

**William Empson**  
**and**  
**The Common Sense of Theory**

**By**

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*For my parents*

## Abstract

‘As for teaching – I quite like talking to myself in public. The thing is to look at the blackboard or anyway not at the assembled frogs. They can read what you write on the board though they can’t understand what you say. If you write steadily on the board and keep up a spoken patter, *never* waiting for signs of intelligence or making jokes, the hour gets through all right’ (SL 40). Thus wrote William Empson from Japan in a letter to John Hayward in 1932. Empson’s early experience as an English teacher in the Far East helped shape the formation of his ambivalent attitudes towards the varied audiences he felt himself compelled to address as a publicly-minded intellectual who always wrote in fear of the charges of elitism and solipsism. Yet there is a sense in which Empson was not always altogether able, nor perhaps even willing, to resist the trappings of solipsistic eccentricity. Aware of his own idiosyncratic critical vision, Empson struggled with the social and theoretical implications of the ultra-refined rationalising drive that motivated his analytical concentration on ‘the words on the page’. And though as a critic with distinct and highly sophisticated philosophical inclinations, he was not averse to engaging in spirited controversy with contemporary academic theorists and philosophers, still he was also keen to foster a sense of common belonging with the ‘ordinary tolerably informed reader’, to cultivate a sense of pastoral intimacy with a broader, non-specialised community, the ‘assembled frogs’ in the classroom and beyond.

The resulting tension in his work between the democratic, commonsensical impulse of a publicly-minded intellectual speaking for our common ‘social experience’ (a key Empson phrase), translating for the greatest possible number, and the unarticulated, elitist products of an idiosyncratic critical consciousness, is the central topic of this dissertation. Empson scholar-theorists have often dealt elliptically with this sturdy resistance to theory by stressing the man’s ‘common sense rationalism’ (Christopher Norris), the ‘reasonableness’ (Paul Fry) of a ‘reluctant metacritic’ (John Haffenden) keen to resist the professionalization of Eng. Lit. in its varied ‘bother-headed theoretical’ forms. Yet both Empson’s homespun rationalism and his resistance to theory are shot through with tensions similar to those which structure his difficult attempt to reconcile the conflicting voices of articulate populism and elitist marginality. The recent publication of Haffenden’s two-volume biography (OUP 2005-2006) and of his edition of the *Selected Letters* (OUP 2006), as well as the forthcoming publication of a collection of essays edited by Matthew Bevis entitled *Some Versions of Empson* (OUP 2007), give Empson scholars and enthusiasts an opportunity to reflect on the ambiguities of Empson’s theoretical and pedagogical legacy.

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## Abbreviations

In this dissertation I refer to Empson's works by abbreviations. The abbreviations and editions I use are as follows:

- ST *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, first published in 1930.
- P *Some Versions of Pastoral*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996, first published in 1935.
- CW *The Structure of Complex Words*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, first published in 1951.
- MG *Milton's God*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1965, first published in 1961.
- CV *Coleridge's Verse: a Selection*, ed. William Empson and David B. Pirie, London: Faber and Faber, 1972.
- UB *Using Biography*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1984.
- ES *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. David B. Pirie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- RB *The Royal Beasts and Other Works*, ed. John Haffenden, London: Chatto and Windus, 1986.
- ARG *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. John Haffenden, London: Chatto and Windus, 1987.
- FC *Faustus and the Censor: The English Faust-book and Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus'*, ed. John Henry Jones, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.
- ER1 *Essays on Renaissance Literature*, ed. John Haffenden, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Vol.1: *Donne and the New Philosophy* (1993).
- ER2 *Essays on Renaissance Literature*, ed. John Haffenden, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Vol.2: *The Drama*, 1994).
- SSS *The Strengths of Shakespeare's Shrew: Essays, Memoirs and Reviews*, ed. John Haffenden, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.
- CP *Collected Poems*, ed. John Haffenden, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001, first published in 2000.
- SL *Selected Letters of William Empson*, ed. John Haffenden, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.



## Introduction

Terry Eagleton famously described Sir William Empson as ‘the critic as clown’<sup>1</sup> to explain Empson’s complex understanding of the relation between critic and audience, his ambivalent sense of marginality and social responsibility. There are in fact a number of other such figurations that provide a similar way into Empson’s critical and creative work. The methodological appeal of these critical images or figurations is that they reflect Empson’s own more or less implicit interest in various figures of criticism, such as the critic as amateur or the critic as pastoral anti-hero. One conviction of the Empsonian pastoral critic is that independence of judgement, one of the rational humanist ‘verbal fictions’ he most steadfastly defended, is best fostered by the preservation of amateurism in criticism. However, with Empson these two figures are merely avatars of a more general figuration – the critic as public translator or mediator. It is the central argument of this thesis that Empson’s attempt to embody this figure was not altogether successful, though it provides a fruitful configuration for thinking about how ‘Establishment English’ (or ‘Eng. Lit.’, as Empson would have called it) is capable of ‘disestablishing itself’ by reconsidering the terms in which it presents itself to audiences, both within and beyond the narrow realm of academia – a realm in which Empson never really felt at home.

Empson often sought to ridicule the pompous limitations of professorial pronouncements, as well as the elitist obscurity of academic rhetoric and high Theory. He once said in a letter to a friend that ‘[w]e must have free communication between the expert and the outsider, who may be an expert at something else, or the whole business of forward development and democracy and so on will stop’ (SL 96). This thesis argues that Empson’s

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<sup>1</sup> Eagleton, Terry. ‘The Critic as Clown’, in *Against the Grain: Selected Essays*, New Left Books, 1986; third impression, London and New York: Verso, 1991, 149-165.

NB. I prefer the use of footnotes as opposed to endnotes in discussing Empson, for unlike Paul Alpers in his outstanding study of ‘Empson on Pastoral’ (1978), I have *not* ‘felt uneasy about providing conventional footnotes in [a dissertation] on a writer notable for his multiplicity and verve, some of whose attractiveness comes from the assumption that he and his readers have read the same books and know about the same things’. I cannot pretend to share this assumption unreservedly, but I have endeavoured at every stage to explain the critical spirit whence it stems. See Alpers, Paul. ‘Empson on Pastoral’, *New Literary History*, Volume 10, 1978-1979; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 489-511, 489.

democratic, Benthamite standard of mediating for the greatest possible number, his principled amateurism, his strong sense of audience always vied uncomfortably with their more problematic or more obscure opposites – the combined perils of extreme specialization, professional elitism and discursive obscurity, which all serve to weaken the sense of pastoral intimacy, the common humanity, which the Empsonian critic wishes to foster between himself and the wider community. This conflict is reflected in the ambivalent implications of his preferred mode of critical address – a conversational style which, though designed expressly to undercut all forms of cant, also caused resistance (even resentment) because it was so often accompanied by ‘a hearty indifference to other people’s feelings’ (SL 139). It also surfaces in his thinking about the conditions of critical debate, the form of critical argument best suited for fostering a critical community. But it is perhaps most in evidence when Empson is talking about the public or social role of the critic, something he often does in private (a fact borne out by the recent publication of the selection of Empson’s letters edited by John Haffenden). Empson was often quite explicit about his philosophical and political beliefs in his letters, far more so in fact than in his published writings. As he once put it: ‘It’s all right for me to say “this is the proper place to be” in a private letter, where I am talking about myself, but as soon as I have it published I am obviously hinting about other people, and I want to avoid that’ (SL 127-128). Despite this strong sense of personal obligation, the critic’s refusal to speak out on political matters may limit the impact of his socio-political role, while the concealment of his philosophical or theoretical views in his published writings suggests an elitism that is unwilling to articulate the theory behind the practice, to make available for public debate the theoretical rationale of the critic’s interpretive pronouncements.

This tension points to something deeply problematic in Empson’s thought: namely that his desire to preserve a certain world-mindedness, a point much stressed in current writings about Empson, especially Haffenden’s recent two-volume biography, never acquired a resilience strong enough to contain altogether its repressed solipsistic tendencies. Just as Empson’s history of pastoral critique in *Some Versions of Pastoral* exposes the growing

isolation of the critic within the community, so Empson himself was exposed to analogous forms of resistance throughout his career. As an opponent of the pomposity and elitism of professional criticism, Empson saw the 'ordinary tolerably informed reader' as his ideal reader, the nub or focus of his preferred audience, but he was also forced to acknowledge that such a being may no longer exist – if indeed s/he ever did. Is the Empsonian critic therefore willing to compromise with the new-fangled languages of professional academic criticism, for surely he does want an audience for his writing? If the only audience willing to listen comes from within the realm of academe, then surely the Empsonian critic must consent to address this audience lest he isolate himself altogether in a private world where a democratic forum for critical debate could no longer be sustained.

Recent critics have translated Empson's work into the idioms of post-68 academic theory or resorted to the various forms of anti-Theory rhetoric generated by these idioms as a means of countering this isolation<sup>2</sup>. While much is lost in such conflicting critical mediations, there seems little to be gained from inferring that there is something in Empson's thought and style that is quite literally *untranslatable*, condemning him inexorably to the margins of academic fashion and critical understanding. A far more positive strategy would be to apply Empson's implicit philosophy of translation to his own work and thereby to discover just what is lost in such attempts to mediate his thought for later generations of readers. This self-reflexive move will serve the further purpose of substantiating the claim that Empson's ethics of critical mediation struggled to resist the threat of solipsistic obscurity. But it will also help to move beyond the current limiting impasse, or critical *âgon*, that restricts the scope of current debates over the role played by Empson's work in the on-going Theory Wars

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of such mediations include Paul de Man's reading – or misreading – of Empson along Heideggerian-existentialist lines in 'The Dead-End Formalist Criticism', *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, London: Methuen and Co.: 1983, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition revised, 234-241; Pamela McCallum's phenomenological rendering of *Some Versions of Pastoral* in 'Figural Narrative and plot construction: Empson on pastoral', in Norris, Christopher and Mapp, Nigel (eds.), *William Empson: the Critical Achievement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 196-212; and Jean-Jacques Lecercle's poststructuralist version of Empson the poet in Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. 'William Empson's cosmicomics', in Norris, Christopher and Mapp, Nigel (eds.), *William Empson: the Critical Achievement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 269-293. At the other (anti-Theory) extreme, see Cunningham, Valentine. *Reading After Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002 and Ricks, Christopher, *Essays in Appreciation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

(especially in view of the current resurgence of interest in his work led by Haffenden) and in broader accounts of modern and contemporary criticism.

Interest in Empson's work has wavered (and declined) in recent times, especially since the late sixties and early seventies when continental Theory began to establish itself as the new force in Eng. Lit. Today, therefore, and despite the rekindled interest in Empson following the 2003 Empson conference at Sheffield and various recent and forthcoming publications by Haffenden and others, there is a pressing question that simply cannot be evaded: why is it that Empson is so little discussed (or even just acknowledged) by contemporary theorists? This dissertation will offer some answers to this question. What unites these suggestions is best construed via my approach to a particular conflict in the reception history of Empson's work, between the rational-humanist Empson and the Romantic Empson. This is a conflict that divides even those willing to ponder the connections between Empson's work and later developments in literary theory, and is another reflection of the implicit tension briefly outlined above between Empson's two conflicting voices, those of articulate populism and elitist marginality. The two critical monographs on Empson differ precisely on this particular difficulty (Christopher Norris, *William Empson and the Philosophy of Criticism*, 1978, and Paul H. Fry, *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice*, 1991). For Christopher Norris, Empson is a brilliantly idiosyncratic creature of the Enlightenment, keen to preserve the public availability of meanings and values and to affirm the rational conditions of analysis. Paul Fry, by contrast, is more interested in detecting in Empson a submerged Romantic 'aesthetic of sublimity', a confused metaphysics that reluctantly acknowledges the ineffable by locating points of resistance to the availability of meaning: 'In Empson's style as in his chosen subjects, the bluff squire, with his keen English nose for nonsense, almost completely conceals a deep sympathy with Romantic attitudes'<sup>3</sup>. Against the claims of literary theorists willing to 'disarticulate' the entire framework of the Kantian faculties, whom Fry is implicitly following in his evaluation of Empson's Romanticism, the realist philosopher Norris has defended Empson as a thinker of the

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<sup>3</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 37.

Enlightenment, a theorist of the public use of reason, a defender of truth attuned to the critical potential of the idea of the Enlightenment. While Martin Dodsworth may be right to object to Fry's version of Empson on the grounds that 'it is better to ponder the hint of concealment as a motive in the style rather than the assertion of fundamental Romanticism'<sup>4</sup>, I suggest that Empson's 'partial alliance with Romanticism'<sup>5</sup>, as well as the cultivation of a forum of 'fair public debate' in Norris's version of Empson, are the products of both critical and stylistic tensions without which the significance of Empson's work cannot be fully measured and understood. It is precisely this tension that makes Empson such an interesting and problematic theorist of critical translation, and it is the conflicts that structure his version of this theoretical figure that constitute the object of this dissertation.

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<sup>4</sup> Dodsworth, Martin. 'Empson and the trick of it'. *Essays in Criticism* 51 (1): 101. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 38.

## Chapter 1

### Empson past and present

The ages change, and they impose their rules.  
We must endure, and stand between two fools.  
'Untitled poem XI' (RB 121)

#### I. Introduction: Empson and Theory

The opening sentence of Kenneth Burke's 1938 review of the American edition of *Some Versions of Pastoral* (misleadingly entitled *English Pastoral Poetry*) is a gleeful comment on the elusiveness of the book's main argument: 'The columnist's dream is of a book that lays down its thesis in the opening sentence, expands it through the entire introduction, repeats it with variations through several hundred pages, and winds up by summarizing it in an epilogue. By such a test, the superb literary analysis of William Empson would be the columnist's nightmare'<sup>6</sup>. The nightmare of Empson's methodological obliqueness is a recurrent theme in the reception history of his work, and so presumably many commentators would happily endorse Burke's verdict (minus perhaps the note of celebratory irony), seeing it by extension as one of the most serious faults of the Empson corpus as a whole. For it is a body of writings that generations of critics have struggled with, and from which others have recoiled, often for the very reason that Empson's broader critical projects, in a manner akin to his close readings, appear to lack any kind of unifying selectivity or drive. The small, scattered body of secondary sources is evidence enough of this perceived difficulty, though it hardly proves that the columnist's nightmare necessarily has any grounding in reality. In a similar vein, Christopher Ricks asked at the end of his Empson obituary: 'How could one possibly sum up this myriad-minded man, inimitably alive as poet and critic?''<sup>7</sup>

Any attempt to write a dissertation on Empson is thus immediately faced with what

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<sup>6</sup> Burke, Kenneth. 'Exceptional Book', *The New Republic*, 95/1225, 25 May 1938, p.81; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 85-87, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Ricks, Christopher. 'William Empson', *The Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol.71, Oxford University Press, pp.539-554, 552, reprinted Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 540-555, 553.

many would consider the near impossibility of tying down his idiosyncratic critical ethos within the neat confines of a suitably academic argument without falling prey to the joint dangers of oversimplification and obscurity. The task is perhaps even more arduous if one's claim is to demonstrate Empson's relevance for us today, but it is certainly one that is worth undertaking, as I hope will become clear by the end of this chapter.

There are broadly two ways of justifying a return to the work of earlier critics or theorists, either of which could potentially provide us with the tight argumentative strategy that Empson's work appears to resist. One is largely hagiographic and claims to demonstrate the relevance of the earlier critic's work to contemporary criticism, by discovering an implicit philosophy which can then be accommodated within the narrow confines of a (frequently politicized) theoretical programme produced at an allegedly more enlightened stage of critical development. The other, more agonistic mode insists on ideological, institutional or disciplinary contexts that, so its practitioners claim, have led earlier critics to develop a misguided and distorted understanding of their subject and that now need to be re-examined resourcefully and reconstituted, if only to avoid repeating the errors of the past, the Dark Ages of pre-Theory naiveté. Empson's criticism is often oppositional, though not in quite the same way, resisting, arguing against or opposing its subject, from Wordsworth's pantheistic mysticism to Milton's God, and from George Herbert's ambiguous version of the Holy Trinity to Thomas Gray's pastoral complacency. Hence his belief in the value of 'argufying', a word he coined to mean the not especially dignified kind of arguing we do in ordinary life and that both poetry and criticism practice as a kind of principled, rational resistance to orthodoxy. So in disagreeing with our subject, we could well be doing the honourable thing, applying Empson's principle of oppositional resistance to his own writings, both critical and creative. My own approach has elements in common with both methods, because taken separately neither proves in the end altogether satisfactory in dealing with the strange case of William Empson. This dissertation thus presents itself neither as an unqualified celebration nor as a systematic ideological subversion of Empsonian criticism.

The job of honouring Empson's work has already been done by a heterogeneous

group of Empson devotees, though often with somewhat mixed, that is conflicting, results. For Empson scholars, as opposed to the casual reviewer, have rarely argued against their eccentric subject. It is perhaps because of his eccentricity that Empson has so seldom come in for the kind of theoretical or ideological taking apart that Richards, Eliot or Leavis have all been subjected to, though scores of reviewers and essayists have underlined Empson's scholarly faults and critical inconsistencies. Still, it remains the case that in attaining a canonical, if somewhat controversial status, Empson's critical thought has been the focus of serious, intense scrutiny and discussion from a small group of devoted scholars and critics. This dissertation thus finds itself already preceded by a number of works on the topic of Empson's relation to broader movements of critical fashion, many of them most informative and substantial, even at times path-breaking<sup>8</sup>. The purpose of this study is not so much to prove or disprove Empson's alignment with recent practices, an ambition which might appear to defeat the purpose of his trademark pluralism. Rather, its object is to engage with the ironic attitude that informs Empson's response to some of the dilemmas often raised to a high point of dogmatic honour by various brands of high Theory.

My aim is thus not to reflect the agonistic mood of the on-going Theory wars, but to offer a more irenic Empsonian response to some of its roots and implications, as well as to the alleged crisis of current academic criticism. Because Empson so often resisted the conventions of academic criticism, his work is most fruitfully read as a storehouse of defamiliarizing resources, of invigorating critical figurations that invite a questioning of the

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<sup>8</sup> In the last thirty years or so, the pressures of increasing theoretical complexity have significantly added to our understanding and appreciation of Empson's work. Besides the two very different, though equally valuable monographs on Empson, by Norris and Fry, there are also an important collection of essays edited by Norris and Nigel Mapp, *William Empson: the Critical Achievement* (1993), a handful of important journal articles and book chapters by, among others, Paul Alpers, Martin Dodsworth, Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe, Terry Eagleton, Neil Hertz, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, Christopher Norris, Lisa Rodensky, Mark Thompson and Gary Wihl, and two volumes of older pieces – the Empson Festschrift edited by Roma Gill (1974) and a volume of reviews and articles edited by John Constable (1993). A flurry of recent publications, including John Haffenden's two-volume biography of Empson, a selection of Empson's letters edited by Haffenden, and the conference proceedings of the Sheffield event in 2003 edited by Matthew Bevis, are crucial additions to this surprisingly small collection of secondary sources. Stanley Hyman's assessment in 1948, that 'Empson has been widely influential but has received little critical discussion', still holds true today. See Stanley Edgar Hyman, 'William Empson and Categorical Criticism', *The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism*, (Alfred A. Knop: New York, 1948), pp. 293-300; 304-306; reprinted in Constable John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, 154-163.



very institutions of literature and academic criticism. Much of this dissertation will therefore focus on the image of the critic, the family of critical allegories that inform and reflect Empson's reluctant philosophy, or anti-philosophy, of criticism. These attitudes will be seen to constitute Empson's ironic response to the conceptual and rhetorical sophistication of high Theory, and will imply a constant return to a family of questions such as: what form might a rehabilitation of common sense take, and how can it negotiate the difficult relation of theory and practice, both within the terms of its own strategic options and in our engagement with textual singularity? What are the political, philosophical and critical implications of the allegory of criticism implied by Empson's refashioning of the concept of pastoral in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), and how is this allegory anticipated in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930)? How might we extract a coherent family of critical figures to people this allegory from Empson's characterological archaeology of counter-conformist values, attitudes and linguistic structures in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951)? And how are these anticipated by his two previous books? What would a genealogy of Empsonian critical figures therefore resemble?

