitation of the style is also apparent in the earlier books, where the commentary on separate passages is dazzlingly clear but the way in which the separate analyses fit together is not. It is only in *Milton's God*

that Empson found a solution to the problem of local order and global chaos, perhaps under the pressure of extreme passion, and it is his masterpiece just because it is the most perfectly articulated of his works, even if it is also the narrowest.

The question of manner recurs in nearly every review or essay written about Empson, and is in fact one of the primary reasons that he became, and still remains, as Roger Sale has said, 'a man no one trusts'.[10] You can't trust him because he won't follow the customs of academic composition, and as a consequence you don't know what he's going to do next. R. M. Adams has noted this by pointing out that the key to much of the career can be found in one sentence from the preface to the second edition of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 'My attitude in writing it was that an honest man erected the ignoring of "tact" into a point of honour'.[11] The way to annoy everybody on a *Narrenschiff*, regardless of their opinions, is to rock the boat.

This is only one reason amongst several for the difficulties which the academic and the literary worlds have had in coming to terms with Empson, and it seems sensible to discuss them before turning to a chronological account of the debate. Roughly speaking, there are three phases: 'Wicked Willie', 'Double Bill', and 'Father William'. The first accuses him of juvenile 'irresponsibility', as if he were a joker or someone simply displaying his talents upon a convenient piece of literature, as an athlete uses a trampoline. The form of this criticism has varied. To begin with it was very much a charge of vanity. John Middleton Murry's review in the *Times Literary Supplement* can stand as the type of this:

> The total effect of Mr. Empson's book is of this kind. It is incontinent, and it obscures rather than explains. It is the work of an exceedingly able young man, who has not learned to control his abilities, and perhaps sees no reason why he should control them. One has the impression that he has been turned, or has turned himself, loose on to poetry; and that poetry has no particular importance to him save as an opportunity for a free exercise of his abilities.[12]

There is something satisfying perhaps in telling the philosopher of ambiguity that he is duplicitous, and in mid-career the accusation took the form of a charge of insincerity, as in Geoffrey Strickland's discussion of *The Structure of Complex Words*, where he refers to the 'cynical tone': 'In general it is difficult not to believe that Mr. Empson is aware that his latest work is in some ways a solemn joke'.[13] With *Milton's God* the fault is reformulated as an obsession obscuring rational judgment, and Empson is transformed from a criminal into a man needing psychoanalysis. From this period until his death the irresponsibility is characterized as that of a crotchety and solipsistic superannuee refusing to come down off his hobby-horses and see the whole picture. Hugh Kenner has even brought his long-standing feud with Empson to an unworthy close in *A Sinking Island* by magnanimously giving much credit in one chapter – only to end, later in the book, with a vicious piece of *ad hominem* reasoning: 'Empson, in his late years "nutty as a fruitcake" – I'll not name my source for that judgment – came to hate whatever had been touched by Christianity'. And just in case you think that means only his very old age Kenner adds a footnote saying that *Milton's God* is 'surely the maddest critical book of the century'.[14] All of which is very comforting, and arms us against any of the supposedly classic books written earlier in his life. The mad are, one

hardly needs to add, irresponsible in the eye of the law, and though apt to be uncannily clever, and to say penetrating things, you need not listen since they invariably speak out of turn. This transformation of the charge of irresponsibility into that of insanity is a sinister one, and the suggestion that such troubles undermine the value of the criticism is no more than innuendo.

Allied to this supposed irresponsibility is that of inaccuracy, or carelessness. From the first reviews of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* until the present, commentators have been revealing Empson's misquotations, errors dealt with by Empson himself as peripheral. He accepted the corrections, but said he couldn't see how the argument was affected. But since they give a plausible pretext for dismissing his works, it is perhaps time that someone with a year or two to spare checked all his quotations, and produce revised editions, noting the cases where the argument would indeed be destroyed by revision. In the meantime it seemed important, when so few of the errors listed by critics have actually been incorporated into the books, that this collection should include the articles in which they are exposed.