The following pages serve the comparatively modest purpose of situating Empson's work within the broader context of past and current debate and of giving some idea of just why re-engaging with Empson's work today is such a worthwhile project. If it might seem at times that I have covertly indulged in a defence of Empson's 'relevance', thereby contradicting my initial remarks about the relative futility of such a project, I can only say in my defence that it is Empson's eccentric differences, the resistance of his work to programmatic appropriation, more than any so-called philosophy of criticism, that makes him so relevant for us today. For even the most explicitly political of his writings validate no political or academic orthodoxy, but are best approached as a source of insight enabling us to investigate the attitudes underlying any orthodoxy through a close engagement with the style in which those attitudes present themselves – which is precisely why the question of style will be a central focus of this dissertation.

A more specific sense of argumentative focus might be gained from a disambiguation

of the title of this study, which is meant to convey an interest in three closely-related issues that provide, sometimes obliquely, the background against which my readings of Empson will be set. First of all, it refers to the discourse, entity or faculty of 'common sense' which post-1960s Theory allegedly demystified and subverted; in other words the historically contingent and politically suspect 'common sense view' of literature, meaning, and interpretation that supposedly regulated and restricted the range of things that earlier critics could say or do with literary texts and critical discourses. Secondly, it is meant to imply a critical perspective upon the meaning or range of meanings that we commonly apply to 'theory' as a word or concept, i.e. the common meaning of 'theory', and how that might relate to the practice of criticism and close reading. Thirdly, it is designed to express the more contentious claim that literary theory can in some way usefully reinterpret our idea of 'common sense' by retaining something of its appeal and value, with a view to promoting the primacy of practice. It will thus be possible to think of literary theorizing as a 'commonsensical' pursuit fostering a healthy approach to life and literature through the application of the common wisdom implicit in Empson's dialogical vision of literary history, his celebration of native wit and his pastoral conviction that to engage in criticism or theory is always a move in the construction of a community, the celebratory surfacing of our common humanity.

My claim is that in reengaging with a critic whose work spans almost the entire course of the twentieth century, we may gain a clearer view of the pursuit of theory, not merely as a speculative activity reflecting on and questioning critical practice, but also as a functionally operating concept with a history of its own, which has evolved over time to become both a controversial discipline and an essentially contested concept. In doing so my purpose will not be to vindicate openly any particular approach against the speculative findings of more recent Theory, but rather to explore, somewhat in the manner of an archaeology of theory both as practice and concept, Empson's critical thought with a view to identifying those aspects of his work that are especially relevant and therapeutic for critical theory and practice today. I hope nonetheless to demonstrate that the results of this archaeological approach will tend towards a defence of the primacy of texts and critical

practice over and against the strictures and reductions of theoretical orthodoxies.

It is important to note that the problem thus raised is not meant to involve a strict opposition of theory and common sense; rather, it implies that the terms of the relation need to be problematized and redefined in the interests of preserving a dialectical mode of theorizing that ignores neither the abstract reasonings of philosophy nor the concrete exploratory manoeuvres of critical practice. Neither should it be concluded that in speaking of the common sense of theory, I have thereby assumed that theory is directed towards one end only, and that the various practices that it encompasses are neither incompatible nor radically distinct. For this would be to ignore both the actual state of contemporary theory and Empson's own pronouncements on critical pluralism and the variety of objects that criticism can legitimately pursue. Suffice it to say at this stage that Empsonian common sense is not synonymous with methodological homogeneity, nor should it be taken to imply any form of ideological uniformity.

There is of course a rich fund of philosophical writings – mainly, though not exclusively, belonging to the British empiricist tradition, in which Empson's own work is steeped – that can be drawn upon to characterize the nature and limits of commonsense. This starts with someone who was admittedly not a British empiricist – Descartes (for whom commonsense is the faculty responsible for coordinating the deliveries of the different senses) – and culminates, in the modern British context, with G.E. Moore's 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925), wherein Moore argued that no philosophical argument that claimed to establish scepticism could be more certain than his own commonsense convictions. Thus the fact that he had a hand was for him more certain than any philosophical premises or trains of argument purporting to show that he did not know this. It is perhaps in the assumptions lurking behind the Scottish 'commonsense' school headed by Thomas Reid and David Hume, as well as behind Gilbert Ryle's suggestion that Locke invented commonsense, in Russell's remark that none but Englishmen have had it ever since, and in the extension of Bentham's utilitarian interest in commonsense, that an archaeological investigation into Empson's own peculiar brand of commonsense may find a suitable burrowing ground or point of departure.

More important for my purpose, however, is the use to which I shall put the conflict-ridden reception history of Empson's work in order to substantiate the claim that by articulating its allegedly radical ambitions around a strategy of systematic deconstruction that seeks to uncover the political, ideological, and philosophical limitations of earlier critics and theorists and the contingent roots of commonsense, much current theory has frequently been compelled to overlook or simplify the complex manoeuvres of Empsonian criticism against which they have sometimes pitted their own projects of ideological demystification. The reception of Empson's work is not merely an instance of such strategic readings and misreadings; it also demonstrates how the simplistic binary opposition of commonsense and theory need not act as the foundational basis for demarcating valid and indefensible critical discourses, but should instead be approached as a taxing though highly productive tension that critical practice may both reflect and refine upon. In his important essay 'The Critic as Clown', Terry Eagleton suggested that Empson's work goes some way towards refurbishing a viable conception of the otherwise ideologically contentious standard of commonsense, that 'most English of vices'<sup>9</sup>. It is precisely the possibility and interest of this rehabilitation and its consequences that I intend to explore throughout this dissertation. One such consequence is a return to the practice of close tactful reading that is not regulated or overly restricted by the 'doctrinal adhesions', 'stock responses', or 'critical preconceptions' (three major causes of misreading identified by Empson's mentor I.A. Richards in *Practical Criticism*) that reflect the sectarian interests of any particular critical school or fashion. In insisting on this resistance of commonsense, we are nonetheless confronted with the problem of Empson's survival in the age of (post-) Theory. For in tracing, however obliquely, the reception history of Empson's work, we also need to consider why his criticism met with what was, comparatively, so abrupt a demise; very few critics and theorists today actually read and write about Empson with anything like the kind of enthusiasm that his work generated from the thirties right through to the late seventies, despite the current renewal of interest in his work.

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<sup>9</sup> Eagleton, Terry. 'The Critic as Clown', in *Against the Grain: Selected Essays*, New Left Books, 1986; third impression, London and New York: Verso, 1991, 149-165, 164.

While there may be historically specific intellectual contradictions to the man and his work that may explain why he had a major though fairly short-lived influence on the main critical/theoretical paradigms of this century, a more positive approach might be a comparative one, seeing in his work those elements that are most at odds with (and yet most valuable for) the multiple projects and styles of current Theory.

Empson enthusiasts certainly have much cause to rejoice at the current renewal of interest in his criticism and poetry, partly kindled by the Sheffield conference in 2003 celebrating the fifty years of his appointment to the Chair of English (which will issue in the forthcoming publication, in late 2007, of the conference proceedings, nearly coinciding with the centenary of his birth). In 2005, an immense gap in Empson studies was filled with the publication of the first volume of John Haffenden's long-awaited Empson biography, the most important addition to Empson studies in recent years. The second volume of the biography appeared in late 2006, and a volume of Empson's letters edited by Haffenden also appeared in March 2006. This thesis considers some of the reasons, as well as the limits, of this renewal. For despite this rekindled interest in Empson, there is a pressing question that simply cannot be evaded: why is it that Empson is so little read (or even just acknowledged) today in the broader arena of literary theory? One reason is that he is so very hard to pigeon-hole, and yet this is precisely what has made it possible for theorists of very different doctrinal allegiances to read his work as a noble forerunner of their own supposedly more sophisticated critical programs. As Christopher Ricks has remarked:

It has indeed been possible to think of Empson as actively in sympathy with many of the claims or ambitions of subsequent 'developments' in literary theory; it is after all difficult on close inspection to charge him with a cramped notion of what might constitute or be regarded as literature. Neither can he be charged with an indifference to other disciplines or other points of view than that of the liberal humanist (he wrote significant Marxist and Freudian criticism), or charged with subscribing to the narrow insistence that a critic should not stray into areas where he or she is not an expert or an authority. Empson cannot be accused either of ignorance about, or indifference or hostility to, cultures that are not European or Western, having given much of his life to working in Japan and in China and to appreciating their cultural and ethical achievements. He cannot be accused of 'complicity' with Christianity, since not only did he argue against the religion with passion and wit; he also studied, with patience, the faces of Buddha and was also familiar with Confucian teaching; we might even say that there is something distinctly Confucian about him, in outlook and in appearance. His arguments cannot be brushed aside as those of a man of the right,

since he was a life-long socialist. And in terms of the more circumscribed world of literary argument, the author of *Seven Types* and *Complex Words* cannot be accused of being antagonistic to or unskilled at high speculation and advanced thought.<sup>10</sup>

I shall argue that while critics and theorists must now contend with many winds of doctrine blowing from the camps of various embattled orthodoxies, the implicitly political criticism of Empson validates no such orthodoxy, though it can also be read as an informative and frequently ironic commentary on the vanity of high theory. In this sense theory might be seen as a worthwhile instrument that could improve literary and critical practice, enhance appreciation, and reduce the strong-hold of prevailing orthodoxies. Theory's practical consequences, however, need not be immediate, nor confined to the notions of literature and criticism it works with, which for Empson go beyond the narrowly aesthetic and extend into the socio-political and ethical realms of experience. Indeed, theory in this sense needs to preserve the local aspect of its investigations, so that the definitions, categories, and frameworks proffered by theory remain provisional and open to revision in the light of new cultural or socio-political demands and circumstances. This is because for Empson there is no such thing as an essence of literature, an activity that is at any rate intimately connected to and reflective of the changing intricacies of human experience and desires.

Empson's review of Lord Raglan's *The Hero* in 1937 is a good example of this mistrust both of the excessively reductive pigeon-holing strategy inherent in any construction of a theoretical system and of his own sense that theory and history are in a necessarily dialectical relationship, just as are the particular and the universal, in any genuinely tactful critical account of individual stories or texts and their status within any general explanatory system. Raglan's theory is 'that figures like Falstaff, Robin Hood, King Arthur, Achilles etc., are essentially cult-heroes, and therefore derived from primitive ritual, not from history' (ARG 453). Empson's chief objection is that Raglan's neat theory makes it impossible to 'know when and how much the broad theoretical argument is true or applicable to the specific case, the event' (ARG 455). Empson conceded that 'it is likely that the very old conventions

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<sup>10</sup> Ricks, Christopher. 'William Empson and the Loony Hooters', in *Essays in Appreciation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 302.

of story-telling, so old that they go back to primitive ritual, were used in building the stories of Falstaff and Robin Hood', but nonetheless maintained that Raglan failed to provide any argument supporting the 'regular tidy religion' required for his 'case against the historicity of these people' and that had allegedly fallen 'out of use when the stories were put together' (ARG 453). Thus 'the main objection to explaining things by "ritual dramas" is, of course, that nothing is explained – how did the ritual dramas come to be different?' (ARG 455). For example, '[t]o be told that Rip Van Winkle and Robin Hood are two more of the same old hero is quite different from being told their stories. If the stories had to come in from outside they might just as well have been striking events, treated metaphorically or otherwise, which would refute Lord Raglan's view that myths never contain fragments of history' (ARG 454). Empson thus concludes that '[e]ven if the problem could be solved in this way, by making a mosaic of cases which fit one theory, still the real problem would lie behind' (ARG 455). For Empson, such theoretical models depend upon a great deal of the account that the model leaves out.

In view of the iron-clad faith in theory since the advent of structuralism, Empson's commitment to the pluralist wealth and significance of the remainder has not always had a positive effect on the reception of his work in literary theory. Another reason for the relative lack of interest in Empson's work today is the tone and the style of his criticism, a corollary of his attitude towards the ultimate vanity of theory. For there is little doubt that Empson's jocular, irreverent tone has little in common with the serious brooding of current, mainly continental Theory, ironically epitomised in Paul de Man's tactless misreading of Empson. As David Bromwich has remarked: 'Empson and Burke are the critics of the last generation who wrote with genius and not just a refined competence, and if their limited, but real, affinities with later rhetoricians have been noticed without ever prompting a revival of their work, a reason may be the unchallenged anti-Anglo-Saxon bias that modern theory professes sometimes ironically and sometimes sarcastically'<sup>11</sup>. This is not merely, as I hope to show, a

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<sup>11</sup> Bromwich, David. 'Literature and Theory', in Harris, Wendell V. (ed.), *Beyond Poststructuralism: the Speculations of Theory and the Experience of Reading*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State

trivial question of tone, for while it may be that the social implications of Empson's iconoclastically English jokiness are indeed quite remote from the humourlessness of de Man's high European seriousness, this is just one of the many difficulties raised by de Man's strong misreading of Empson along existentialist-Heideggerian lines. Empson is so very English, and while much theory aims precisely at subverting any such notion of national character or style, it is difficult to see how Empson's studied pose of humorous British populism could be made to square with the tone and manner of much current theory. My argument, however, is that while Empson is undoubtedly a token of a recognizable type, he is also, as it were, a genuine eccentric; and this in turn will be seen as a crucial factor in the complex, divided narrative of Empson's critical reception. In his important essay 'Empson on Pastoral' (1978), Paul Alpers sees Empson's style as the exemplification of the 'cult of independence' he so admired in *The Beggar's Opera*:

No party can claim him, and his criticism seems as personal in its great, central moral statements as when it is cranky or eccentric. And his idiosyncrasy is cultural as well as personal. He is English through and through and, unlike Richards, made no attempt to be a citizen of the world (though unlike that other very English critic, Leavis, he is at home anywhere in the world). But this in itself is one of the great 'arguments' of his pastoralism – that any human expression is bound up in its circumstances and indeed can get much of its power from dwelling fully within them. Empson and his Englishness give us important perspectives on a great many issues and furthermore remind us that 'general' aspects of literature and life are present first of all in specific works and situations and only secondarily in the theories constructed about them. Empson is an example and an ally for anyone who feels the need to stand Hegel (*et omne hoc genus*) on his feet.<sup>12</sup>

He is, in short, something of a pastoral figure himself, a latter-day embodiment of his own favourite mock-heroes, those curious compounds of independence and community, of eccentricity and sound common sense.

Furthermore, in view of Empson's disclaimers of theoretical prowess and his explicit endorsement of the 'old verities' of post-Renaissance Enlightenment humanism, it would seem that there is simply no case for seeing his work as a body of texts in tune with the disjointed melodies of postmodern orthodoxy. And yet it is equally clear that Empson has appealed to theorists precisely because the inbuilt radicalism of his criticism subverts the

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University Press, 1996, 212.

<sup>12</sup> Alpers, Paul. 'Empson on Pastoral', *New Literary History*, Volume 10 (1978-1979), 121.



assumptions identified by Theorists as typical of pre-Theory naivety even as it attempts to negotiate its way around the claims of more radical theory to return in due course to a firm belief in what Christopher Norris has identified as a sturdy outlook of ‘commonsense rationalism’. It is therefore also important to recognize that the relative decline of interest in Empson’s work during the heyday of the Theory-boom is partly attributable to the implications of Empson’s iconoclastic version of post-Renaissance Enlightenment humanism. It is an ethos that finds sustenance in a profound uninhibited respect for the essential sanity and rationality of the human mind, and in its implicitly essentialist and resolutely optimistic view of the category ‘human’ as denoting a rational animal capable of acting decently and with due respect for the diversity and demands of the world and ‘other minds’. Empson’s adherence to the humanist ethos was not merely unerring; it was also highly self-conscious and so cultivated a strong element of historical situatedness. Maintaining as he did that ‘a humanist, as I understand the term, says, “This world is good enough for me, if only I can be good enough for it”’ (ARG 113), the basic impulse behind Empson’s thought does indeed seem a far cry from the tragic ideology of negativity and pessimism that animates much postmodernist theorizing. Empson was in fact quick to foresee the rise of such a trend and its wholesale rejection of the valuable achievements of the Enlightenment, complaining that ‘for the majority of Eng .Lit. critics, especially in America, it seems to have become a convention to pretend that one has never heard of the Enlightenment’ (UB 208). Empson’s subversive rational humanism can in fact be seen as the unifying force of his work as it is reflected in the more theoretical chapters on critical debate in *Seven Types* and in the logico-semantic explorations of key linguistic items such as ‘wit’, ‘dog’, ‘fool’, and ‘sense’ in *Complex Words*. I shall argue that the complex of attitudes thus implied acquires a peculiar self-reflexive quality within the self-implicating terms of his celebration of the pastoral mode as a model for cultural and socio-political critique in *Some Versions*.

One upshot of Empson’s courageous praise of the secular tradition of Enlightenment humanism was that he felt somewhat marginalized within the new profession of Eng. Lit. and took it upon himself to openly criticize the very doctrines and institutions that were helping to

define the new orthodoxy. But it is perhaps tempting to overemphasize the extent to which Empson was a genuinely marginal figure. He was after all as much a creature of his time as a genuine pastoral eccentric, as I shall argue in the main body of this dissertation. And yet it is important to see just why this apparent paradox is so important for understanding the value of Empson's work for us today. I propose therefore to extend Empson's project of oppositional criticism by reading his criticism partly against the grain both of its reception in certain quarters of postmodernist thought, and the broader context of Theory and its various (post-structuralist) avatars. John Haffenden has called Empson a 'reluctant metacritic' (ARG 54), not least because Empson's forays into the thickets of theory were to a great extent motivated by his distaste for the bother-headed paradox-mongering of theoretical critics who had raised all kinds of irrationalist doctrines (such as the New Critical veto on authorial intention or the Symbolist focus on images at the expense of articulated verbal meaning) into high points of critical dogma. For Empson the proponents of such doctrines had all too often gaily proceeded on the assumption that the Enlightenment had simply never happened.