Even friendly critics, Roger Sale for example, find the error count embarrassing:

> R. G. Cox, reviewing the second edition, said, 'some of these errors are trivial, others less so, but they all help to undermine the reader's confidence in a critic who stakes so much on close verbal and grammatical analysis.' It is awkward indeed to disagree with this and come down on the side of sloppiness.

This leads to another point of objection to Empson's work as a whole, a charge which is founded on each of the points listed above: unprofessionalism. There is little doubt that, underlying a good deal of the hostility between the academies of Great Britain and the United States there is the simple difference between their career structures. Had Empson been a student in an American university instead of Magdalene College, Cambridge, he would probably have worked on *Seven Types* as his thesis, with what results it is difficult to guess; but one can be reasonably certain that he would have been made to check his quotations. Empson was not a University critic of the type produced by the doctoral system, and if regarded in these terms his career seems only moderately successful. There was an element of choice in this: he liked China and wanted to stay there, but when he did return to the English-speaking world he went not, as I. A. Richards did, to a chair, however marginalised, at Harvard, or to a senior post at Cambridge, but to Sheffield. Senior positions require an administrative talent as well as intellectual excellence, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the stress now placed on accuracy and scholarship, even in works of criticism, is largely because it is evidence of this sort of ability. Defending himself against one of the lists of errors, Empson claimed that 'this idea of checking your quotations as an absolute duty is fairly recent, and not always relevant; for instance Hazlitt habitually quoted from memory, and commonly a bit wrong, but he was writing very good criticism.'[15] The comparison confirms an observation made by Hugh Kenner, to prove quite different points, that Empson is in many ways a nineteenth-century figure.[16] He had little sympathy with the scholars of the modern university, or with the education provided by such institutions, though by all accounts he took his duties at Sheffield very seriously. In turn those who

were definitely of that earth regarded him as an invader. It is difficult to read a reference to him as 'Professor Empson' without feeling it to be sarcastic.

Having suggested that Empson's opinions were less of an obstacle to his establishment than were his inaccuracies, it must be said that these have also been responsible for making him a figure to whom it is safe to condescend. His conviction of the evil of Christianity is the most significant of these opinions, since it has tended to be seen as a governing principle which explains other aspects of his behaviour, as if to say 'An atheist lives without God, and consequently in such a chaos that nothing he does or says should surprise you.' And in a society where the University critic is held to be a guardian of public morals, the dull may, on account of their virtue, claim to be better educators than those with sceptical views. The problem was more acute in the United States, as Empson himself remarked, because religion, paradoxically, seemed to be a great bulwark against communism. Yet it was there that his impact was greatest.

In retrospect it must be surprising that Empson was ever taken up by the New Critics. Roger Sale's comment, 'It was, however, as a New Critic, of all things, that he was imported and it is as a New Critic that he is known even today',[17] remains just. This labelling can lead to the most remarkable misapprehensions, particularly amongst those ecstatically demolishing the New Critical edifice. I have actually met scholars who imagine that Empson was a Christian. But these errors are intelligible since Empson's admirers often dodge the implications of his linguistic theory for their theology ('ambiguity' destabilizes the word of God by suggesting that it has human origin; at least I do not suppose that it is possible for a Christian to believe that God's mind contains unresolved conflicts). And in fact they pass over the handful of occasions in his work before *Milton's God* where his feelings become apparent (*Some Versions*, 166 ff, for example). The New Critics were extremely careful to borrow Empson's instruments only, which in practice was a way of blunting them. With the publication of *Milton's God* the truth was out, but since critics of every kind agreed in calling the book nonsense, it could, if you wished, be said to be an aberration, and in any case Empson was no longer needed as an authority to assist a young movement.

His offhand prose style, the extremes of his interpretations, his sloppy quotation, and his godlessness, have combined under one heading, that of 'irresponsibility', a term which carries in Empson's case the opprobrium of 'delinquent' and the abuse of 'deformed'. It is of course perfectly true that many of the critics who were remarking on these features would have said they were only qualifying their admiration, and indeed Empson could hardly have become the name that he is without gaining the respect of his opponents. But it is here that the comparison with the licensed fool again becomes relevant. One wonders whether Empson's interest in this subject, and also in the way a culture runs its social and intellectual aristocrats as 'pets' sprang from his own experience as the idol of Cambridge.

Seven Types of Ambiguity was published in November 1930, and was almost immediately reviewed by A.B., probably Arnold Bennett, for *G. K.'s Weekly*.[18] He recommended the book – 'it should be read by everyone who has not lost the art of duly savouring what

he reads' – but suggested that 'boojums' would be a more appropriate term than 'ambiguities', as if he hoped that Empson would succumb as the baker in Carroll's rhyme had done:

> In the midst of the word he was trying to say,
> In the midst of his laughter and glee,
> He had softly and suddenly vanished away –
> For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see.

This brief mention was rapidly followed by longer discussions in *The Granta*, one of the first to provide a short list of errors, *The Nation and Athenaeum*, by Edmund Blunden, and *The Spectator*, by Bonamy Dobrée, who also commented on the mistakes.[19] Dobrée explained that 'the great delight in reading this book is that, though you can agree with and rejoice in Mr. Empson's main lines, you are moved to quarrel with him over detail on nearly every page, which becomes scrawled over with marginal comments. His active mind stimulates yours...' Readers are still finding this to be true, and in large part it accounts for the value of his work; it has a liberating effect on those who read it. J. D. C. in *Revolt*[20] remarked that 'the style is refreshingly "low brow", and much more entertaining than Mr. Eliot's "ex-cathedra" manner', and the practically minded writer in *The Saturday Review*[21] pointed out that to read like Empson is to find 'man's allotted span of life too short for the full appreciation of any prolific author'. He also found that 'No spark of humour illustrates the book'. Murry's *TLS* review, already mentioned, is the first sign that deeper implications had been noticed. Up to this point one might think that it was simply being absorbed into the polite world of criticism. You would never guess from Blunden at his most shepherdly ('Canst tell why the seven types are no more than seven?') that the book was a bomb threatening critical standards. But Murry sounds an alarm, and the words he uses are typical of the first phase of the resistance to Empson. The reading of Herbert is 'unnatural', and could arise only in a mind which had made a 'deliberate and violent effort to forget the poem as a poem.' This objection to the 'analytic' school of which Empson was supposed to be a member, is rather similar to that of the Church to early medicine, and comes down to an abhorrence of knowledge, or, rather, of its conscious, active, form. Murry would have preferred, perhaps, the 'wise passivity' of which T. Earle Welby spoke in the first review which treated Empson as a positive menace (who 'must be extinguished, if possible, forthwith'): 'And this is analytical criticism, by implication a nobler thing than that careful training of naturally very sensitive "nerves of delight", that humble readiness to receive the impress of a poem in its totality, hitherto deemed essential in the criticism of poetry.'[22]

This phase did not last long, and seems to have been originated entirely by the men-of-letters. With the entry of the university critics, who would differ from the literary gents as a matter of course, and especially over the worth of one trained in their schools, the objections take on a different cast, largely because they have no doubts as to the quality of the book. The difference is between those who felt, as Murry and Welby did, that Empson was a threat, and writers who based their criticisms on the fact that he did not seem to fit into their projects. Leavis is the obvious case to cite, but the antagonism is not evident in his own publications. At this time he was publicly reverential on the