Empson's love for Shakespeare and the Renaissance dramatists was to a great extent informed by his appreciation of the dialogism fostered by Elizabethan drama: 'I have sometimes, though seldom and long ago, felt the real thing in a theatre: an absorption so total that all other experience seems to have dropped away from you, as in the act of sex or in gambling all night' (ARG 123). This plain-speaking tone is characteristic of *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture* (1987), among other things a storehouse of Empson's more explicit views on the value of abstract philosophizing and theorizing. The collection is, in more ways than one, shot through with an underlying belief in the ultimate vanity of theory. For what matters for Empson is to a great extent a healthy cultivation of the art, or rather craft, of argufying, a corollary of his belief in the basic sanity and appeal of the ordinary and the commonplace, coupled with a disdain for the aesthetic isolation of literature from other spheres of experience. Argufying emerges *in fine* as a principled defence of the other-regarding impulse that motivates the communal enterprise of rational communication:

Argufying is perhaps a tiresomely playful word, but it makes my thesis more

moderate; I do not deny that thoroughly conscientious uses of logic could become a distraction from poetry. Argufying is the kind of arguing we do in ordinary life, usually to get our own way; I do not mean nagging by it, but just not a specially dignified kind of arguing. This has always been one of the things people enjoy in poems; and it can be found in every period of English literature; but the effect of the Symbolist movement is that you are forbidden to do it, with no reason given; except that the anti-intellectual movement, which has been one of the causes of Symbolism, tells you that thinking is sordid or low-class. What I want to say amounts to a revolt against Symbolism. (ARG 167)

One important aspect of the principle is the strikingly loose manner of its articulation; and yet only a blind adherence to theoretical systematicity could possibly lead us to ignore the fact that such apparent definitional looseness is merely an extension and application of the principle itself. In *Milton's God*, Empson praised Satan for being 'a very argufying character', and many critics have seen traces of the Miltonic Satan's courageous tenacity in Empson's own argufying. Both his creative and his critical works demonstrate his commitment to debate in and through literature, but also to clarity and intelligibility – the conditions of critical or poetic dialogue. Empson frequently complained about critics who, as he phrased it, 'talk as if they were androids from Andromeda' (SSS 126). His life and his work were courageous attempts to speak to and for our common experience, even while such attempts acknowledged the importance of difference and division in our relations with others. He once wrote that 'you can only understand people by having such a life in yourself to be their mirror' (AG 83), and it was for Empson the chief value of literature that it helped to foster a due regard for 'other minds' beyond our own. Against the modern affronts to the basic values of post-Renaissance commonsense humanism that he stood up for, Empson was led to defend the specific ethical rewards that were to be gained from the other-regarding impulse of imaginative sympathy and its courageous intimations of commonality and division. In a letter to a friend, Empson boldly claimed that 'Western man is still working out the Renaissance...as man is a profoundly social creature most of his experience is "sympathetic", each man imagining in himself the experience he observes in another man...we still in the main accept the Renaissance map of values and sympathies' (SL 106).

Having gradually mapped out the main results in criticism of Empson's idiosyncratic version of the ethical character of critical humanism, I shall argue that what is lost in the

broadly postmodern misappropriations of Empson's work is the marriage of an eccentric critical manner and outlook with a distinctly self-conscious humanistic ethos that is driven by a particular sensitivity of regard both for individual works of literature and for the highly diverse audiences that Empson felt himself compelled to address, often beyond the strict confines of academic life. For it is one of the great misfortunes of the perception of Empson's irreverence that it has all too often been domesticated within the narrow restrictions of agenda-driven theories of writing and reading, so that the felt strangeness of individual texts that his readings frequently spell out, which always anticipates and exceeds the theories constructed about them, is aggressively tamed and made to fit the demands of the systems that are at stake in encounters with the singular text.

For just as much recent theorizing of the most dogmatic kind is defined by its regular tendency to read texts by the pigeon-holing label of various kinds of critical nomenclature and procedures, thus denying the singularity of individual texts, likewise orthodox theoretical schools and factions of literary-critical power have frequently operated in their gestures of historical re-appropriation by imposing awkward limitations and reductions through the deployment of various rhetorical strategies and etiquettes that tend to misrepresent or oversimplify the critical writings that belong to the pre-Theory age. The most instructive strategies of these forms of myth-making can be reinterpreted as allegories of the rise and pursuit of literary theorizing and so are not entirely devoid of critical interest. However, the urge to annex the work of early (again, pre-Theory) critics acquires a further ironic edge in considering how warring schools or methods (New Critical, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructionist, Marxist, New Historicist) still manage to claim Empson as a visionary and pioneer of their own allegedly radical critical insights. For in doing so they are not merely compelled to edit out those elements in Empson's work that flatly contradict their own interests and agendas; they also suppress the peculiar critical stance that informs his approach to the strictures and demands of literary, aesthetic and ethical theory and practice. In the 1974 Empson Festschrift, Muriel Bradbrook had in fact gone some way toward protecting Empson's work from such distortions, portraying him thus: 'By turns outrageous,

unpretentious, rather grandly supercilious or careless, Empson's flexibility of engagement and withdrawal makes him usable by a wide variety of people who do not share his complexities. In a sense his virtuosity at the language-game serves as a camouflage for judgments which, if undogmatic, are not uncommitted. Witty, and balanced between innovation and tradition, his humour is apt to be sardonic'<sup>13</sup>. Thirty years later, the relevance of Bradbrook's insight into the consequences of Empson's singularity has surely not lessened; indeed, in the aftermath of the Theory boom, it may well prove more relevant than ever.

It is therefore vital to grasp how complex are the forces – the combinations of historical and cultural motive – that have affected the first reception and subsequent fortunes of Empson's work, and how deeply-rooted are the accompanying prejudices and images that have accrued around his work with the rise and fall of passing critical orthodoxies. But just as his work cannot be read independently of the literary, critical, and philosophical contexts through and against which it needs to be defined, so it is also important to see how the relevance of Empson's thought for the current state of criticism can only emerge through such a dialogical engagement with the driving motivations and forces of its development and critical reception. I shall argue that it is also important to proceed on the conviction that the controversies that surround his work cannot simply be ignored in the interests of achieving a univocally balanced account, for they do in fact point to unresolved tensions that emerge both from within the Empsonian corpus and from the rival appropriative readings and mythical figurations. Such an approach will help to shed light on the prejudices and biases in much that is taken for granted in contemporary perceptions of Empson's work, without however concealing the limits of his own outlook and their contribution to the relative decline of interest in that work at various stages of the Theory boom and recent critical history. This will enable us to recognize those aspects of his thought which are typically ignored or misunderstood in the interest of preserving and confirming received views of his work or its submission to the convenient labels of critical nomenclature, as well as those deviant critical

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<sup>13</sup> Bradbrook, Muriel. 'The Ambiguity of William Empson', in Gill, Roma (ed.). *William Empson: the Man and his Work*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, 7.

tendencies in his work that are frequently overshadowed by an exaggerated emphasis on the enormous differences between Empson's outlook and our own so-called postmodernist perspective.

## II. Some Misconceived Versions of Empson

Among the controversial misconceptions of his work is the view of Empson as a founding father and key exponent of the strait-laced formalism and inchoate insularity of early and mid-twentieth century Anglo-American criticism, the Cambridge English School and the New Criticism. These critical traditions are condemned as cutting literature off from other (ethical, political, ideological, philosophical, and sociological) concerns and as limiting literary appreciation entirely to the detailed and quasi-objective interpretation of particular 'verbal icons' or 'well-wrought urns', and to a purely aesthetic response to the qualities of form and structure of individual poems or textual fragments. Though Christopher Norris, Paul Fry and Terry Eagleton, among others, have done much to dispel this particular myth, it still retains its hold on the broader narratives of twentieth literary criticism and theory. Indeed there is still a strong element of truth in Roger Sale's earlier complaint that it 'was [...] as a New Critic, of all things, that [Empson] was imported and it is as a New Critic that he is known today'<sup>14</sup>. This is not to say that the New Critics themselves were not aware of some of the fundamental differences between Empson and their own formalist agenda. As Cleanth Brooks noted in 1952:

Empson sometimes works in terms of author psychology – the author's unconscious motivations, his private beliefs, his sense of what kind of rhetorical tricks he can play upon his audience; sometimes in terms of audience response – its inherited ideas, its conditioning in terms of stage and literary conventions, its sensitivity, or its stupidity. This is all very well; for a work of art is rooted in the historical process and it has its own history. Both are proper subjects for study. But there are also problems here – to be faced, not to be begged – and the ignoring of distinctions can lead to confusion and to inconsistencies that range from mere impressionism to historicism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Sale, Roger. 'The Achievement of William Empson', *The Hudson Review*, 19/3, Autumn 1966; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 445-456, 446.

<sup>15</sup> Brooks, Cleanth. 'Hits and Misses', *The Kenyon Review*, 14/4, Autumn 1952, pp. 669-678; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 283-292, 290.

In light of such remarks, it is odd to see Empson still referred to as a New Critic in standard histories of twentieth-century criticism. Even the chapter devoted to Empson in the prestigious Cambridge history of criticism figures at the beginning of the section on the New Criticism<sup>16</sup>. As for Empson's role in the rise of Cambridge English, we might echo Geoffrey Hill's feelings about the futility of such suggestions; writing about Empson and Graves, Hill insisted that '[o]ne is not concerned with instituting a competition for precedence or patent-rights but with attempting to dislodge a seemingly-fixed idea that verbal analysis was the private language-game of a Cambridge cabal. Graves, indeed, has always had acid things to say about mere academicism and the explication of his method in *Poetic Unreason* offers no suggestion that he is concerned with verbal texture simply as an end in itself'<sup>17</sup>.

In fact, the picture of Empson as a founding father of New Criticism and Cambridge English is both misleading and highly tendentious. Empson himself vigorously denounced the parochial insularity of English and American letters, of the ruling classes of Eng. Lit., and frequently insisted on the limitations of our own critical, cultural, religious and historical perspectives. He was not merely an eloquent critic of Anglo-American formalism and the Neo-Christian revival in his middle and late essays and books, wherein he displayed a marked interest in history, biography and the broader (social, political, philosophical) dimensions of poetic language and ordinary discourse (which in Empson's view are at any rate co-extensive). Suspicious of the smug confidence in the special character of contemporary western thought, Empson also cultivated a lively interest in non-European traditions and modes of thought. So it is not merely that his thought is deeply infused with a sense of history and political responsibility, though this is not the least therapeutic dimension of his work for us today, insisting as he did that it 'is of great importance now that writers should try to keep a certain world-mindedness' [...], for '[w]ithout the literatures you cannot have a sense of history, and history is like the balancing-pole of the tightrope-walker ...; and nowadays we

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<sup>16</sup> Walton Litz, A., Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism – Volume 7: Modernism and the New Criticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Hill, Geoffrey. 'The Dream of Reason', *Essays in Criticism*, 14/1, February 1964, pp. 91-101; reprinted in Constable John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 402-410, 404.

very much need the longer balancing-pole of not national but world history' (ER 25). In Empson's view it was not merely history that could provide us with such a foil against insularity and intolerance; other non-Western religious and spiritual perspectives could also act as invaluable buffers against both Christianity and the ethical bankruptcy and sense of alienation that the modernist (and postmodernist) ethos appeared to countenance.

As a member of the Cambridge Heretics, Empson always had a strong distaste for religious intolerance in general and dogmatic forms of Christianity in particular. Though his most eloquent attack on Christian dogmatism came with the publication of *Milton's God* in 1961, he had already looked to the East, not for a substitute religion, but for a perspective at the furthest remove from the West in his poetry and creative prose, and had also gone some way toward articulating a critique of religious and political narrow-mindedness in his criticism. There are in fact many examples of Empson celebrating the strangeness and appeal of non-European traditions of thought in his critical and creative writings, most notably perhaps Buddhism and Far-Eastern ideas and models. They are there partly as positive though decidedly ambiguous responses to some of the most deeply-entrenched dilemmas and pseudo-problems that obstructed, in Empson's view, the practical appeal and value of certain western traditions and trends. They also serve to articulate his pragmatic conception of ethical conduct in the face of philosophically irreducible contradictions and aporias. This was an ethos that reflected the course of his own public life, which took him through many of the major political events of the twentieth century – the rise of imperialism in Japan, the Sino-Japanese war in China, wartime propaganda for the BBC, and the Chinese civil war and Communist takeover of Peking in 1949.

But Empson was not merely the opposite of parochial in his celebration of cultural, spiritual and ethical pluralism; he was also far from any outlook of aestheticist insularity limiting critical practice to the formalist interpretation and appreciation of particular works. Though he started off as a close reader of short extracts or fragments, as his thought developed and matured he increasingly came to recognize how important it was to treat an author's work as a whole and not isolate their individual texts from the rest of their work or



from other contemporary writers and discourses. He increasingly found himself working to situate the work of Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Rochester, Coleridge, Lewis Carroll, or Dylan Thomas in the context of the life, and to spell out all the human truths, and the conflicts, at the heart of the complex construct that is the work of literature. Empson was thus from the very outset interested in literature, not as 'noumenon', but as 'phenomenon', as James Smith came to recognize, to his dismay, in his review of *Seven Types*.<sup>18</sup> The phenomena that Empson saw manifested in poetry mirrored the complexity and internal contradictions of the human mind and of life itself, and while the apparent stress on close verbal analysis tended to obscure this basic fact in his first book, in retrospect it can be seen as a permanent concern of Empson's thought. An important development of his work thus involves a recognition of the futility and the dangers of isolating creative and critical writing from other human interests, since literature itself necessarily involves such non-literary interests. Though in his early (and arguably most significant) criticism he successfully sought to make room for a relatively autonomous field of literary criticism, one that would not be wholly subordinate to other disciplines, he none the less warned very early on (indeed in *Seven Types* itself) that criticism could not get along without demonstrating its relation to and relevance for ordinary experience, since literature itself was informed by and reflected upon our own everyday experience.

Not altogether unrelated to this misreading of Empson as narrowly English and still more narrowly formalist is the misconception that he is irresponsible, anti-philosophical, and non-systematic. For some Empson commentators have taken this view in response either to the seemingly untamed and irresponsible critical attitude that his most famous writings (in particular *Seven Types* and *Some Versions*) appear to evince, or to the embarrassing number of apparently conflicting statements plaguing Empson's multifaceted critical and creative corpus, or indeed to Empson's own admission that he was not a critic with strictly philosophical motives and intentions. This particular misconception is partly accounted for by

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, James. 'Books of the Quarter', *The Criterion*, 10/41 (July 1931), 739-742, reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, 42-45.

the fame of *Seven Types* and the relative decline of interest in his work from *Complex Words* onwards. In fact, this was one major aspect of the early (pre-Theory) reception of his work and one that has been neatly summarized by John Constable, who has usefully singled out three figures that capture the earlier and later phases and tensions of this difficult reception history: 'Wicked Willie', 'Double Bill', and 'Father William'<sup>19</sup>. Taken together these figures all reflect a single misleading complaint, namely that 'his offhand prose style, the extremes of his interpretations, his sloppy quotations, 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"'<sup>20</sup>, complaints that have helped to foster the image of Empson as the 'licensed fool, a genius who was to be revered and patronized'<sup>21</sup>. The Empson cultus in late 1920s Cambridge delighted in his eccentricity, especially the curious hint of solipsism that seemed to affect even the earliest manifestations of Empson's ambivalent sense of audience. At university, Empson never showed any great talent as a Union speaker – 'Not much good on a platform', as Richards once told Eliot. These difficulties were reflected in the expository prose style of his early essays and journalistic pieces. The solipsistic or irresponsible element in Empson's style and sense of audience is in fact crucial for understanding his complex reception history; it began with *Seven Types* and was to dog the reception of all his subsequent writings. Roger Sale once described him as 'a man no one trusts' because he seemed bent upon ignoring, even subverting, the customs and rules of academic composition<sup>22</sup>. Empson himself wrote in the preface to the second edition of *Seven Types* that 'my attitude in writing it was that an honest man erected the ignoring of "tact" into a high point of honour' (ST xii). His 'ignoring of "tact"' will be seen as a major cause of resistance to his work, but also as the hallmark of Empson's attempt to undercut academic mores and to foster a sense of communion with non-academic audiences.

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<sup>19</sup> Constable, John (ed.). 'Introduction' in *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Sale, Roger. 'The Achievement of William Empson', *The Hudson Review*, 19/3, Autumn 1966; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.), *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 445-456, 447.

It is indeed a central argument of this dissertation that Empson's 'tactless' style – the outward sign of alleged solipsistic tendencies – partially accounts for the curious reception of his work. John Middleton Murry articulated the most eloquent early expression of the charge of tactless irresponsibility, concluding thus his review of *Seven Types*:

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.<sup>23</sup>

Witness also Geoffrey Strickland's description of Empson's cynical tone in *Complex Words*:

In general it is difficult not to believe that Mr. Empson is not aware that his latest work is in many ways a solemn joke, a joke intended to disturb one by its display of erudition, its air of good common sense, and its way of suggesting that in a world such as ours only the preposterous is sane or normal. It is, however, the way in which this cynical tone merges with the authoritative which is a more alarming portent for anyone who is concerned with the way in which words can 'convey feelings' or make 'covert assertions' in the literary and academic world today.<sup>24</sup>

This version of Empson as the solipsistic private joker culminated with the reviews of *Milton's God*, supposedly the clearest manifestation of an anti-Christian obsession that further undermined Empson's reputation as a rationalist critic, an analytical close reader. The initial response to his fourth book was in fact reminiscent of the reception of Richards's *Coleridge on Imagination*; Empson's idiosyncratic vision of Milton's God, just like Richards's version of Coleridge, had far more to reveal about the author than it did about the subject *per se*. In his 1965 review, Christopher Ricks wrote:

'Most provocative', drawled the Miltonists in 1961, and turned aside to smother an irritable yawn. The phrase was a useful bon voyage with which to shunt a disturbing book up a cosy little siding, and the trick seems more or less to have worked. A very important book by a very important critic was swaddled. This resembles the parenthetical casualness with which God in *Paradise Lost* mentions his finally sealing off the wicked in Hell, on which Mr Empson comments: "How tidy", one feels, "to

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<sup>23</sup> Middleton Murry, John, 'Analytical Criticism', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 29/1507, 18 December 1930, p. 1082. Reprinted in *Poets, Critics, Mystics: A Selection of Criticisms Written Between 1919 and 1955* by John Middleton Murry, ed. Richard Rees (Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale, 1970), pp. 78-82; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.), *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 29-31, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Strickland, Geoffrey. 'The Criticism of William Empson', *Mandrake*, 2/10 (Autumn-Winter 1954-5), 320-331; reprinted (with an appendix including Empson's letter in reply, and Strickland's rejoinder, *Mandrake*, 2/11, Autumn 1955, pp. 447-449; reprinted in Constable John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 298-312, 307.

get rid of them like that"; God is like a cat shaking a drop of milk from his paw'. Empson's own book was handled as felinely...Milton bibliographies feel no obligation to mention it; the standard literary history of the period allows it four words ('more Empsonian than Miltonic'); and three years after publication there was no copy in one English Faculty Library (no demand, and anyway the committee didn't think it relevant to Milton). Even Empson's admirers played into the paws of such Miltonists, by seizing delightedly on the relevance of the book to Empson's own creativity and to the best of his own poems.<sup>25</sup>

Even Roger Sale noted in his review of *Milton's God*: 'To convince his readers he is talking about the poem and not about himself is a task worthy of all his wiles, jokes, acumen, and bravado, and he solved the problem as he imagined Shakespeare solving the problem of Hamlet's delay - "the only way to shut this hole is to make it big"<sup>26</sup>. As Constable writes: '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'<sup>27</sup>. This was not lost on Empson, as he wrote in a letter to his publisher Ian Parsons in 1967:

I don't think I have [been] losing my public by only writing short articles, usually funny or rude. I suspect they are positively grateful to the old man for not boring them with a book. Anyway, a slight suggestion of lunacy and bad temper attached to Milton's God, and is now cooling off I think. Many wicked teachers hate me, of course, but it does me good when they say so in their horrible magazines. I am rather surprised in fact at not being more of a back number; maybe it is just because the young are so dull. (SL 437)

Empson was in fact deeply affected by the more or less implicit charges of solipsistic lunacy that accompanied his alleged lack of seriousness in his later years; as he wrote in a letter to Roma Gill in 1979:

Some of the recent reviews of my work have wondered why I am always so facetious, making it impossible to take what I say seriously; this author is probably a tragic clown, they say, staving off lunacy. Perhaps it comes from imitating Bertrand Russell. It is so, whether lunatic or not, that I can't bear to print a thing till I can read it over without feeling bored; if it feels boring, that proves it is wrong. Often only the order is

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<sup>25</sup> Ricks, Christopher. 'The Ways of God', *New Statesman*, 70/1798, 27 August 1965, pp. 292-293; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 411-413, 411.

<sup>26</sup> Sale, Roger. 'The Achievement of William Empson', *The Hudson Review*, 19/3, Autumn 1966, excerpts, pp. 369-376, 386-390; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 445-456, 453.

<sup>27</sup> Constable, John. 'Introduction' in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 1-14, 3.

wrong (as you pointed out about Mary Marvell). A lot of details get cleared up from having to re-write, but it would be better to think clearly first. (SL 647)

Constable rightly notes that the ‘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’<sup>28</sup>, but the charge is one that needs to be explored as a central factor in the gradual removal of Empson’s work from the focus of literary-critical debate.

Alongside the charge of irresponsibility are the mixed responses to Empson’s conceptual looseness and philosophical amateurism. George Fraser was adamant in his depiction of Empson’s deeply sceptical attitude towards the claims of abstract philosophizing, though his portrait of a resolutely anti-philosophical Empson is misleading because influenced by a somewhat biased sense of what might count as proper philosophizing. It therefore tends to obscure the kind of philosophical reflection that we might find lurking in the complex of attitudes and resources that define Empson’s ethos:

Empson, I think, dislikes philosophers on the whole, as many poets do; but to have intellectually matured in that extraordinarily distinguished Cambridge of the 1920s, when Richards and Wittgenstein and Moore were around (and the young Leavis, to be sure, but I do not think that Empson ever took much of an impact from Leavis), must have left its mark on him. Most really fine poets know and do not really know what they know, can say things they did not think they were going to say; from quarter of an hour’s casual browsing in a library, may have constructed, and forgotten, a whole system of philosophy. Empson’s mind is, in a sense, the opposite of philosophical. I think the beautifully tedious prose of G.E. Moore, leaving no possible step in an argument out, fussing and fretting over every even faintly ambiguous concept, sublimely pedestrian, is the model of what a good philosopher’s prose should be; whereas Empson’s mind, in prose or verse, moves in seven-league boots, in a giant’s elliptical leaps, and there are great Serbonian bogs between his premises and his conclusions. But Cambridge, in his time there, was a great philosophical place, and this must have influenced him; an influence, as Empson himself said of that of T.S. Eliot, bleak and penetrating, like an east wind.<sup>29</sup>

Or as Richard Sleight put it in his review of *Complex Words*:

A refreshing scepticism and nicely pragmatic attitude mark Empson’s use of philosophers and their kind. Even the giants like Russell and Collingwood are put in their places with a polite apology; Vaihinger gets short shrift (though this is a little unfair, since his book was one of the first in the field, being published in 1911);

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>29</sup> Fraser, George. ‘The Man within the Name: William Empson as Poet, Critic, and Friend’, in Gill, Roma (ed.). *William Empson: the Man and his Work*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, pp. 52-75, 68.

Piaget and his children get an honoured place, while Wittgenstein is pushed about light-heartedly; C.L. Stevenson is dismissed along with his linguistically jejune theory. Others singled out for satirical praise or honourable mention include Durkheim and Levy-Bruhl (a little out of date but valuable as a specimen because he presents in all its purity the theory of the primitive use of false identity), Money-Kryle among the Freudians, Stern and Bloomfield among linguistic theorists and Scott Buchanan with 'a charming little book' *Symbolic Distance*, 'so suggestive that it no longer suggested anything'.<sup>30</sup>

This led in some quarters to the charge of unprofessionalism, a charge especially associated with the reception of Empson's work in America, where the relentless professionalizing drive towards theoretical sophistication often left little room for conceptual mavericks; as Empson himself once put it: 'The English have not the American theoretical drive, but this does not keep them pure' (ARG 265). His self-conscious amateurism, as well as the institutional marginalisation he suffered after his expulsion from Cambridge and his move to the Far East (and later, as a Professor at Sheffield self-consciously working against the grain), are, indeed, two further reasons for his ambivalent position in the history of critical theory. For Colin MacCabe, it is chiefly Empson's institutional marginalisation that explains why Empson is ignored in current debates in literary theory, rather than his idiosyncratic style or his theoretical belief in the individual's 'complete conscious control of language' – a fate not suffered, apparently, by Leavis:

Empson's marginality is not, however, finally to be explained in terms of discursive difficulty or theoretical inadequacies. It is, more simply, that Empson's teaching life was spent largely abroad, in China and Japan, and so he never developed a conscious 'position' or the material determinates which would make such a position a force to be reckoned with. The critic who, famously, did both these things was F.R. Leavis. Leavis, in fact, represents two different possibilities. On the one hand, and particularly in the early years, he elaborated a much more complex understanding of the relation of the individual to language both for the production of texts and for the moment of reading. The moments of authorship and of reading were both firmly embedded with their contemporary linguistic and social order. On the other hand, the reference to language became a merely mechanical gesture delivered under pressure as the author was accorded a dominance necessitated by the theories of society in which there was no contemporary linguistic or social order on which s/he could possibly draw.<sup>31</sup>

In retrospect, this prediction by the anonymous author of a portrait of Empson the

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<sup>30</sup> Sleight, Richard. 'Mr Empson's Complex Words', *Essays in Criticism*, 2/3, July 1952, pp. 325-337; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 261-273, 272.

<sup>31</sup> MacCabe, Colin. 'The Cambridge Heritage: Richards, Empson and Leavis', *Southern Review: Literary and Interdisciplinary Essays*, (19:3), Nov. 1986, 242-249.

undergraduate in *The Granta* will therefore appear somewhat ironic: 'Great things are expected of Mr. Empson by many of our professional expectors; he is emphatically one of those who have tried to make Cambridge what it will be, and will go on making it what it will be even when it becomes what it shall'<sup>32</sup>.

However, it was also Empson's opinions, and not just his irresponsibility, his amateurism or his institutional position, that has nurtured his ambivalent position in modern and contemporary theory. As Norris puts it:

If one set out to trace the reception-history of Empson's work, it would register a series of deepening resistances and cross-purpose encounters, from the widespread critical acclaim for *Seven Types* – a response that was based on a highly selective, opportunist reading of that book – to the general failure to grasp what he was attempting in *Complex Words* and, after that, the frequent expressions of bafflement, strained understanding and downright hostility that greeted the output of his last three decades. Not that Empson found this in the least surprising, given his belief that academic Eng.Lit. (both its mainstream and radical varieties) had for some time been drifting into an 'eerie cultural twilight', a condition of depressed intellectual and moral values where he had no wish to feel at home.<sup>33</sup>

On this account, Empson's unfortunate reception history testifies to a misunderstanding of the theory beneath the practice from *Seven Types* onwards, and to the misconception that Empson radically changed his theoretical views between *Seven Types* and *Complex Words*. In fact, many of Empson's alleged shifts and inconsistencies may still be readily explained in terms of a rational development of his thought, earlier views being modified or rejected as he matured and saw the changing needs of criticism. As he himself candidly remarked in an article on contemporary criticism in 1955: 'it is a general truth about the pleasant and economical habit of reprinting old articles that the author had better say each time how far his opinion had changed now' (ARG 120-121)<sup>34</sup>. Many of Empson's so-called inconsistencies

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<sup>32</sup> Anon. 'Those in Authority', *The Granta*, 38/866, 31 May 1929, p. 485; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 15-16, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Norris, Christopher. 'Introduction: Empson as literary theorist: from Ambiguity to Complex Words and beyond', in Norris, Christopher and Mapp, Nigel (ed.). *William Empson: the Critical Achievement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 1-120, 119.

<sup>34</sup> Still, Empson was always keen to defend the continuity of his work and the resilience of his basic critical beliefs, commenting the same year in a letter to Cleanth Brooks: 'I do not know why you say that I have decisively abandoned some old positions that I may be said to have pioneered; I do not think I have abandoned any; but in any case I would always have been against any pig-headed dogmatic position such as the Rejection of Intentionalism. The reason for putting in so much about "Empson thought years ago" and suchlike, which you naturally find self-important, as I felt myself, was that I wanted to insist that I really had not changed my mind'. (SL 246-247)

may be explained away by showing that the appearance of contradiction derives from considering statements out of their original context or taking the vague and problematic terms in which they are often couched as unambiguous and fixed in meaning, and reducible to a single meaning and critical intent. Such a strategy has tended in the main to reduce Empson's work to a convenient set of operative concepts and methods, an approach that falsifies the development and subtlety of his thought. Speaking of how Aristotle's concept of imitation and Coleridge's notion of imagination had been taken up and frequently misapplied by their mediators and interpreters, Empson himself remarked that 'it is a natural rule that once a term is taken as fundamental for a system it gets unconsciously generalized' (ARG 121-122), a rule to which, unfortunately, his own work is no exception. The irony of this reductive strategy is of course that Empson never tired of stressing the elusive, ambiguous nature of words and the inescapable contextual factor in their meaning, whether in literature, criticism, philosophy, or science. Moreover the distinctly ethical motives behind Empson's own concern with the ruses and subterfuges of political and religious consciousness are frequently geared toward preserving and cultivating singularity and integrity over and against the reductive bad faith of mandarin literary-critical thought, an imperative that is all too easily obscured by an exaggerated stress on Empson's philosophical inconsistencies and limitations.

But we may well exhaust these explanatory stratagems without thereby presenting Empson's critical writings as a wholly consistent and harmoniously structured theoretical system. The problem of systematicity and consistency is in fact made much more tolerable to Empson apologists by Empson's own express disclaimers of philosophical prowess. In his most systematic and extensive treatment of literature, meaning, and interpretation – *Complex Words* – he repeatedly pleaded his own incapacity for dealing with the 'intellectual buzzsaws' of strict philosophical analysis and abstract theorizing, and described his forays into the thickets of linguistic and moral philosophy in the book's theoretical chapters as 'rather amateur attempts to push some problems of Philosophy out of the way' (CW 428). This fits in with one Empsonian figure, the eccentric English gentleman-amateur indulging in a very English taste for the particular and local, coupled with a disregard for philosophical



systematicity, theory, scheme, or overarching structure, for century-hopping generalization, let alone models. But in maintaining for instance that ‘a critic ought to trust his own nose, like the hunting dog, and if he lets any kind of theory or principle distract him from that, he is not doing his work’ (ARG 104), it is easy to see how such an image arose in the first place and has been continually nurtured both by the broad narratives of the history of criticism and by the scholarly exegeses of generations of academic critics. Yet it is equally clear that Empson would not have subscribed unreservedly to the comforting lure of such a stereotype, and with good reason. For not only does it fail to capture the complexity of his own reflections on the nature of critical theory and the reliability of standard common sense; it also signals his own unwillingness to adjudicate on the conflict between theory and the pursuit of practical criticism and cultural critique, typified at the outset of his career in the numerous scuffles opposing the Cambridge critics in the Ricardian line of descent, the dour anti-theorists of a more Leavisite persuasion, and the unphilosophical Oxford dons of whom Sparrow is perhaps the earliest example in the context of the rise of British theory. As with his cautionary note that ‘the English assume that they are sensible, therefore don't require abstruse theory, but one cannot always gamble on that’ (ARG 141), Empson frequently distanced himself from the comfortable though limited security of the anti-theoretical liberal humanism that many critics have accused him of (or indeed praised him for) falling back upon. His ambivalent attitude to theory is thus reflected in the mythical figurations and images that have accrued around his life and work. I shall argue however that his more explicit pronouncements on the nature and use of theory should not be overshadowed in the interests of simply cultivating or subverting such myths, but should rather be employed with a view to understanding them and using them so that we may gain a clearer view of how the constitutive tension at the heart of his critical thought – the dialectics of commonsense and theory – has shaped the complex reception history of his work and divided its most eminent representatives. For the reception history of Empson’s work in literary theory is a peculiar narrative, divided and controversial. From the beginning his work was both celebrated and vilified as a prime instance of the New Criticism, and yet his gestures towards formalism are constantly thwarted by an anti-formalism present

in both his early and late work. The later readings of his work by post-structuralists and deconstructionists followed essentially the same pattern, struggling as they did to accommodate his humanist beliefs within the limiting ambit of postmodern scepticism. The appropriation of his name in recent polemic by deconstruction and politicized cultural criticism is the most recent chapter in this conflict-ridden story.

Though it contradicts his alleged subjectivism and irresponsibility, another misconception is to depict Empson's work as naively objectivistic and confidently scientific, and directed at the rationalization of the elusive mysteries of poetic expression, finding a rational explanation for all literary phenomena in the analytical working-out of possible meanings and motives. However, Empson repeatedly and explicitly rejected the idea of criticism as an objective science, and was careful not to erect the distinction between objectivism and subjectivism into a clear and rigid dichotomy that left no room for some intermediate or alternative position. In Empsonian criticism the role of the reader and critic is not one of inertly neutral reflection on a thing in itself but an engaged and complex response whose character will be delineated in the course of this dissertation. The view of Empson as an uncompromising adherent of naïve rationalism is to some extent shared by Empson's sympathizers and adherents, though the emphases of these interpretations differ quite widely on matters of detail. Of course it is pointless to deny that Empson's work exemplifies a complex of attitudes and assumptions that mirrors the early twentieth-century Cambridge realism which shaped his mind. Empson's adherence to the basic tenets of 'naïve realism' (a term used on one single occasion in the Empson corpus – in Appendix A of *Complex Words*) is nowhere more apparent than in his third book, though, as we shall see, it also informs both his earlier and his later writings, albeit in a more oblique and sometimes problematic manner.

Empson's rationalism underlies the most sophisticated strategy of unification for approaching the apparent diversity of Empson's theoretical views as a common body with a set of core (epistemological and normative/ethical) assumptions, and does indeed give much weight to the view that these assumptions all derive from a central philosophical attitude or set of beliefs. This is in fact the central thesis of Norris's *William Empson and the Philosophy*

of *Literary Criticism*. For Norris, 'Empson's humanistic rationalism is present in his earliest writings, and forms a coherent and developing background to each of his books'<sup>35</sup>. Though qualifying Norris's characterization by maintaining that 'it would seem best [...] to call him "understanding" or "reasonable", a purveyor of workable truths, not transcendental or even general truth'<sup>36</sup>, Fry does not depart radically from the idea of Empson as a rationalist in principle, but he does insist on those moments in Empson's work that resist or undercut the rationalism that Empson vindicates in principle. Indeed, Fry is at pains to detect in Empson a submerged Romantic 'aesthetic of sublimity', a confused metaphysics that reluctantly acknowledges the ineffable by locating points of resistance to the availability of meaning. In similar interpretations of Empson, and unlike the previous strategies of reappropriation, this mixed image of a rationalist Empson and a romantic Empson is not a misconception, since it isolates, as I shall argue in later chapters, some of the key theoretical tensions underlying Empson's criticism.

At any rate, it will be clear by now that Empson was from the beginning a paradoxical figure in relation to the shifting tides of critical fashion. This thesis argues that the distinctly 'pastoral' inflections of Empson's work simultaneously explain and reflect this strained dialectical relationship with the passing fashions of critical theory. In particular, they explain how Empson's philosophy of common sense emerges from his conception of pastoral as cultural critique, his linguistic archaeology of Renaissance and Enlightenment counter-conformist attitudes and the wide range of critical figures implicit in his work (for instance the critic as clown, translator or amateur), a family of critical figurations that suggest different though related modes of figuring the dialectics of centrality and marginality in critical discourse.

### III. Sensible Empson

There is much truth in the latest readings of Empson as an ambivalent rationalist, and so we

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<sup>35</sup> Norris, Christopher. *William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*, London: Athlone Press, 1978, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 76.

might ask: what does it mean today for a literary critic and 'reluctant metacritic' to be, and to be known as, a 'humanist', or a 'rationalist', or an example of pragmatic reasonableness? For someone writing about Empson, to answer this question is to delve into the various controversies that continue to surround his work and its complex reception history, to reconsider the various images and mythical figures that often exaggerate or transcend the documentary evidence of his life and work, and to enter, however reluctantly, into the ongoing debate for and against theory (or rather Theory), exploring the claims and counter-claims of recent and present-day theorists and anti-theorists of literature and criticism. Of course terms such as 'humanism' and 'rationalism' have been widely discredited by so-called postmodern theory, and so it is that we are, it would seem, immediately faced with the problem of situating Empson historically and reading his work as a now dated example of humanist naiveté. For Empson such strategies of demystification would have seemed at best irrelevant, a species of self-indulgent paradox-mongering of 'bother-headed theoretical critics' up to no good, and at worst a philosophically perverse and ethically disastrous cult of irrationalism. He would also have remarked that a great deal of caution is required in the use of these terms, for they hardly denote a single unified philosophical doctrine or school. For if we are to make a profitable use of these (or any) philosophically-charged words, and to preserve many of the values that they enshrine, a great deal of care is required in order to sort out the various controversies that have surrounded their use for, as Empson remarked in a letter to Richards, 'one has to consider how far a philosophical word is meant to be read differently by different readers, people at different stages of the acceptance of a philosophy. Such words are often used so esoterically that a peculiar use of them cannot be pinned down, not even to one meaning, but even to a complex of meanings' (SL 34).