subject of Empson, as his *Cambridge Review* article shows, while handing over the duty of distancing his thought from *Seven Types* to others, such as James Smith, who reviewed it in *The Criterion* on publication, and Muriel Bradbrook, who commented on it for *Scrutiny* in 1933.[23] Empson paid tribute to Smith's article by discussing it at length in the preface to the second edition of *Seven Types* where he said that it gives all 'the fundamental arguments against my approach'. Smith's article is indeed overflowing with well-directed criticism, but it was one of the least of his points, concerning valuation, which was to become a standard remark of the 'Scrutineers'. He expresses the belief that a student of poetry has as his first business the 'passing of judgments of value', that 'It is not his main, or even his immediate, concern that a word can be interpreted, that a sentence can be construed, in a large number or ways: if he make it his immediate concern, there is a danger that, in the enumeration of these ways, judgments of values will be forgotten.' Empson dealt with this by declaring it outside the scope of the book: 'when Mr. James Smith said that I often left out the judgment of value he was of course correct. Many of the examples are only intended to show that certain techniques have been widely used. [...] The judgement indeed comes either earlier or later than the process which I was trying to examine.'[24] Such a reply, had it been made at the time rather than sixteen years later, would not have been enough to defend himself. It would have seemed no more than a dodge. Muriel Bradbrook complained that, while 'Mr. Empson will be all alive' to 'the question of analysis and elucidation', 'there is little attempt in his book to evaluate the experience analysed and presented.' Combine this with a further proposition: 'judgment, a sense of relative values without which criticism is no more than a game for the intelligent and an emotional shower bath',[25] and her own valuation of *Seven Types* is clear: Empson will show you how to read, in a mechanical sense, but he has no judgments to offer, (unlike Leavis). Empson is in this sense much more like Richards, who hoped to instruct people in the abstract principles of judgment by improving their rhetorical competence, a method which respects the independence of the reader, and does not require discipleship.[26]

1931 also saw the publication of the American edition of *Seven Types*, and thus the beginning of another reputation and another debate. The reviewer in the *New Republic* noticed immediately that 'Empson's approach is psychological',[27] a point not much stressed in the British reviews. Harold Rosenberg in *The Symposium* went further and saw connections with psychoanalysis. Chapter VII, he noted 'makes more open use of the Freudian conception of "ambivalence", that charming interpretation instrument of the psychoanalysts accepted by him quite without criticism.' This review, with the exception of Smith's, was the most important to date, but does not seem to have been very widely read. It was the first to see that the concept of ambiguity was an extremely powerful one and might be difficult to control:

> An analysis of the various meanings surrounding a poem can order itself only by finding some unified emotion or idea within the poem to which the spreading variety may be attached and by which it may be corrected and restrained. If this is not done, the analysis will tend to introduce elements which belong to a whole universe of interpretations, and must result finally in scepticism with regard to all exact communication in poetry.[28]

By the end of the year the response to the book had taken up the shape with which

we are now familiar. The Anti-Analysts had put their case, the Evaluators had expressed disappointment that a book of such quality should be so little use in defining standards, and the Sympathizers felt he had damaged a good case by 'overdoing it'. More importantly, the proximity to radical scepticism had been noted.

Although the period between 1931 and 1935 appears to be one in which Empson was not much discussed, it was a period of rapid consolidation, when, as H. A. Mason put it, *Seven Types* 'established itself as an indispensable aid to "the training of sensibility"',[29] at least in the United Kingdom. Thus when *Poems* and *Some Versions of Pastoral* appeared, they were treated as the work of a major critic, and the volume of reviews is proportionately much larger. 1935 was Empson's *annus mirabilis*, with at least 34 reviews and essays in 1935, and 9 in 1936, as against 17 in 1930, and 16 in 1931.[30]

Not only were the numbers high, but the reviews appeared in periodicals of widely differing character, testimony to the fact that Empson was becoming a celebrity. In the *Spectator* Richard Hughes made the first reference to his physical appearance, a highly unusual thing to do in the literary world of the time:

> The mind of Mr. Empson is interesting, vigorous, and voracious as a lobster. The whole ocean of his reading, from Mandeville to Eddington, is filtered through his whiskers: the most heterogeneous minute particles of knowledge are caught, and cohere in his poetic images (if I express this frivolously, it is not meant in disrespect).[31]

Unsurprisingly this was a review of *Poems*. Creative writers are after all expected to be eccentric, and the publication of this volume made it plain to those who had not realized before, that he was both poet and critic. Almost all the reviewers accept, often grudgingly, that the poems have merit, though the *New Statesman*'s reviewer, Richard Church, did find them the work of 'the tenth muse proclaiming the fine sterility of the operating theatre'.[32]