Norris and Fry tend to agree in the main about the most pertinent epithets that apply to Empson's critical outlook, though they part company on matters of exact terminological detail. While Norris's early and late work on Empson is unified by a strong sense of Empson's 'commonsense humanist rationalism', Fry qualifies this description in his own book on Empson, preferring to see his subject primarily as a 'reasonable critic'. 'Running

through' his work,

there is devotion to what it seems better to call reasonableness than rationalism, but this ideal is upheld by three successive, sharply divergent senses (as Empson would term them in *Complex Words*): (1) it is reasonable to assume that all mysteries have scientific explanations (in the first three books, where the mystery of sacrifice is dispelled by the Golden Bough as a 'pastoral' identification of the one with the many); (2) it is reasonable that the truth remain indistinct (in *Milton's God*, where Milton muffles the Christian sacrifice, which now seems unforgivable, in evasiveness and 'sublimity'); (3) it is reasonable, truth being out of reach, that no account of life go unheard (in the late books and essays, where one exemplary figure after another refuses to betray the plenitude of existence by sacrificing speculation to orthodoxy).<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps it is a tedious and misleading business to worry the subtle semantic shades of classificatory labels that define philosophical or critical camps and traditions; tedious, because it is a distraction from the main business of dealing with the particulars of each individual case, and is usually a lengthy process of assessing easily forgettable details of questionable relevance; misleading, because even if every such case is indeed the token of a type, and thus representative of it, our interest in an individual critic is surely what differentiates him or her from the rest of the critical field. Of course the theorist is apt to respond that philosophical generality outstrips particularity in intrinsic interest and theoretical worth. The critic may turn round and say that what interests him or her is the particularities of each case, whether that particular case happens to be a literary work of art or an important figure in the history of criticism and theory. This apparent conflict between singularity and systematicity is as old as philosophy itself, and while there is little point in attempting to legislate on this issue within the confines of this (or any) dissertation, it is important to see why Empson's work can be thought of as a fertile ground for exploring the kinds of productive dialectical encounters that occur when the two extremes meet, in particular when such encounters are staged and explored in literature and criticism. For one of the chief problems that the recent Theory wars have brought to the fore is precisely this: what is the proper order of priorities in criticism? Is it the singular literary experience afforded by each individual text, the unique vision that it offers of human life? Or should criticism stress the inevitable oppressions and determinacies of which the text is necessarily (or 'always already')

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<sup>37</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, iii.

the unconscious voice? In other words, the question is not merely the extent to which literature should be read as an experience of identity or as an encounter with 'alterity' or 'otherness'; it is also, and perhaps more importantly, the extent to which we need theory, or should be made aware of what determines or constrains our modes of writing and reading. While it may seem an arduous task to attempt to imagine what Empson's answers to these questions might have been, the attempt is still worth making. My view, and one of the main arguments of this dissertation as a whole, is that these questions are both badly posed and yet urgently in need of an Empsonian answer.

Underlying the various readings, figurations, and misconceptions described above, and by way of returning to my initial point about the rivalry between commonsense and Theory, I wish to isolate a more basic tension that has been a major factor in the winding path of the reception of Empson's work by commentators from across the literary-theoretical board. In one sense, Empson would have scorned being thought of primarily as an abstract theorist. He maintained that theory could not have any intrinsic value, though it could become useful by giving the critic practical assistance towards saying how a piece of literature worked and what its author meant by it. In one sense then, to judge the cogency of Empson's critical theory as such is to miss the point. There nonetheless remains in his work a tug between the claims of theory and the more pressing demands of critical practice which is reflected in that work's reception, since his most important current devotees tend to split into two somewhat opposed camps. Some critics, the most eminent among whom is probably Christopher Ricks, have primarily learnt from Empson a technique of minutely detailed close reading. Another critical group, including Christopher Norris, Terry Eagleton and Jonathan Culler, has been more attracted by Empson's theoretical assumptions: his commonsense rationalism, his willingness to imbue his criticism with strong social and political beliefs. But what underlies this split is in fact a constantly shifting emphasis from the practical business of close reading to abstract theorising and back again, and this does indeed reflect a movement that is fundamental to Empsonian poetics.

Empson enthusiasts with an overt interest in theory (such as Jonathan Culler, Gary

Wihl or William Righter) have devoted much of their attention to the philosophical resourcefulness of *Complex Words*, celebrating its linguistic sophistication, its logico-semantic machinery, and its insights into sociolectical history, but also complaining of the relative lack of interest it has elicited among theorists and philosophers. The social and political dimension of *Some Versions* has appealed to many American critics, such as Kenneth Burke, Stanley Edgar Hyman, Roger Sale, or Paul Alpers, though Fry places the 'pinnacle' of Empson's career rather later, seeing *Milton's God* as the greatest, though perhaps not the most influential or enjoyable, of his works. There are also many admirers of Empson's late essays, in particular 'Donne the Space-Man', 'Tom Jones', 'Joyce's Intentions', and many of the shorter pieces collected in *Argufying*. I would argue that *Some Versions* along with some of these later essays and articles are indeed the most sophisticated of Empson's critical works, demonstrating how the human significance and inherent radicalism of some literature transcends the theoretical frameworks designed to account for it and containing the substance of Empson's attitude towards the claims and ultimate vanity of theory. I shall try to show why some of the most interesting aspects of the implied ethics of criticism in *Seven Types* look forward to *Some Versions* and its negotiation of the rival claims of individualism and community, of elitism and populism. But the subtlety of *Some Versions* also anticipates, and I think outdoes, the sociolectical history of the rise of individualism and the implied tension between active resistance and the constraints of necessity explored in *Complex Words*.

For *Some Versions* is in many respects not merely an allegory of Empsonian criticism; it is also a finely self-reflexive portrayal of the man himself, one that ties in strikingly with some of the received images of Empson and yet outdoes them by the subtle nuances it weaves around Empson's picture of sophistication and ironic simplicity. Thus, to return to the second conception described above, the figure of the anti-systematic wit verging on irresponsibility is certainly more arresting today than the narrowly tendentious characterization of Empson as an epigone of early twentieth-century positivism or Cambridge rationalism, though I shall argue throughout this dissertation that the two images evidently

contain elements of truth. The Empson cult at Cambridge in the late 1920s prefigured in more ways than one the subsequent formation of the image of the licensed fool, the revered yet patronized genius embodying the ideal of the mythical poet-critic erected into the wit and fool of the new modernist paradigm. Various descriptions as 'weird', 'eccentric', 'mad', and 'uncannily clever', 'joker', and 'nutty as a fruitcake' by both sympathizers and opponents, it is hard to see how one might separate out the various strands and expressions of his creative and critical thought, as well as their reception, because to do so would distort the fundamental thrust and purpose of his pluralist and integrative critical outlook, a theorist, critical practitioner, and poet constantly seeking for ways to unsettle, disturb and subvert ruling orthodoxies and dogmatic standards of thought and reflection. Standing often quite deliberately at the margins of the cultural and academic community to which he owes this image, Empson was nonetheless from the outset at the centre of critical controversy and innovation, though he always shied away from anything bearing a resemblance to the comforting perspective of any institutional or entrenched faction of power. This, as I shall argue, is not the least appealing virtue of Empson's peculiar style of oppositional criticism and literary theorizing. It is thus partly through the successive portrayals of this paradoxical position of the revered fool, disconcerting and unnerving so many widely differing sections of the community and yet still making substantial contributions to it, that a return to Empson affords a glimpse of how criticism can operate and transform received views and habits of reading, forms of critical reflection, and the pressures of institutional practices. For it is not merely his attitude of cheerful defiance that might well be therapeutic for us in the face of the current pressures of institutional and doctrinal sectarianism. The various images and mythical figures that have accompanied and fashioned this particular misconception, extending beyond the salient evidence of his verse and prose, need not be utterly dismissed as convenient labels or pigeon-holing marks of affection and condescension, since they are capable of being more usefully employed as integral instruments of an inquiry into the depth and subtlety of his thought, its contemporaneity and relation to the current state of critical theory and practice. Jonathan Culler has remarked that 'the very fact that we are so inclined to dismiss his views



as eccentric shows how reluctant we are to confront the aspects of academic criticism that he reveals to us'<sup>38</sup>. We shall see in due course some very specific forms taken by such neglect, and the value of Empson's own typical habit of rattling at the comforts of institutional consensus.

It is perhaps in the complex logico-semantic muddle of two key-words, 'sense' and 'theory', that we will find a means of articulating the strategies and selections that the various parties with a vested interest in Empson's work adopt and deploy; my aim in doing so will not be to come down on one side or the other, or indeed to demonstrate the limitations and shortcomings of either side, since the most insightful representatives of both parties have identified very real and resourceful traits of Empsonian thought. Paul Fry has in fact suggested that it is from the 'muddle' of the key-word 'sense' that 'the broadest coherence of his thought paradoxically emerges, serving to create rich intermediary registers of being that keep the easy rigors of idealism and somatic materialism at arm's length'<sup>39</sup>. I would suggest that the inflections and paradoxes of Empson's critical and creative thought emerge in the space opened up by the interaction of the muddle of 'sense' with another logico-semantic and philosophical muddle – the muddle of 'theory'. I will argue furthermore that it is from a consideration of this dialectical tension that the coherence of his thought, or rather its critical, political, and ethical interest and relevance for us today, fully emerges. I will also contend that my approach via these two key-words mirrors and indeed applies one aspect of Empson's own insistence on semantic and conceptual perspectivism. For there is not merely ample evidence in his writings that the dialectics of common sense and theory are two strands of the same dilemma. As the two key elements of a constitutive though historically contingent tension, we must be on our guard against viewing them ahistorically, for, to reiterate Empson's own warning: 'one has to consider how far a philosophical word is meant to be read differently by different readers, people at different stages of the acceptance of a philosophy. Such words are often used so esoterically that a peculiar use of them cannot be

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<sup>38</sup> Culler, Jonathan. *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, 85.

<sup>39</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 73.

pinned down, not even to one meaning, but even to a complex of meanings' (SL 38). Of course in the literary field the muddle of 'theory' that I propose to explore in a somewhat roundabout way is a more recent creation than the muddle of 'sense', since it is essentially a symptom of two major twentieth-century creations: the rise of professional academic criticism and the later spread of literary interdisciplinarity. We may therefore not have attained a sufficiently remote vantage-point from which to take stock of the complex of meanings implied by the idea of 'theory' in literature and criticism, though we do admittedly have a firm understanding of it as a working notion. By contrast, the muddle of 'sense' is a more familiar one, partly by virtue of its being more firmly rooted in the various strands of our modern (post-Renaissance) philosophical tradition and perhaps more limited in its range of logico-semantic complexity and historical implications; indeed we need look no further than Empson's resourceful analysis of the term for an initial taste of its logico-semantic complexity, and for a first insight into his own moral and intellectual self-conception:

Our present structure of the word was invented around the time of the Restoration; speakers then took to regarding the 'good judgement' use as a simple metaphor, in the course of a general drive toward simplification. And the two types of equation, 'A is like B' and 'A is typical of B', come into play together; the rise of *sense* for 'good judgement' goes hand in hand with the rise of sensationalist or plain-man philosophies... The suasive power of the word seems to come from treating all reactions or good judgements as of one sort, though, in fact, they presumably range from the highest peaks of imaginative insight, or the greatest heart-searchings of 'enthusiasm', to fundamental but humble processes like recognizing a patch of colour as a table. *Sense* tells you to concentrate on the middle of the range, the man-size parts where we feel most at home; and it can do this because the simple use of the trope (which is now taken as a pattern) is an appeal to show a normal amount of good judgement, 'like everybody else'. (CW 262)

My oblique approach via the muddle of 'sense' will thus draw upon Empson's own marked interest in the set of complex words that, taken together, articulate some of the major values and problems of Enlightenment humanist philosophy and ideology, and that receive a complex treatment in the subsequent rise of Romanticism and Modernism, a fact that Empson both knew and could not help reflecting in his own critical outlook and ethos. In *Complex Words*, Empson remarked that 'the English could claim that their present extreme muddle with this family [of meanings] came from having faced first the realist and then the romantic issues with more of the permanent human balance than their neighbours' (CW 251). The

family of philosophical considerations implied by 'sense' covers much of the ground that I wish to explore in the context of Empson's own grappling with the resilience of sense and the claims of theory. The main elements of this range – 'sensation', 'sense-data', 'taste', 'intuitive insight', 'conceptual understanding', 'meaning', 'imaginative sympathy', 'judgement', and 'common wisdom' – will thus inform both my study of Empson's literary interests and preferences and the more elusive complex of attitudes and assumptions that underlie his thought. To this end we will of course need to avoid, like Empson, the 'eerie Mobius strip'<sup>40</sup> that concludes the chapter on 'Statements in Words' in *Complex Words*: 'what I have to avoid is often the 'sense "sense" of sense', a phrase which can leave no impression on the mind except that of a sordid form of lunacy' (CW 80). In the following pages I will delineate the various philosophical, epistemic, aesthetic, and ethical considerations implied by the muddle of 'sense' that translate some of Empson's own philosophical insights and dilemmas and, beyond these, his own idiosyncratic grappling with the common sense of theory.

Finally, a word or two of apology is in order about the style and tone of this dissertation. For Empson, style, whether in poetry or criticism, was always a matter of principle, the statement in form of beliefs, convictions or assumptions often beyond the pale of propositional articulation and – perhaps for that very reason – sometimes more instructive than explicit content (for Empson a purely conceptual distinction of course, and rightly so, since style just *is* content, and *vice versa*). The complex strategic motives underlying his style are however still a matter of much dispute among Empson scholars, as will become clear in the ensuing chapters. Suffice to say at this stage that since the question of style is so central to the Empsonian critical ethos, it might well behove the commentator to apply or reflect Empson's own principle of stylistic eccentricity. Yet with every quotation the Empson commentator inevitably runs the risk of drawing attention to the contrast between Empson's eccentrically brilliant style and his or her own no doubt less readable prose. As the preceding pages make clear, I have made no attempt to imitate Empson's style, nor have I ventured too far off the rhetorical beaten track. In my defence, I can only say that it is well beyond my

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<sup>40</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 14.

powers to produce a characteristically Empsonian piece of stylistic brilliance; and even if it were possible to capture something of Empson's stylistic idiosyncrasies, the benefits of such an achievement would almost certainly be outweighed by the twin perils of parody and pastiche. At any rate, my ambition is not to parody Empson's style, but to explain its purpose and its value. For this thesis presents itself as an explanation of the challenge that his style poses to past and current practices of academic criticism.

## Chapter 2

### Theory and the Form of Critical Debate

‘Arguments against analysis tend to broaden to an unreasonable degree of generalization, and become arguments against understanding anything’. (ARG 86-87)

#### I. Introduction

In his appendix on theories of value in *Complex Words*, Empson wrote that ‘[t]he point about democracy is not that people all really have equally good judgment; no sane man believes this; the claim is that the government or the constitution has no right to presume that some group of citizens has better judgement than the rest. People with better judgement must try to convince their neighbours, and not over-rule them’ (CW 421). While he was thus willing to acknowledge that we are not all equally placed as apt judges or decision-makers, Empson was keen to pose the conditions of a democratic critical forum wherein the intellectual or material privileges and inequalities that threaten to undercut the democratic element in criticism (or indeed any other kind of debate) could be just as easily articulated as the actual objects of critical judgement. Hence Empson’s strong attachment to the tradition of ‘fair public debate’, since without such a forum, the process of deliberation involved in any decision or judgement (whether critical, political, ethical or whatever) could never even get off the ground. In the absence of such democratic pluralism, Empson knew what could happen: those privileged few who know all the answers – the ‘monks and commissars’ (ARG 110-112) – must be obeyed without question. This mattered to Empson because in his role as a critic and teacher, both literary and cultural, he was acutely aware of the difficulties involved in extending the wider ethical and socio-political implications of his intellectual interests to a wider audience without badgering his public. He remained undeterred in his desire to preserve an intimate and fruitful relationship with a non-academic public and to foster a common sense exhibiting genuine critical force and acumen. The question as to whether Empson succeeded in reconciling his strictly intellectual interests with his sense of social responsibility will only be hinted at

towards the end of this chapter; it will be more fully addressed in chapters three and four.

The more particular concern of this chapter is to trace the development of Empson's critical thinking along the lines of this democratic rationalist ambition, especially in *Seven Types* and *Complex Words*, as well as various articles, reviews and letters. However, the more enduring importance of *Some Versions* will be implied at every stage of my argument, though it will be discussed more explicitly in later chapters. For in this chapter I shall argue that the distinctly pastoral inflections of Empson's work simultaneously explain and reflect his strained relationship with theory and critical method. This should help to clarify the nature of the implicit principle of translatability – the dual thesis of continuity and commensurability – underlying Empson's critical practice, as well as the dormant threat of relativism that lurks beneath Empson's faith in this cherished principle. In attempting to come to grips with the logic of Empson's thought on this matter, we might begin to understand just why Empson so abhorred modern theorists (famously calling Derrida 'Nerrida' in a letter to Christopher Norris<sup>41</sup>) and yet was, at various points in his career, what we might legitimately call a considerable theorist. After all, he thought *Complex Words* his greatest achievement, his *magnum opus*, and the opening chapters are deeply theoretical and philosophical, but he also thought that readerly tact and individual taste always transcended the claims of abstract theory. We might thus just begin to see the importance of Empson's own word of warning in 1955, that '[t]he English like to assume that they are sensible, therefore don't require abstruse theory, but one can't always gamble on that' (ARG 141).

In a letter to Richards in 1932, Empson wrote that '[m]y pupils often ask me to explain about methodology, and I always tell them I have no idea what the word means...Fukuhara teases me by saying that my book (which you are so right in calling fluid) is full of methodology; so I am in no need of a ruling on this point' (UB 304). The cynic's response might be to note that the 'reluctant metacritic' (Haffenden's apt phrase) finds his own come-uppance in the classroom, since there is surely little virtue in claiming a principled

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<sup>41</sup> See Haffenden, John (ed.). *Selected Letters of William Empson*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 514-515.

resistance to critical method or theory if the teacher finds himself at a loss to explain the logic of his own critical assumptions. For I shall argue that the Empsonian critic as teacher assumes as a matter of principle that the student needs to understand the rationale of critical judgement in order to improve his own and thereby to participate in the conversation sustaining the critical community; the teacher is thus required to articulate the rationale, as well as the content, of his own judgement. So, just as the critical mediator as teacher is honestly 'routed' by his methodological reluctance, so the niggling verbal critic is forced to concede the absurdity of pursuing ever finer though ultimately irrelevant details of semantic nuance, as Empson himself remarked in the opening paragraph of the chapter on 'They That Have Power to Hurt' in *Some Versions*:

One would like to say that the poem has all possible such meanings, digested into some order, and then try to show how this is done, but the mere number of possible interpretations is amusingly too great. Taking the simplest view (that any two may be alike in some one property) one of the four either is or is not and either should or should not be like each of the others; this yields 4096 possible movements of thought, with other possibilities. The niggler is routed here; one honestly has to consider what seems important. (P 77)

Empson's sense of pedagogical responsibility was indeed hard to reconcile with his taste for textual or verbal irrelevancies, for if his work was also to be an effective tool of literary education (as Cleanth Brooks thought it would be, writing in his review of *Seven Types* that Empson's 'work is fraught with revolutionary consequences for the teaching of all literature and for the future of literary history'<sup>42</sup>), then he could ill afford to indulge in such infinite movements of thought, however well he might digest them for his students. At any rate, there is evidently, as Fukuhara saw, plenty of methodology in *Seven Types* and *Complex Words*, and indeed in the Empson corpus generally, a truism that would hardly need stating if it were not for Empson's feigned ignorance of the term. One consequence of this aversion to explicit methodology is conceptual looseness, making his work difficult to use and the extension of his central categories (ambiguity, pastoral and complexity) beyond their idiosyncratic

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<sup>42</sup> Brooks Cleanth. 'Empson's Criticism', *Accent*, date not known. Reprinted from 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); reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 123-135, 135.

confines deeply problematic. Yet Empson's work is shot through with an almost desperate attempt to foster the mediatory conditions of rational dialogue and thus to employ theory and theoretical conceptualisation in the service of public critical debate. The implications of this paradox will be explored in more detail in later chapters, but it is the objective of this chapter to outline the ideal conception of reading and critical argument upon which this paradox can be seen to rest. Some idea of the paradox beneath the faith will nonetheless be hinted at towards the end of this chapter in my discussion of the difficult coexistence of pluralism and relativism in Empson's critical theory.