The first major review of *Some Versions* to appear was that of G. W. Stonier. He repeated the complaint with regard to a lack of an evaluative framework, and added that his terms 'ambiguity' and 'pastoral' expand to cover such wide areas that 'these signposts do not point in one direction.'[33] Moreover he felt that 'the essays remain separate: facets chosen here and there'. This was to be a recurring point in discussions of *Some Versions*, a book that is much more difficult to read than its predecessor since it seems intended to convey an abstract point, whereas the framework in *Seven Types* had been carrying the analyses. The 'piece-meal non-conformity' of the examples in the later book were thus irritating. Nevertheless, Stonier commended it for being 'less academic', presumably referring to its social commitment, but very few reviewers noticed that the book was drawing on Marx.

No review would be complete without a reference to Empson's intelligence – 'He has remarkable agility (if he misses with his feet his tail catches on)'[34] – and many are no more than that. It is surprising how few actually made an attempt to engage with the book's thesis, that of the representation of the complex in terms of the simple, preferring to continue the discussion of *Seven Types*. The *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, returns to the complaints that Murry made in 1930: 'If he had time and

energy he would not merely read a poem as a newspaper article, but as a blue book, as an arithmetical problem in permutation and combination, as a dictionary, and as anything else that the particular series of black marks on white paper might by an "objective" mind be temporarily supposed to be'.[35]

Lively remarks, however, were being made in the United States. Kenneth Burke reviewed it twice, taking the politics of the book as its heart, and pointing out that the analysis of Gray's 'Elegy' was 'profoundly Marxist', and that new interest in social questions made the book a great advance on *Seven Types*.[36] However, it is Arthur Mizener's review that indicates the surprising direction that thought about Empson was about to take. The book is important, he claims, because it 'deals with the past in terms which make it available to the present':

> By finding a method of analysis which brings into focus the dominant purpose of our literature and then applying this method to the literature of other ages, Mr. Empson frees us from the dreary necessity of justifying our concern with past literature on no better grounds than those of historical interest.[37]

This is not an impermissible description, and Empson certainly spent much of his later career campaigning against the view that literature should be read with historical judgment only, but it might be seen to present Empson as a critic who would justify readings tending to ahistoricism.

This was not the only aspect of his work which attracted the New Critics. Empson, with his microscopic attention to the text, could seem like a man who would not allow extraneous matters to call him away from the poem '*as a poem*', to use Brooks' phrase. The recurrence of these words from Middleton Murry's review of *Seven Types* is worth attention. Empson was now being praised as a model of exactly what the bookmen in England said he could not do – keeping his eye on the text.

John Crowe Ransom's essay 'Mr. Empson's Muddles'[38] has classic status, and is an important document, but it doesn't touch Empson's principles, and despite its insistence on the importance of logic in poetry he gets no closer to a criticism than a sketch and a deprecatory gesture. However, with the syntax suitably corrected its opening sentence has become a cliché – 'Mr. William Empson is one of the closest living readers of poetry' – and the essay is an important stage in the adoption of Empson as corresponding member of the New Critical academy (to which we might say he was elected in his absence). Ransom is extremely cautious in his attempts to praise Empson without recommending him: 'If I reproach his extravagances, I do not like the risk I run of giving comfort to the commonplace critic who likes to reduce the meaning of poetry to fit his own cozy little apartment'; and though the old charges come out in new forms they remain the old charges: 'Mr. Empson is a solipsistic critic, because he has much to say about anything, and not the strictest conscience about making what he says "correspond" with what the poet says.' At the core of his argument is Empson's relation to Richards, with an emphasis which needs to be mentioned here because within two years Ransom had changed his mind on the issue:

> I have the notion that Mr. Richards and Mr. Empson confuse the kinds of psychological effect when they admire all possible complications, all muddles, indiscriminately. The really impres-

> sive effect comes, I should think, when the complications support and enforce a central meaning and do not diffuse it or dissolve it.