## **II. The Ethics of Critical Pedagogy**

In order to foster his ideal democratic forum of critical debate, Empson was always keener to pursue the cognitive content of poetry, rather than the purely emotive dimension or the strictly textual features made apparent by aestheticist or impressionistic creeds that ignored the rational intent of the poet as 'arguer'. This cognitivist focus was derived from a firm belief that the conversation articulated within the critical community was best served by a faith in the poetic material more readily available for cognitive analysis by what he termed 'ordinary tolerably informed readers', i.e. rational beings capable of offering reasons for their appreciation and enjoyment of a text – a cognitive entity – also presumed to be the product of an articulate, rational being. This was the basis of his rejection of Leavis's criticism, whose moral judgements, though not properly reasoned, were conveyed in such a tone as to appear legitimately democratic. As Empson put it: 'It was a fatal step, I always think, when Leavis began attacking Richards' Theory of Value, which however hard to express properly is an essential plank in his platform; Leavis has never shown any philosophical grasp of mind, and took for granted that he could strut about on the rest of the platform without ever falling through the hole. The effect has been to turn his intensely moral line of criticism into a quaintly snobbish one, full of the airs and graces of an elite concerned to win social prestige, though this is much opposed to his real background and sympathies' (ARG 289). This is what prompted Empson to believe that '[t]he idea of making a calculation to secure the greatest



happiness of the greatest number is perhaps inherently absurd, but it seems the only picture we can offer...the only alternatives to Bentham are arty and smarty moralising; giving unreasoned importance to a whim of one's own or to the whim of a social clique' (ARG 217-8).

Empson's cognitivism was also the basis of his rejection of the New Criticism (and for their rejection of him). The trouble for Empson was that the formalist aesthetics of the new critical programme tended to drain poetry of its rational content. For Empson, reading poetry is a cognitive activity, and it is only by rational means that we read, interpret or defend a poem. Hence also his resistance to Richards's emotivism, a point well summarised by Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe: poetry for Empson 'does not (as Richards and others had claimed) by-pass questions of truthfulness by its own form of "pseudo-statement". In this sense, poetic language in Empson's view simply extends the resources of sense-making characteristic of language-use more generally'<sup>43</sup>. In extending such resources, poetry is thus available to all who share in the rationality manifested by any good poem; and since this rationality is human rationality, it is, at least in principle, something we all share in. Such is, as I shall argue here, the principle that unites Empson's criticism and his teaching.

In practice, sharing this common rationality means resisting any appeal to Richardsian emotivism and New Critical paradox or irony. For Empson was keen to promote a view of poetry and reading as rational dialogue, with the intentions of the author and of the readers given equal consideration. In *Some Versions*, Empson wrote that 'once you break into the godlike unity of the appreciator, you find a microcosm of which the theatre is the macrocosm; the mind is complex and ill-connected like an audience' (P 60). His interest in verbal multiple meaning, from *Seven Types* to *Complex Words* and beyond, results from this identification of the single though myriad-minded reader with a diverse community conceived as the theatre audience. On this account, a word's various meanings are seen as plausible interpretations proffered by reasonable readers with differing viewpoints. Before explaining

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<sup>43</sup> Durant Alan, MacCabe Colin. 'Compacted doctrines: Empson and the meanings of words', in Norris, Christopher and Mapp, Nigel (eds.). *William Empson: the Critical Achievement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 170-195, 173.

the form and purpose of Empsonian critical argument, we therefore need to consider the ideal Empsonian conception of poetry underlying the provision of such arguments. For it is only with this ideal conception in mind that we will begin to understand the principled ethical stance that underlies Empson's complex and ambivalent relation to theory.

The democratic pedagogical principle underlying Empson's ideal critical practice is clearly outlined in an early pedagogical manifesto, 'Teaching Literature', first published (in Japanese) in 1934. Here Empson can be found worrying not only about pedagogical methods, but also about the relation between his own teaching and the more general conception of the nature of literature and the ethical role of imaginative reading. In his view,

[i]f the process is not useless, the normal student gets from literature pleasure, cheap while he is in reach of libraries, fullness of breadth of emotional life, independence of mind and a sense of proportion. This last involves not the avoidance of emotion (which narrows understanding as much as [?pleasure]) but a power to have strong emotions without forgetting the things he will value at other times, a power to know what his feelings will be under other circumstances so as not to be helplessly surprised by them when they come. It is a by-product of the independence, as are both of the enjoyment. (ARG 93)

For Empson, the teacher thus needs to foster a sense of personal judgement and the ability to adduce reasons for the personal enjoyment of poetry. As he put it later in the same piece: 'It may be said that a student's opinion is sure to be based on inadequate knowledge, and so a decent modesty will stop him from forming one. But just as you can get nothing from literature without in some degree enjoying it – it is no use treating it as a mere mass of information, because then you don't get the essential information; every reader has to re-make it in his own feelings – so you can only make your feelings real to yourself by recognising them, by forming a "personal opinion"' (ARG 95). Independence of mind means articulating and defending personal taste:

The independent mind, the feeling that it is worth while to use one's own reason, that one has a fair chance of seeing the thing for oneself apart from tradition, fashion or caprice, is developed by a process of learning that makes you feel able to understand the things you may have to judge and the world at large. (ARG 94)

After all: 'When you have an opinion of your own, however wrong, some real use may be made of a teacher, because you can argue with him' (ARG 95). This is so because for Empson studying literature 'is frivolous unless related to judgments of value, experience of life, some

kind of trying out [of] the different kinds of attitude or world-view so as to decide which are the good ones' (UB 194). His pedagogical principle therefore seeks to foster a critical practice that constantly demonstrates the ethical, cognitive and educational value of entertaining beliefs and respecting the complex integrity of the other minds and other beliefs encountered in literature. The Empsonian reader therefore needs actively to cultivate the ability to entertain beliefs that he or she may not ever share or accept; literature thus conceived is one of the means by which we preserve a respect for the practice of entertaining beliefs (as well as for such beliefs as are not ours), even though Empson was always careful to maintain the pragmatic distinction between entertaining a belief and holding a belief. After all, one of the chief functions of literature, for Empson, 'is to make you realize that people act on moral convictions different from your own... What is more, it has been said from Aeschylus to Ibsen that a literary work may present a current moral problem, and to some extent alter the judgement of those who appreciate it by making them see the case as a whole' (ARG 481). Entering a fictional world thus requires such imaginative understanding and development of the self through its imaginative projection and transfiguration in reading.

In a casual description of the cathartic encounter with 'otherness' in *Seven Types*, Empson noted that 'many works of art give their public a sort of relief and strength, because they are independent of the moral code which their public accepts and is dependent on; relief, by fantasy gratification; strength, because it gives you a sort of equilibrium within your boundaries to have been taken outside them, however secretly, because you know your own boundaries better when you have seen them from both sides' (ST 284). Some art works may thus act as focal points for the perception of differences and contrasts between two horizons of cultural and ethical experience and in this way refine a given public's awareness of the specificity and uniqueness of their own sociocultural frame of mind by sharpening points of convergence or divergence. Such works may thus have a distinct sociocultural value that mirrors and cultivates the dialectics of identity and difference structuring our apprehension and understanding of the world of the art work. By fostering an awareness of the characteristic features of our social tissue through contrastive encounters with other worlds,

such works enhance our sense of selfhood and our capacity for understanding and self-understanding. For Empson this involves approaching the poem, a 'piece of writing' (to use his own phrase), as a reflective and dialectical product of the complexity and internal contradictions of the human (authorial) mind, and as the expressive site of beliefs and values that may be different from, but are still commensurable with, our own.

Still, Empson was not blind to the objections that could be raised against appeals to intentions by the 'bother-headed theoretical critics', acknowledging as he did that 'maybe, as an intention is only known as it is shown, all references to intentions can in theory be avoided' (SL 171). But he also remarked that 'although we do not actually see forces in the equations given by the science of dynamics, we could not possibly understand dynamics without supposing forces to be at work' (SL 171). Empson thus understood the logic of anti-intentionalist formalism, conceding that success in the realization of intention is 'never complete'. And yet 'it is nearer completeness in a successful piece of literature than in any other use of literature' (UB 45). Ultimately it is thus not merely the possibility of understanding which is at stake for Empson in defending intentionalism, but the possibility of respect for the authenticity of other thinking minds. While he readily admitted that questions such as 'how far one's response to a poem is a complete one, how far it is the right one, how far it is the one intended by the author' are 'mysteries, and if they could be answered would be answered very differently in different cases' (ARG 199), his commitment to the intentionalist cause in its various guises was nonetheless unwavering simply because his ethics of communicative practice rejected anti-intentionalism as a mistaken *choice*.

His greatest fear was that the anti-intentionalist approach would turn all conversation and dialogue, all 'argufying', into solipsistic monologue. By denying the alterity of the text and its ability to maintain a different point of view, the New Critics, among others, were committed to a denial of what made the reading of imaginative literature such a worthwhile ethical pursuit. Empson advocated breadth of reading precisely because the variety of different and incompatible views held by authors and encountered by readers would keep our minds open and active in assessing their relative merits. To learn from and enjoy literature we

must to some extent submit ourselves to the work, even if ultimately we must critically assess it against our own experience and view of life. For the anti-intentionalist, 'there is only one right code of morals, a thing already known to himself', and so no possibility of expansion through resistance. Thus the 'idea that a piece of writing which excited moral resistance might be a discovery in morals, a means of learning what was wrong with the existing system, somehow cannot enter his [Wimsatt's] mind'. Likewise in science it 'is unsafe to explain discovery in terms of man's intellectual preconceptions, because the act of discovery is precisely that of stepping outside preconceptions' (ARG 531).

For Empson, wide imaginative reading is valuable only as something construed not as 'a mere mass of information' but 'something that every reader has to remake...in his own feelings', something that 'must be connected at once with an independent judgment', because 'you can only make your feelings real to yourself by recognizing them, by forming a 'personal opinion'' (ARG 95). The exercise of our critical faculty of judgment, our capacity for wide critical *understanding* (a key term in Empson's writings) through such wide reading is therefore valuable because it fosters independence, develops and sharpens our critical consciousness and power, but also elicits the formation and expression of our own selfhood in our comparative assessment and ordering of the different views. For Empson, 'one great important function of poetry is precisely this; to make the reader connect naturally, with understanding, things which he had not connected before' (ARG, 76). And also: 'the process of understanding some lines of poetry is an essential part of their value' (ARG 74). Hence Empson's interest in the surprise element of poetry, the capacity of poetry to expand the horizons of our imaginative world.

For Empson the educative, heuristic process of reading thus involves and is designed for pleasure, knowledge, and self-knowledge, an education in understanding and feeling one's own condition, frequently by encountering other minds and worlds, but always by exercising our capacity for uninhibited personal judgement and confronting our judgment with other people's – such as the teacher's. For Empson criticism therefore needs to respect and value literature as ethically and emotionally educative. Such is the ethical principle underlying the

theoretical contents of Empson's critical judgement as a pedagogical critic, a mediator or translator seeking to explain the rational other-mindedness of literary texts. Still, this hardly explains just how Empson intended to put this principle into practice as a means of averting the undemocratic rule of an academic or political elite; neither does the principle go very far towards explaining the kind of relationship he wished to foster between the critic and his audience.

### III. The Geometric Virtues of Analysis: *Seven Types* and Beyond

The challenge facing the pedagogical Empsonian critic in *Seven Types* was to articulate the reason in the madness, to rationalise the bafflement of the ordinary reader before an ambiguous poem or piece of language. In a short piece published at around the same time as *Seven Types*, Empson explained just how contemporary critics working along the same lines had dealt with their bafflement, writing: 'The Robert Graves school of criticism is only impressive when the analysis it employs becomes so elaborate as to score a rhetorical triumph; when each word in the line is given four or five meanings, four or five reasons for sounding right and suggesting the right things. Dazzled by the difficulty of holding it in your mind at once, you feel this at any rate is complicated enough, as many factors as these could make up a result apparently magical and incalculable' (ARG 69). His project here, as in *Seven Types* and various other shorter pieces of the same period, was a bold attempt to classify and solve as many problems for as many viewpoints as possible, and not just state them, particularly as these problems or conflicts are presented in ambiguities

Because of his desire to articulate a reasonable solution to such problems, Empson is led to proceed on the charitable basis that such confusions will, more often than not, have a rational explanation, and thus to make every attempt not to reflect a similar tentativeness in his own interpretations, even if these hardly result in a harmoniously unified response. After all, 'explanations of literary matters...involving as they do much apparent random invention, are more like Pure than Analytical Geometry, and, if you cannot think of a construction, that

may show that you would be wise to use a different set of methods, but cannot show the problem is of a new kind' (ST 252-253). In the 1947 edition, Empson admitted his pleasure at being found in error; after all, criticism for him is error-making, because it is an activity of rational dialogue (between the text and the critic) in which the full resources and sense-making capacities of the analyst are (sometimes excessively) in play. One result of this process was an acceptance of the futility of any attempt to come down on one side or the other of the subjective/objective divide, and in the concomitant cultivation of the critical ability to see as much as possible 'all round a poem'; as he put it in a letter to a Chinese friend, Qien Xuexi, in 1947:

I quite agree that the ultimate criterion for a good poem is not 'internal', that is inside the poem, and I should have thought it was evidently not inside any one reader either. The term 'subjective' always leads to confusion, I think. The reader has got to make up his own mind, but what he is deciding is whether the poem is likely to last, for his own feelings and for subsequent generations – he has to make the same kind of prophecy about both. (Of course this is only one of the things he is deciding; I mean that there is no absolute line of division corresponding to 'subjective'). The ultimate decision can never be made, though later generations can make a working approximation to it; and the chief reason why it can't be made is that nobody gets to see the whole of things. But in getting to see any tolerable representative or workably large world-picture it seems obvious that you would need to bring in the sciences as well as the philosophies, and for that matter the other arts. It seems perhaps rather obscurantist to say that one must know all there is to be known before one can judge a poem, but it only amounts to saying that one's interests should not be deliberately narrow. (SL 151)

From this perspective, there is nothing in poetry, at least in principle, that exceeds, or departs from, the normal processes of sense-making employed in ordinary (i.e. non-poetic) communicative uptake, nor is there anything inherently 'paradoxical', mystical or transcendent about the language used by poets. The critic needs to assume that the meaning of things 'temporarily or permanently inexplicable' is indeed readily available to us and that poetry is not something that transcends the powers or capacities of rational thought. In the 1947 preface to *Seven Types*, Empson nonetheless conceded that a degree of impasse is fundamental to ambiguity, writing that '[i]f a pun is quite obvious it would not ordinarily be called ambiguous, because there is no room for puzzling', and again: 'most readers would consider the ironies of Gibbon unambiguous, though possessed of a "double meaning", because they would feel that no one could be deceived by them' (ST x). Still the point of it all

remains rational clarification since ‘the criterion for the ordinary use of the word [ambiguity] is that somebody might be puzzled, even if not yourself’ (ST x); but there is invariably a moment of hesitation in the act of analytical reading, before the critic narrows the range of hypothetical interpretive moves open to her. This moment or interval of indecisiveness is construed by Wihl in terms of ‘resistance’ in *Complex Words*<sup>44</sup>.

The cultivation of this faith in explicability derives from Empson’s desire to promote rational dialogue; as he once put it: ‘[p]ersonally, I am pleased and given faith by this analysis because it has made something which seemed to me magic into something which seems sensible’ (ST 26). The critic needs to articulate and account for the sensibility or taste that shapes the judgements proffered to the audience. Empson rationalised this faith in the final chapter of *Seven Types*, which attempts to defend the possibility of such articulation. In Empson’s view:

[n]ormal sensibility is a tissue of what has been conscious theory made habitual and returned to the pre-conscious, and, therefore, conscious theory may make an addition to sensibility even though it draws no (or no true) conclusion, formulates no general theory, in the scientific sense, which reconciles and makes quickly available the results which it describes. (ST 292)

Sensibility, for Empson, is not a universal faculty, nor is it something that is not always in some sense theory-laden. For here, ‘one is again faced with the problem about the hen and the egg; the dogma produces the sensibility, but it must itself have been produced by it. But to say that the dogma does not influence the sensibility is absurd. People only say it when they are trying to put the sensibility in a peculiar state of control over the dogma’ (ST 293). *Seven Types* argues that the claims set forth in our speculative theorizing on critical practice merely articulate in a more explicit public form the insights of intuitive sense formulated in practical criticism. In practice the relevance and interest of our intuitive responses is not a function of the analytical dismemberments imposed by theory, though analysis can depend on the processes by which those intuitions of meaning are generated. So it is that in *Seven Types* Empson claimed ‘to show how a properly-qualified mind works when it reads the verses; how

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<sup>44</sup> See Wihl, Gary. ““Resistance” and “Pregnancy” in Empsonian Metaphor’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Winter 1986, pp. 48-56.



those properly-qualified minds have worked which have not at all understood their own working' (ST 291). Yet his attitude to the details of such a project was typically humble and self-consciously unassuming, though it was also symptomatic of a positivistic confidence in the transferability and communicability of experiences: 'it is necessary to protect our sensibility against critical dogma, but it is just because of this that the reassurance given by some machinery for analysis has become so necessary in its turn' (ST 293). A recent summary by David Fuller of Empson's 'relationship to sensibility' explains this well:

In this sense relationship to sensibility is the proper test of how a theory is held. A theory must also be tested in impersonal terms: from this derives whatever ability it may have to challenge and not simply validate preconceptions. A theory that is too limited, rigid, or mechanical can have worse results than an unconscious one: after the routine testing of premises come the utterly predictable results. A myth critic finds a pattern very like a seasonal cycle; the deconstructive critic finds criticism participating in a text's endless play of meanings; and so on. The Unsceptical Theorist may claim that the special defect of theoretically unselfconscious thinking is that it acts in the dark; but this is true only on the circular presumption that self-consciousness is the only light. The theory implicit in any critical practice is constantly tested by that practice so long as the critic attempts, as Empson did, a free play of the mind over a wide range of literary kinds from diverse periods and cultures.<sup>45</sup>

Since the test of his critical practice is thus partly its applicability to all varieties and periods of poetry, Empson needs to resist any appeal to a fixed or transcendent conception of poetry – hence, for instance, his resistance to the Classic/Romantic divide in *Seven Types*. The practice will only work therefore if the critic operates on the assumption that poetry makes sense because it is continuous with ordinary language and the processes of normal, 'non-poetic' understanding, and that poetry as such, from whatever period or sensibility, makes sense according to standard modes of understanding and comprehension. For while poetry may indeed seem so condensed that it resists rational explanation, still the critic needs to proceed on the basis 'that no poetical effect is of its nature permanently inexplicable; this is an act of faith, and in practice only means that I think it worth while to try and explain things' (ST 45). For Empson, this is at any rate a better working assumption than the mystical or emotivist conceptions of poetry advocated by Richards and the New Critics, who give up analysing the

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<sup>45</sup> Fuller, David. 'William Empson: from verbal analysis to cultural criticism', in *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, Patricia Waugh (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 161.