His objection is that poetry seems good to Richards and Empson because it holds contradictions in the mind for contemplation in a state of uncertainty, whereas Ransom prefers to think of it as a rhetoric for justifying, legitimizing, a statement, the end result for the reader being conviction. In fact he has nothing but contempt for Empson's central plank, the co-existence of contraries, remarking that it 'does not deserve refutation': 'If the poet does not choose, his poem simply does not advance to the stage of logic and truth.' At the back of this is a worry about Richards' 'pseudo-statement', and a fear that Empson is in some way a believer in the non-cognitive value of poetry.

Ransom's second essay on Empson forms a section in a long chapter on Richards in *The New Criticism*.[39] It suffers from all Ransom's faults, the languid hedging manner and quotations of absurd length (omitted in the extract reprinted here), but deserves a place in this collection because it so strikingly demonstrates his changed feelings towards Empson, whom he now attempts to divide from Richards – 'Empson after all was Richards' pupil, and he remarks about the emotions a poem expresses, but I think they are not seriously on his mind. The thing that engages his close analysis is the cognitive content' – in an effort to recruit him, as a prophet, for his school. The charges of over-reading remain, but since Empson has been purged of his connections with Richards he can also be exonerated of the charges of solipsism. 'Ambiguity' becomes a trope used to reinforce a single meaning (he calls it 'predicative ambiguity'), rather than a fundamental fact of language by which we articulate our uncertainties. Empson can then be praised for his discovery, but chastised for the extravagant use to which he puts it.

In comparison with Ransom, Cleanth Brooks is forthright and open. One might say that he is less aware of the difficulties involved in taking Empson as an ally. This is partly because he is less worried about the Ricardian heritage, and indeed in his first major essay on Empson he succeeds in making him sound rather like a quotation, out of context, from *Science & Poetry*:

> For the significance of Empson's criticism is this: his criticism is an attempt to deal with what the poem 'means' in terms of its structure *as a poem*. To sense its importance, one must recall what the critic in the past has attempted to do: either he attempted to find the goodness of the poem (and its status as poetry) in terms of its prose argument – and in terms of the 'truth' of what was being said – and thus made poetry compete with philosophy or science; or else he tried to find the poetry in the charm of the decorative elements – in the metrical pattern, in the sensuous imagery, etc.[40]

Where Ransom was devious in his misreading Brooks is charmingly open: 'I have taken the liberty of stating this summary in my own terms'. After such a remark it is very hard to say you have not been warned, but some of Brooks' observations still come as a surprise:

> In a time in which the study of literature threatens to turn into sociology and in which the death of the humanities is prophesied openly, it is impossible to overestimate the significance of the kind of criticism of which Empson remains the most brilliant exponent.

In view of the kind of criticism which *Some Versions* represents, this is a very odd

thing to write, and is evidence of a tendency, already noted in Ransom, to accept Empson as a source of exegetical tools while avoiding the accompanying linguistic and axiological speculations.

Viewed as a series Empson's four books eddy about one another. *Some Versions of Pastoral* differs from *Seven Types of Ambiguity* merely in raising the level of examination from the sentence and the word to that of the narrative. *The Structure of Complex Words* returns to the microscopics of *Seven Types*, which it develops and attempts to refound on linguistics and logic. *Milton's God* looks to *Some Versions* for its level of enquiry, but, apart from its polemical edge, is an investigation of the question of authorial intention, something which had arisen everywhere in his studies. Although it has become conventional to talk of Empson's immense range, it is evident from the way his books relate to one another that he is a critic with only a handful of closely knit subjects. By 1951, when the third of his books had been published, the basic arguments against his theoretical position had already appeared, which may account for its dismal, and weary, reception. His work on Milton, however, produced lively argument only because it was so rude about God. In terms of literary criticism it met merely with the familiar accusations of over-creative interpretation, and of having a conception of authorial intention which was as good as denying it altogether. Negative criticism after this time is repetitious, or a refinement only. But the 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of a body of critics in the United Kingdom who had, more or less, been nurtured on Empson, and their eloquent defences of his value are more than sufficient compensation.