'roots of beauty' too soon:

[things] temporarily or permanently inexplicable are not, therefore, to be thought of as essentially different from things that can be explained in some terms you happen to have at your disposal; nor can you have reason to think them likely to be different unless there is a great deal about the inexplicable things that you already know. (ST 292)

This amounts to a refusal to countenance the notion that poetry differs so radically from our ordinary processes of understanding that we cannot possibly translate a poem into ordinary, non-poetic language since poetry and ordinary language thus conceived are radically different languages. Empson was in fact frequently compelled to correct one misconception of verbal criticism, that its basic operative procedures were derived from essentialist assumptions about the special nature of poetry. As he put it in a review of contemporary criticism in 1955, responding to R.S. Crane:

[Crane's] crucial complaint against verbal analytical criticism seems to be that 'its controlling aim is the differentiation of poetry as poetry from other things'. Now, a man can really try to explain to himself why a poem has the effect on him that it does, and can succeed in getting an answer which feels to him true, and he is interested while he is doing this. If you told him he was only really concerned to know why the poem wasn't a pussycat or a triumvirate you would merely surprise him; it is off the point. (ARG 122-123).

Empson was thus wary of claims pertaining to define the nature of poetry and to infer norms of critical reasoning from the definition, rather than allowing for the free play of the mind, the appeal to the wide, idiosyncratic variety of each reader's personal, cultural and theoretical resources. In the letter to Qien Xuexi already quoted, Empson exemplified this principle with the particular case of poetry conceived as 'concrete dialectic':

I think I agree with your phrase that poetry is 'concrete dialectic'; the question is rather what we do with these phrases after we have got them. It seems clear that one must still consider first whether a given object is 'poetry', and then if it is also found to be 'concrete dialectic' that is further confirmation of the theory. But if one set out to write concrete dialectic on the ground that it would be sure to turn out good poetry I think it would be rather a matter of luck whether it turned out good poetry or not (so it would be, of course, if one set out to write good poetry). The aphorism is not a recipe, if this is so, and yet it is rather hard to see what else it can be. (SL 150)

On this assumption there is no fundamental or essential distinction to be drawn between one language and another, and so in considering the relation between two languages (such as the language of poetry and the language of criticism), the critic needs to accommodate the

respective (and seemingly distinct) features of each language in order to bring our familiar (i.e. standard, non-language specific) ways of understanding into play. Interpretation thus conceived proceeds on the basis of a principle of charity according to which a reader confronted with a difficult or obscure passage employs those critical resources most likely to yield a result showing just how the author may have been making an unexpected sort of sense. Hence the need for an analytic 'machinery' of understanding resilient enough not to give in too soon to the appeal of emotivist or mystical modes of understanding that concede too much to the inexpressible element in poetry. A machinery of this kind is needed, so Empson argues,

partly so as to look as if you knew what you were talking about, partly as a matter of 'style', and partly from the basic assumption of prose that all parts of speech must have some meaning. (These three give the same idea with increasing generality). Otherwise, one would be constantly stating relations between unknown and indefinite objects, or only stating something about such relations, themselves unknown or indefinite, in a way which probably reflects accurately the nature of your statement, but to which only the pure mathematician is accustomed. So that many of my explanations may be demonstrably wrong, and yet efficient for their purpose, and vice versa. (ST 293)

Thus, criticism, like the sciences, cannot solely rely on intuition, which, however far it may go in appreciative criticism, still needs a machinery of rational argument to back up its claims. Though intuition may be required, still criticism requires rational argument or a 'machinery' of critical understanding as a condition of debate. So the critic is constantly having to find the right balance between analysis – which ignores taste in its search for rational understanding – and appreciation. Hence the required balance between the two:

When you have made a quotation, you must first show the reader how you feel about it, by metaphor, implication, devices of sound, or anything else that will work; on the other hand, when you want to make a critical remark, to explain why your quotation takes effect as it does, you must state your result as plainly (in as transferable, intellectually handy terms) as you can. (ST 290)

This was the basis of Empson's defence of Richards against the aesthete Sparrow, whose attack on the new paradigm of verbal criticism denied the analytical dimension of intuition altogether, thus construing intuition as a pure, undiluted basis for the provision of critical insights. Thus:

The root divergence seems to be that Mr Sparrow thinks the meaning of a poem, and its mode of action, ought not to be analysed too deeply, nor ought the poet or his reader to be analysed too deeply. Evidently this is a matter of degree; you have at

least got to construe poetry, not merely snuff it up; Mr Sparrow admits that analysis is in some degree possible and at least useful if not necessary. One may say in general that those who judge in literary matters by 'intuition' always assume a legacy of analysis, and complain when it is carried further. This is not in itself unreasonable; one must judge how far a thing needs to be explained both by what seems most agreeable to one's own habits and by what, independently of them, seems most effective. (ARG 194)

This machinery of critical understanding, the 'intellectual background for our appreciation' (ARG 194), was required, in Empson's view, because 'this is the first generation which has tried on a large scale to enjoy simultaneously the literature of a great many generations' (ARG 194). Hence the worth of Richards's project in *Practical Criticism*: 'the point of collecting them [the protocols]...was to show that, in the present bewildered state of the poetical public (and it is all very well for Mr Sparrow to be too proud to mind about the public, but if you are a poet, the poetical public is what you are writing for) some form of intelligible process of interpretation is urgently needed, if only to give people confidence' (ARG 195).

Empson's resistance to the aestheticizing impulse of the impressionist or appreciative critics – the main early opponents of the critical method expounded in *Seven Types* – also extended to the somatic and non-linguistic elements in poetry, again because interest in such matters could hardly count as an articulate contribution to critical debate; literature is a verbal art and there is far more that we know about its medium than any other art form. As he put it in his review of a new edition of *The Foundations of Aesthetics* by Richards, Ogden and Wood:

we know a good deal about our own language. It is much harder to know your way about Emotion in the visual arts, for instance in some fascinating African fetish, where you pretty certainly don't feel what the sculptor and his original public felt, and yet the emotional force of the thing is pretty certainly what makes it good. At least this is the natural way to phrase the matter, but I am not sure that talking about the Emotions is any help. What seems clear is that the internal goings-on when you appreciate the fetish are much less in reach of argument than the goings-on when you appreciate an English poem. This is what makes it plausible to talk about Pure or Significant Form. (ARG 213)

In this respect, 'Sound and Meaning in English Poetry' (1931), a review of Katherine M. Wilson's *Sound and Meaning in English Poetry*, usefully illustrates Empson's earlier views on the place of melody and sound in the analysis of literature, especially poetry. For Empson,

Wilson is merely transposing the problem of meaning in poetry to the problem of sound and music, not explaining it, because she believes that ‘the aim of the poet must be to write musically; that the aim of the literary must be to use the methods of the musical critic; that poetry, in fact, is “like” music’ (ARG 88). However, as Empson notes, ‘[i]t is not really very illuminating to say that the verses act in the same way as tunes; no use could be made of the relationship even if we could establish it’ (ARG 88) since ‘practically nothing is known about the mode of action of a tune’ (ARG 88). The result is that ‘so far from explaining anything about poetry, these opinions (which certainly have some degree of truth) open up abyss after abyss of the inexplicable beneath the plainest set of verses’ (ARG 88). Because so little is known about tune or melody, the critic who relies on these concepts to explain poetry limits the scope of criticism to the point of making it almost impossible; Wilson’s opinions ‘make the critic so helpless’ (ARG 89): ‘poetry is inexplicable, and criticism impossible’ (ARG 89). Since we know far more about the mode of action of language and meaning, the critic would do better to concentrate on verbal analysis. This is where Empson’s pragmatic approach to criticism is most in evidence; since he wants to make meanings available for public debate and discussion, his preferred tools for criticism are those we understand most fully and that fulfil a certain idea of the conditions of rational debate – namely that we rely on articulated, explicable concepts to explain the ‘inexplicable’. He is thus led to the conclusion that ‘it is no use considering the sound alone, because the sound made is defined, and the sound heard is positively created, by the meaning’ (ARG 91).

Empson’s faith in his decision to privilege that which can be articulated verbally is expressed in *Seven Types* as a conviction that poetry ought to make sense according to the most rigorous standards of hard-pressed analytical commentary. For Empson:

[e]xplanations of literary matters..., involving as they do much apparently random invention, are more like Pure than Analytical Geometry, and, if you cannot think of a construction, that may show that you would be wise to use a different set of methods, but cannot show the problem is of a new kind. (ST 292-3)

In order to mediate the sense of a passage, the critic thus needs to cultivate a faith in the analysability of poetic language, its transferability into ordinary language, so as to make it

available for critical discussion and debate. While some passages may ultimately resist such a faith, still we will do best to find another, more successful analytical construction (as in the geometric sense that Empson was so fond of), rather than referring to depth psychological analysis or deep symbolism. This means resisting as far as possible the aestheticist or appreciative resistance to the 'bad taste' of explanation: 'When the examination paper says "Evaluate the following poem", the student will happily write down, "Significantly, the images are symbolical". What they signify, or what they symbolise, he does not say; he considers that if he did he would look low-class and philistine' (ARG 168). For as he put it in *Seven Types*:

[any] advance in the machinery of description makes a reader feel stronger about his appreciations, more reliably able to distinguish the private or accidental from the critically important or repeatable, more confident of the reality (that is, the transferability) of his experiences; adds, in short, in the mind of the reader to the things there to be described, whether or not it makes those particular things more describable. (ST 294)

The function of analytical criticism, the vehicle of Empson's early commensurability thesis, is to apply the nascent theory of 'transferability', the translation into prose of the public meanings expressed by poetry. Analysis, rather than pure appreciation, is thus the basis of Empson's early views on the conditions of articulate, democratic debate.

#### **IV. Reasoning with Pleasure**

His review of *Elizabethan Imagery* by Elizabeth Holmes, written in 1930, the same year as *Seven Types*, contains the most succinct statement on the importance, as well as the limits, of the analytical/appreciative divide. The piece initially sets up a rigid distinction between the two critical modes. The basic premise of this division is that 'the reasons that make a line of verse likely to give pleasure [...] are like anything else; one can reason about them' (SSS 67). He remarks that although 'Coleridge said that reasons could be assigned, when a poem was successful, for the position and use of every word it contained [...]; with unusual caution he made no attempt to do this himself, nor did he say whether a complete set of reasons could be assigned or only several true ones; the field of criticism described by this aspiration has been

left to this age' (SSS 67). On this account the modern appreciative mode Empson opposed was indeed distinctly Coleridgean, since the appreciative critic makes no attempt to assign reasons to literary enjoyment, but 'must produce a literary effect similar to the one he wishes to isolate from the passage' (SSS 69). By contrast, the object of analysis is 'to show the modes of action of poetical effect' (SSS 69) and thus presumably to carry out Coleridge's partially unfulfilled aspirations. The suavisly rhetorical critical statements made in the appreciative mode are therefore not significantly different in kind from those made in the object of study itself, the poem, since the critic merely expresses somewhat differently the content of the text. Therefore, since what is said about the text in the appreciative mode is not different in kind from the object of study, the reason why the text is 'apt to give pleasure' cannot logically be given – the pleasurable experience can only be restated, not explained. By contrast, analysis, since it reflects upon the first-order language of the object of study, says something different in kind from the text and is therefore more likely to locate the origin of our enjoyment, supporting its claims through rational explanations of the pleasure induced by particular features of the text.

But Empson was quick to see how such a distinction hardly stood up to the pressure of sustained analysis, observing in the same article and in the final chapter of *Seven Types* that this neat distinction collapses as soon as one begins to reflect on what can possibly be said about a poem in the analytical mode. Admitting that 'the analysis of a poem can only be a long way of saying what is said anyhow by the poem it analyses, that it does not show how the devices it describes can be invented or used' (ST 292), Empson was led to consider the nature of critical statements made in analysis and concluded that they could not be taken as statements expressing absolute truths, but rather as forms of performative injunctions. What this concession suggested to him is that the statements set forth in the analytical mode, and not merely those made in the appreciative mode, also have a rhetorically persuasive force and cannot therefore be evaluated by principles of deductive or inductive validity but rather by their tendency to satisfy, persuade, or seduce the critic's reader or audience. Although the analytical critic is committed to giving reasons to support the explanation of an effect of the

text, the only ultimate ground of appeal for the validity of such reasons and arguments is success in inducing the desired critical verdict, and not any kind of absolute objective criterion defined outside the realm of intersubjective critical debate. Thus it is that through analysis the critic 'must coax the reader into seeing that the cause he names does in fact produce the effect which is experienced' (ST 291). For Jonathan Culler, Empson is therefore operating on the assumption that critical competence is 'not to be verified by surveys of readers' reactions to poems but by readers' assent to the effects which the analyst attempts to explain and the efficacy of his explanatory hypotheses in other cases'<sup>46</sup>. Culler is thus led to argue that

[f]or Empson the complex effects of poetry are extremely difficult to explain, and the analyst finds that his best strategy is to assume that the effects he sets out to account for have been conveyed to the reader and then to postulate certain general operations which might explain these effects and analogous effects in other poems. To those who protest against such assumptions one might reply, with Empson, that the test is whether one succeeds in accounting for effects which the reader accepts when they are pointed out to him.<sup>47</sup>

The performative dimension of critical statements suggests therefore that in Empson's view the relation between the critic and the reader is one of seduction, and not one in which the truth-value of the critical statement provides the criteria for assessing the validity of the statement. Analytical criticism is thus inevitably an art of pleasurable seduction in which the performative brilliance of the analyst is not different in kind from the critical practice of the appreciative impressionist, though, in contrast to the appreciative mode, it always seeks to maximise the rationality of its object.

Because the two critical modes evidently share this performative dimension, Empson recommended that we do away with the deeply troublesome dichotomy, deriving as it does from such naive antinomies as 'intuitive' versus 'analytic' modes of response, since it fails to explain just how analysis and appreciation are not separate and radically isolated activities, but two dimensions of a process that 'must be that of alternating between, or playing off against one another, these two sorts of criticism' (ST 289). The result of his conception of the

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<sup>46</sup> Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, 125.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.



interpretive process is to steer a middle course between the unreflective impressionism of the appreciative mode and a false scientism that attempts to extend the ideal of positivistic objectivity into the realm of criticism. For although the analytical mode shares this much in common with the appreciative mode, it nonetheless preserves its ambition of providing reasons that account for the pleasure felt in the reception of poetry through close critical analysis. In other words, although the content of critical statements in the two modes is not essentially different, the statements of the analyst are driven by the effort to understand and communicate literary effects through close verbal analysis, and not through unsupported evaluative claims that do no more than express a private experience of textual pleasure without any further reflective criticism. There is no difference in kind, only a difference in the depth and subtlety of understanding. At the other extreme, the scientific view is at any rate difficult to maintain in the realm of criticism since the 'scientific idea of truth is that the mind, otherwise passive, collects propositions about the outside world; the application of scientific ideas to poetry is interesting because it reduces that idea of truth (much more intimately than elsewhere) to a self-contradiction' (SSS 68). In fact, the same principle informed his criticisms of scientism in linguistic research: '[t]his whole notion of the scientist viewing language from outside and above is a fallacy; we would have no hope of dealing with the subject if we had not a rich obscure practical knowledge from which to extract the theoretical' (CW 438). And again: 'till you have decided what a piece of language conveys, like any other literary critic, you cannot look round to see what "formal features" convey it; you will then find that some features are of great subtlety, and perhaps fail to trace some at all' (CW 437).

One of Empson's methodological principles was that the resources of analysis, despite the appearance of positivistic dryness that the early reviewers attacked so vehemently, were most fruitfully applied to poems that the analyst enjoys. Empson was thus committed to the ascription of reasons for his enjoyment. It is easy to see that if the task of the analytical critic is to explain why poems give pleasure, then the purpose of criticism is, more generally, to analyse poems that have effectively been objects of enjoyment. In *Seven Types*, Empson in fact openly acknowledged that his method was most fruitfully applied to poems that had

given pleasure: 'I shall almost always take poems that I admire and write with pleasure about their merits; you might say that, from the scientific point of view, this is a self-indulgence, and that as much is to be learnt from saying why bad poems are bad' (ST 26). He thus conceded that the priority is given to poems that are thought to be good and have effectively been read with pleasure. This methodological statement of principle upholds the idea that pleasure sustains the activity of analysis, and interpretations of poems that have given pleasure are likely to be both more rewarding and more refined than readings of poems that have not been accompanied by such pleasure. In what may retrospectively be taken as yet another version (admittedly in somewhat less radical terms) of Roland Barthes's paradoxical query in *Pleasure of the Text*: 'Can it be that pleasure makes us objective?'<sup>48</sup> – Empson concluded that '[i]t is more self-centred, and therefore less reliable, to write about poems you have thought bad than about the poems you have thought good'(ST 26). Analysis is at its best when its object of study has given pleasure and that's why it is almost impossible to say why bad poetry is bad: if you have understood it at all, you must first have made the imaginative response of creating the poem for yourself, and then have revolted against your own creation; so that while writing about good poetry you can say how the poem ought to work, in writing about bad poetry you can only describe your own internal convulsions'(SSS 68). Empson thus saw the element of pleasure as an integral part of the understanding and appreciation of poetry. All this does not purport to account for the nature or the structure of literary judgement, but rather underlines the crucial contribution of enjoyment and pleasure to critical analysis and understanding. For what Empson's explicit statement of *modus operandi* suggests is that pleasure promotes critical interest, while displeasure or mere indifference impede it.

The emphasis of Empson's argument is therefore on the nature and mode of apprehension of the poetic object to which the pleasure in question corresponds and of which it is the accompaniment and sign for whoever can contemplate the object with understanding and sensitivity. The critic need draw no rigid distinction between analysis and appreciation,

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<sup>48</sup> Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, 64.

since, recalling Aristotle's views in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 'pleasure completes the activity' as 'bloom in the case of youth'. Indeed, like many non-Aristotelians, Empson still seems to have admired the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, and he named one of his early poems 'Value is in Activity'. The main point of this conception is that pleasure is not a thing in itself that can be used to define adequately an end of human activity, but always something that goes with and completes activities when they are successful and is a sign of their success in the participant or beholder. Analysis will thus be a more rewarding and successful activity when the reading process is carried out with pleasure. It certainly seems deeply problematic to say that the pleasure we take in an activity is a kind of sensation that could in fact have been obtained by engaging in some other activity. Rather we would do better to think of pleasure as something that forms a complement to the activity. In this sense we might say that pleasure is something that readers are necessarily aware of and paying attention to, although they could hardly attend to it in isolation from the activity of reading. Pleasure cannot easily be defined as an isolated happening and assessed separately. Just as it is impossible to leave the concert hall to attend more closely to the pleasure we get from listening to the music, since we thus cut ourselves off from the pleasure, it is impossible to isolate the pleasure of reading from the activity of reading.