Note on the Selection and Texts

Though the general intent has been to produce a selection which is representative, reviews, and especially early reviews, have been favoured a little since many are hard to come by. With some very long essays, or chapters from books, it has not been practical to reprint them complete. Omissions are signalled by marks of ellipsis in square brackets, [...]. Errors have been allowed to stand. In some cases, where the original has been difficult to obtain or photograph, the text is reproduced not from its first appearance but from a later reprint. Instances of this kind are mentioned in the list of contents. Where Empson replied to an essay with a letter this has been appended to the article, together with the author's rejoinder if there is one.

This book is about Empson's criticism, but the public debate surrounding him has from the first been concerned with his thought and personality, of which the verse and prose are equally important phenomenal evidence. I have, therefore, tried to do justice to both elements of his work.

The original intention was to cover Empson's career up to *Milton's God*, his last published book, but with the material collected together it was obvious that this would leave things hanging in the air and a more logical place to stop would be with the posthumous appearance of *Using Biography*, the volume which Empson was preparing when he died. The last ten years of his life saw the publication of a number of books about him. No attempt has been made to cover these critical works, or their reception. Indeed there was only space for one representative review of *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poetry*, which Empson

edited with David Pirie, and a similar sole example for *Using Biography*. Such economies have meant that Paul Alpers' long essay on pastoral, and Veronica Forrest-Thomson's discussion of the poetry, could be reprinted entire. The obituary by Christopher Ricks closes the book at a point where one period of the critical thought may, without seeming too arbitrary, be said to end.

Permissions difficulties have enforced the omission of four pieces that would otherwise have been included, Kathleen Raine's 'And Learn a Style from Despair', *The New Statesman and Nation*, 50/1287 (5 Nov. 1955), 580-582, and her 'Correspondence', *The London Magazine*, 3/3 (Mar. 1956), 66-67, have been withdrawn at the request of the author, and Hugh Kenner's 'The Critic's Not For Burning', *National Review*, 13/18 (28 Aug. 1962), 149-51, and Jonathan Culler's 'A Critic Against the Christians', *Times Literary Supplement* (23 Nov. 1984), 1327-8, have been omitted for other reasons.

Notes

1 Quoted in John Haffenden, 'The Importance of Empson: The Poems', *Essays in Criticism*, 35/1 (Jan. 1985), 22.

2 I. A. Richards to T. S. Eliot, August/September 1929, *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1990), 53.

3 'Union Notes', *The Granta*, 36/799 (5 Nov. 1926), 99. The motion was defeated 296 against, 210 for.

4 'Union Notes', *The Granta*, 37/822 (28 Oct. 1927), 65. The motion was defeated 185 against, 54 in favour.

5 The relationship with Haldane may come to be seen as one of most important of his undergraduate years. Apart from many similarities of background and training, both were interested in the reform of sexual morality, and both came up against the Cambridge establishment for infringements of the traditional codes. One could add that their political positions were on the left, Haldane being a Communist Party member, and that both gave many years service to foreign universities, Empson in China and Haldane in India. Lack of biographical data makes it difficult to speculate further, but in so far as Empson's interest in modern science is to be attributed to anyone, Haldane is a major influence.

6 'Almost', *The Granta*, 37/829 (27 Jan. 1928), 229.

7 *The Structure of Complex Words* (Chatto & Windus: London, 1951), 365.

8 Lascelles Abercrombie, 'Literary History and Criticism: General Works', *The Year's Work in English Studies*, Vol. 1, 1930 (Oxford 1932), 14–16.

9 'Empson, Adams, and Milton', *Partisan Review* 21/6 (Nov.–Dec. 1954), 698.

10 'The Achievement of William Empson', *Hudson Review*, 19/3 (Autumn 1966), 369.

11 Empson's preface is still reprinted with current editions. Adams' remark appeared in 'Hero of the Word', *New York Review of Books*, 32/6 (11 Apr. 1985), 32.

12 *Times Literary Supplement*, 29/1507 (18 December 1930), 1082.

13 'The Criticism of William Empson', *Mandrake* 2/10 (Autumn–Winter 1954–5), 330. The typographical error in the original has been corrected.

14 Hugh Kenner, *A Sinking Island* (Alfred Knopf: New York, 1987; Barrie & Jenkins: London, 1988), 212–13.

15 'Empson, Adams, and Milton', *Partisan Review*, 21/6 (Nov.–Dec. 1954), 698.

16 Hugh Kenner, 'Alice in Empsonland', *Hudson Review*, 5/1 (Spring 1952), 144. (See also his review of *Milton's God*, 'The Critic's Not for Burning', *National Review*, 13/8 (28 Aug. 1962), 149–51.) Kenner, incidentally, was by no means the first to compare Empson with Carroll.

17 'The Achievement of William Empson', *Hudson Review*, 19/3 (Autumn 1966), 370.

18 A. B. *G. K.'s Weekly*, 14 November 1930. This review was traced through the Chatto & Windus press cutting book, and I have not been able to verify the reference.

19 B. 'Now We are Eight', *The Granta*, 40/898 (21 Nov. 1930), 144. Edmund Blunden, 'The World of Books: The Oracular Poets', *The Nation & Athenaeum*, 48/8 (22 Nov. 1930), 267. Bonamy Dobrée, *The Spectator*, 145/5344 (29 Nov. 1930), 850–1.

20 *Revolt*, 1 Dec. 1930.

21 'Analysis of Ambiguity', *The Saturday Review*, 150/3919 (6 Dec. 1930), 750.

22 'Time to Make a Stand', *The Weekend Review*, 3/43 (3 January 1931), 18.

23 James Smith, 'Books of the Quarter', *Criterion* 10/41 (July 1931), 738–42. Muriel Bradbrook, 'The Criticism of William Empson', *Scrutiny* 2/3 (Dec. 1933), 253–6.

24 'Preface', *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Chatto & Windus: London, revised edition 1947).

25 'The Criticism of William Empson', *Scrutiny*, 2/3 (Dec. 1933), 253–7.

26 For a discussion of this matter tilted towards Leavis' side of the argument see H. M. McLuhan, 'Poetic vs. Rhetorical Exegesis: The Case for Leavis against Richards and Empson', *The Sewannee Review* 52/ (Spring 1944), 266–276.

27 Anon, 'Book Notes', *New Republic* 66/849 (11 Mar. 1931), 107.

28 'Book Reviews', *The Symposium*, 2/3 (July 1931), 412–18.

29 'W. Empson's Criticism', *Scrutiny*, 4/4 (Mar. 1936), 431–4.

30 These figures in fact surpass those for *The Structure of Complex Words* and *Milton's God*: 1951: 26; 1952: 13; 1961: 26; 1962: 19.

31 'New Poetry', *Spectator*, 155/5589 (9 Aug. 1935), 233.

32 'The Feet of the Young Men', *New Statesman and Nation*, 10/232 (3 Aug. 1935),

33 'Complexity', *New Statesman and Nation*, 10/423 (19 Oct. 1935), 568–570.

34 Desmond Hawkins, 'Illuminated Texts', *The Spectator*, 95/5603 (15 Nov. 1935), 828.

35 'Pastoral and Proletarian', *Times Literary Supplement*, 34/1765 (30 Nov. 1935), 798.

36 Burke's first review, 'Exceptional Improvisation' appeared in *Poetry*, 49/6 (Mar. 1937), 347–350, and his second, 'Exceptional Book', in *New Republic*, 95/1225 (25 May 1938), 81.

37 'The Truest Poetrie', *Partisan Review*, 5/1 (June 1938), 57–60.

38 *The Southern Review*, 4/2 (July–Apr. 1938–1939), 322–339.

39 *The New Criticism* (New Directions: Norfolk Conn., 1941).

40 *Accent*, repr. in Kerker Quinn and Charles Shattuck (eds) *Accent Anthology: Selections from Accent, A Quarterly of New Literature, 1940–1945* (Harcourt, Brace and Co.: New York, 1946), 496–508.

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