In this respect Empson's conception of pleasure converges with Gilbert Ryle's famous assault on the received doctrine of pleasure, conceived as the opposite of pain<sup>49</sup>. Ryle famously insisted on the necessity of thinking of pleasure as something we take, to our being active and not merely passive in enjoyment. The activity need not be vigorous and may be merely the activity of the imagination (as in reading) or of paying attention or attending finely to what is happening or to what we are engaged in doing. Pleasure and displeasure are thus special qualities of the interest we have in an activity, and that interest itself is a special quality of the activity in question. Thus it is that by not availing themselves of the resources of analysis to refine their understanding and appreciation of the text, appreciative critics tend

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<sup>49</sup> See Ryle, Gilbert. *Dilemmas: The Tarner Lectures 1953*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954, pp. 54-67.

to assume that pleasure can be isolated and attended to in isolation from our actual understanding of the text. But pleasure is not a separate happening, it cannot be 'separately clocked'. Empson's and Ryle's conceptions are in this respect both distinctly Aristotelian, since Aristotle had already argued that activity and pleasure are 'bound up together and [do] not admit...of separation, since without activity pleasure does not arise, and every activity is completed by the attendant pleasure'. The pleasure is greatest, as for instance in reading, when 'both the sense is at its best and it is active in reference to an object which corresponds'. Likewise for Empson, 'the act of knowing is itself an act of sympathising; unless you are enjoying the poetry, you cannot create it, as poetry, in your mind' (SSS 68). In short, the pleasure of literature is bound up with the activity of appreciating literature and insofar as this activity requires that we understand literature, we cannot properly enjoy literature without understanding it. But our enjoyment also enhances our apprehension and understanding of the poem as poem: 'So far as poetry can be regarded altogether dispassionately; so far as it an external object for examination; further, so far as the critic has made himself dispassionate about it; so far as he has repressed sympathy in favour of curiosity, he has made himself incapable of examining it' (SSS 67). In short, the enjoyment of a poem and its understanding cannot be sharply isolated, and so 'you cannot get anything from literature without in some degree enjoying it' (ARG 95).

In viewing the relation between the two critical modes, then, a balance is required. The depth and scope of analysis is partly a function of the degree of pleasure in the reception of the text, enjoyment thus completing the appreciative activity. Conversely, the enjoyment of the poem is enhanced and enriched by understanding and analysis. On the face of it, that there might be in Empson's view a specifically literary kind of pleasure cannot be doubted, since part of the pleasure of reading is derived specifically from the activity of critical analysis, and cannot therefore logically be derived from any other activity. But is it radically, or essentially, isolated from the kind of pleasure derived from the contemplation of and engagement with the objects of ordinary, non-aesthetic experience? Empson's response to this issue is somewhat oblique, but it is clear from a number of remarks that in his view literary

appreciation depends upon an activation of modes of judgement that are not specifically aesthetic, thus working out, after Richards, his own dismissal of the 'phantom aesthetic state'. Thus it is that for Empson '[w]hat I would suppose is that, whenever a receiver of poetry is seriously moved by an apparently simple line, what are moving him are the traces of a great part of his past experience and of the structure of his past judgements' (ST 16). The ease with which we appreciate and enjoy a poem is misleading; at this early stage in the critical process, the reader feels as if she is doing no cognitive work at all, whereas in fact the act of appreciation is founded on an appeal to highly complex layers of unconscious knowledge that are necessarily involved in the apprehension of the poem as poem such that 'there is always in great poetry a feeling of generalisation from a case which has been presented definitely; there is always an appeal to a background of human experience which is all the more present when it cannot be named. I do not have to deny that the narrower chisel may cut deeply into the heart' (ST 16). The act of appreciation in reading a poem is thus neither immanent nor cut off from extraneous factors that inform, at however unconscious a level, the nature and scope of our critical judgements. The marked difference between analysis and appreciation is therefore undoubtedly unfortunate. Far more emerges from our enjoyment in the reception of the text if analysis is allowed to gain the upper hand as the proper mode of criticism: 'Such an advance in the [analytical] machinery of description makes a reader feel stronger about his appreciations, more reliably able to distinguish the private or accidental from the critically important or repeatable, more confident of the reality (that is the transferability) of his experiences, adds, in short, in the mind of the reader to the things there to be described, whether or not it makes those peculiar things more describable. What is needed for literary satisfaction is not, "this is beautiful because of such and such a theory", but "this is all right, I am feeling correctly about this; I know the kind of way in which it is meant to be affecting me"' (ST 292).

This suggests that the reader cannot properly be said to have enjoyed the poem without understanding it, and cannot fully understand it without enjoying it. In the absence of any such analytical machinery, the result is, in Empson's view, 'a certain lack of satisfaction

in the reading of any poetry; doubt becomes a permanent background of the mind, both as to whether the thing is being interpreted rightly and as to whether, if it is, one ought to allow oneself to feel pleased' (ST 294). The critic gives cogently argued reasons for the enjoyment of a poem, and to do so is in itself a peculiarly satisfying and pleasurable activity; analysis itself is therefore construed as pleasurable. Thus it is that for Empson '[c]onsidering what it feels like to take real pleasure in verse, I should think it surprising, and on the whole rather disagreeable, if even the most searching criticism of such lines of verse could find nothing whatever in their implications to be the cause of so straddling a commotion and so broad a calm' (ST 16). His conception of the pleasure of analysis is perhaps best illustrated by reference to that kind of ambiguity where 'the pleasure belongs to the act of working out and understanding, which must at each reading, though with less labour, be repeated' (ST 79). Empson's conception of literary appreciation thus assumes that pleasure and understanding are intimately connected, the pleasure of poetry and its criticism being that of an activity. Pleasure intensifies critical interest in the activity.

In maintaining that 'the kind of criticism that most interests me, verbal analysis or whatever one calls it, is concerned to examine what goes on already in the mind of a fit reader, sometimes bringing it up from levels of unconsciousness deep enough to make it look rather surprising, but even so not expected to make much difference to the feelings of the fit reader after he has got over his surprise' (ARG 107), Empson was characteristically prudent about the kinds of statements made in analytical criticism. For 'like all theories about the action of the mind...there is a sense in which it does not need to be expounded; if it is true, we are already working on it all the time' (ARG 107). The idea that the statements made by theory or analysis are tautologies, that they make explicit what is already going on in the mind of a competent reader, and that they constitute reflections of ordinary experience without adding anything to it or modifying it in any significant way, is perhaps the most fundamental expression of what Norris has called Empson's 'commonsense rationalism'. While analysis is praised as the most valuable form of criticism, its statements are ultimately tautological, and operate purely as performative injunctions that are continuous with the poem. The difference,

for Empson, between poetic language and criticism is that poetry is more concentrated, less diffuse, than prose, for 'the great trick of poetry, the reason, you might say, for writing in verse at all, is that it lets the writer get his thought crushed into a small space. Then it is like gunpowder, if the trick is done well; the thought comes bursting into the reader's mind' (ARG 232).

There is a correlative principle that applies to Empson's anti-essentialist conception of poetry; writing about Spenser, Empson noted that '[t]he term "Poet's Poet" is sometimes taken like "Holy of Holies", to mean that he gives a sort of concentrated essence, much more poetical than most poetry, or nothing else but Pure poetry. But this need not be praise, and might make him a sort of caricature; there is some truth in it, but one needs also another meaning, that all kinds of later poets have gone to him as a teacher' (ARG 244). The major difference between Spenser and modern poetry is that 'to the patient listener...most poets nowadays are at any rate brief; obscure and disagreeable...but the desire to be concentrated does at least keep them from prattling endlessly...Most Elizabethan poets are diffuse, but Spenser stands out as an extreme example of it' (ARG 244). Critics need therefore to cultivate a particular attitude towards the semantic concentration or density of poetry:

We critics, I think, tend to make the contrast too sharp because we like to be able to quote a short bit and then discuss it. We should rather take the attitude of what is called *analysis situs* in geometry, where it doesn't matter whether the strings are pulled tight to make a knot; the interesting thing is whether their relations are such that they would make a knot, if they were put under strain. (ARG 247-248)

The most ambitious project of Empson's critical theory at this stage can thus be defined as an attempt to formulate discursively, though in a way that is readily accessible to the layman, the processes that occur imperceptibly in the 'preconscious' of the minds of readers as they read a poem and then to articulate in detail the different meanings that those processes generate so that one can make sense of the response one has to the poem. The 'method' is designed as an explicit working through of the possible meanings of any poetic line or fragment in order to help readers identify what is already in their minds somewhere if they are actually understanding what they are reading. In doing so, Empson is not claiming a superior knowledge or understanding of the text, or indeed radically different and inherently preferable

reading skills, but merely pointing to the simple fact that the reader may require a pedagogue in understanding and bringing to the surface what is already there. The reader is always prejudiced and predisposed by a context-bound structure of beliefs and assumptions that informs and enables the act of reading; by devising any means at his disposal to draw out both the assumptions that preface any act of reading and the relation that such assumptions might bear to the text under scrutiny and the critic's own reading, the analytical critic recognizes, as Eagleton has written *à propos* Empson, that 'the reader inevitably brings to the work whole contexts of discourse, tacit assumptions of sense-making which the text may challenge but with which it also in continuity'<sup>50</sup>.

So it is that although the sophisticated analyses carried out by critics, theorists or philosophers on the complexities of poetry or ordinary communicative discourse may be of little practical interest to ordinary readers and interpreters, the technical interests of the former still need to be pursued on the assumption that any strict distinction between first-order (ordinary or poetic) language and the methodologically self-conscious articulations of our more formal investigations into poetic language and meaning will ultimately falsify an enabling condition of communicative uptake, namely that we appeal to a deeper array of pre-conscious analytical skills in making sense of any utterance in poetry or ordinary communicative discourse. Empson was thus careful not to erect the language of criticism into an entirely independent metalanguage that could adequately account for the effects brought about by the reading of imaginative literature. His dispute with logical empiricism thus amounted in part to a recognition that criticism could not at any rate be conducted on the basis that theory and critical statements alike are radically and essentially divorced from the kind of language used in the object of study itself. As Norris remarks in discussing Empson's resistance to any notion of a purely isolated metalanguage, Empson's 'chief objection to logical empiricism is that it adopts a formalized (or metalinguistic) approach that divorces logic from natural language, or scientific method – abstractly conceived – from the everyday

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<sup>50</sup> Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: an introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, 19.



or practical contexts of empirical enquiry'<sup>51</sup>.

The Empson of *Seven Types* therefore sees analysis as merely uncovering what is already going on in the mind of the fit, though perhaps less sophisticated reader, articulating for the first time his belief in the shared rationality of critic and reader, with the critic taking on the role of pedagogue and interpretative guide. Seemingly construing analysis as a form of self-critical tautology, neither entirely subversive nor altogether subservient to the results of critical practice, Empson's earliest remarks on the role of theory are easily translatable into his later idiom of pastoral irony. For Empson's flattening claim that his close readings do nothing that intelligent readers are not already doing, even if they are not fully aware (or indeed prepared to admit, as with the appreciative readers and critics) that they were doing it, assumes that no degree of critical or philosophical sophistication displayed by the critic is enough to warrant a radical severance of interests and idioms that would isolate the critic from the fit or competent readers postulated in *Seven Types*. An ambiguity of the sixth type, since it appears to say 'nothing, by tautology, by contradiction, or by irrelevant statements', an adequate theory of critical response and analysis thus adds nothing – nothing, that is, except greater self-consciousness and self-knowledge.

#### **V. Pastoral Irony and the Defence of Commensurability**

There is more than a hint of this principle behind the pastoral allegory of criticism implied by Empson's second book-length study, *Some Versions*. But while the critic as teacher who figured in *Seven Types* still wishes to foster a sense of common humanity as a means of securing the rational grounds of our relations to other minds, desiring to articulate the communion of all rational beings, the pastoral critic figured in *Some Versions* is more willing to concede that we may share less in common than this. After all, the Empsonian pastoral process of 'putting the complex into the simple' is partially designed, as Eagleton puts it, 'to reflect a desire to assuage the guilt we experience in pursuing the ever more refined pleasures

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<sup>51</sup> Norris, Christopher. *New Idols of the Cave: on the limits on anti-realism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, 56.

of intellectual or artistic endeavour at the expense of a more active furtherance of social justice or political engagement'<sup>52</sup>. Indeed, it is precisely the ironic contemplation of the possibility of communion between classes, across and in spite of the differences inherent in any complex society, achieved often by means of the enforced marginality of the sacrificial pastoral hero or anti-hero, that Empson's versions of pastoral all tend towards. For him all such figures of marginality occupy centre stage in his allegory of the pastoral mode as cultural critique. Empsonian cultural critics are thus pastoralists, since, as Eagleton writes, 'they cannot escape the occasionally farcical irony of being fine, delicate and excessively complex about writing whose power lies ultimately in its embodiment of a "common humanity"'. They are continually haunted by the irony that the very instruments that give them access to those powers also threaten to cut them off from them, and so deny them the very contact with the masses that the form and success of their critique depend upon'<sup>53</sup>. How, then, are they to negotiate the terms of their complex relationship with their object of study, which must also be what they wish to engage and interact with, what they wish, perhaps, to share? How are they to mediate the results of this engagement? What might an engagement in mediation look like?

To answer this question, however briefly, we need to consider some of the implications of Empson's principle of continuity between different discursive modes, between analysis and the objects of analysis, between theory and practice, between criticism and meta-criticism. The appeal of the Empsonian pastoral mode is that it offers an allegorical picture of what the critic does, a meta-critical framework for the dialogical mediation of these different discursive practices. In outlining his four-stage model of interpretation as glossing, enigma-solving, translation into another theoretical language and intervention in his *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle is to a certain extent employing a variety of this translational process, except that he is talking about the process of criticism, not meta-criticism. But that is precisely the point – the two, for Empson, are coterminous. For Lecercle,

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<sup>52</sup> Eagleton, Terry. 'The Critic as Clown', in *Against the Grain: Selected Essays*, New Left Books, 1986; third impression, London and New York, 1991, 149-165, 157.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

the final chapter of *Some Versions* on the *Alice Tales* offers a remapping of *Alice* as pastoral, thus ‘seemingly ignoring received wisdom, which takes it for granted that *Alice* is first a children’s tale, then a nonsense tale, the acme of a new genre’<sup>54</sup>. More obvious translational moves don’t occupy Empson for long, since the ‘books are so frankly about growing up that there is no great discovery in translating them into Freudian terms; it seems only the proper exegesis of a classic even where it would be a shock to the author...To make the dream-story from which Wonderland was elaborated seem Freudian one has only to tell it. A fall through a deep hole into the secrets of Mother Earth produces a new enclosed soul wondering who it is, what will be its position in the world, and how it can get out’<sup>55</sup>. Far from being solely an illustration of the Freudian paradigm, the *Alice Tales* are read by Empson in terms of a range of discourses, all basically building on the outrageous nature of Empson’s initial statement.

Lecerclé writes that

[t]he body of the piece is full of other surprises – a firework display of allusive interpretations. We thus learn that the *Alice* tales are topical, an allegory of progress and industrialisation (is this a Marxist *Alice*? The mind boggles although, of course, the essay was written in the *engagé* 1930s); that *Alice* is a child of the Wordsworth and Coleridge type (this is closer to received wisdom); that the tales are an allegory of Darwinism (so they are topical again – Nature nonsensical in tooth and claw); that they are all about rules and convention; and that the theme of insanity is essential in them (thus nicely pre-empting post-Foucault *Alices*). These are what we might call local interpretations, partly incoherent but often rich and illuminating, and they are so many attempts to translate the text into other constituted discourses.<sup>56</sup>

For Lecerclé, other surprises include likening the ‘new feeling for childhood to the end of duelling’, or ‘the pigeon who calls *Alice* a serpent...to the dove of the Annunciation, which turns *Alice* into the Serpent in the Garden of Eden’<sup>57</sup>. And as Lecerclé also remarks, ‘rather than a Catholic Carroll, what we have here is perhaps a Blakean Carroll: Carroll must have been a secret Muggletonian or Swedenborgian. As for the Gnat in *Through the Looking Glass*, who weeps at his own jokes, this is what Empson has to say about him: “a certain ghouliness in the atmosphere of this, of which tight-lacing may have been a product or a partial cause, comes out very strongly in Henry James”....Plus the hint of a Gothic *Alice* and

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<sup>54</sup> Lecerclé, Jean-Jacques. *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999, 29.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

the suggested comparison with Henry James. It is obvious that the interpretive screw has had one turn too many'<sup>58</sup>.

Lecerle also observes that 'in spite (or because) of its outrageousness, its flippancy, its blatant interpretive imposture, the essay works...the result is an interpretation that is not the solution to a riddle but a multiple translation; it is the density of the text's projection onto various discourses – onto a tradition (pastoral), an intertext (the Romantic vision of childhood, Darwinian natural selection, and so on), a structure of feeling (the relationship with madness) that enables the interpretation to work and survive'<sup>59</sup>. Lecerle is thus happy to find in Empson a model for the kind of glossing that he defines as the defining process of any 'just' interpretation. The text presents itself as a labyrinthine problem to be provisionally solved; provisionally because the problem resists every attempt to give a definitive solution, and so calls for what Lecerle, in writing about Deleuze, describes as 'the proliferation of part theories...theories that never explicitly form a whole'<sup>60</sup>.

The interest of Lecerle's view of Empson is that it isolates some of the central operations that underlie a conception of theory as 'mapping'; theory thus construed is, as Ronald Shusterman has recently put it, a 'redescription of phenomena in new and enlightening terms, an attempt to characterise and understand some element in a deeper way....this action of redescribing can indeed give us an idea of the way in which each redescription is an event'<sup>61</sup>. As forms of critical translation, such events or redesigns involve negotiation between the textual object and the critic's desired audience, so that notions of absolute equivalence or complete interpretive relativism are simply absurd. The role of the critic as translator is indeed that of a mediating interpreter operating between source and target in a space between two distinct poles, with responsibilities to both the original text and the intended readership. Or to put it in the structuralist idiom of Culler writing on Empson in his *Structuralist Poetics*: 'the test [of the success of a critic's proffered

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>60</sup> Lecerle, Jean-Jacques. *Deleuze and Language*. London: Palgrave, 2002, 40.

<sup>61</sup> Shusterman, Ronald. "'I'm a Total Solipsist – What About You?'" (The Metaethical Effect of Jokes, Theories and Other Articulations)', *Tropismes* 2003, 12.

interpretation] is whether one succeeds in accounting for effects which the reader accepts when they are pointed out to him'<sup>62</sup>, or as Empson himself put it, the critic 'must coax the reader into seeing that the cause he names does, in fact, produce the effect which is experienced; otherwise they will not seem to have anything to do with each other' (ST 13). We are perhaps reminded of Wittgenstein's performative model of critical argument in which the test of the validity for an interpretation is success in inducing the desired perception of the text, if not also the desired critical verdict, so that the form of critical argument is essentially dialectical or rhetorically persuasive, and is evaluated not by principles of deductive or inductive validity but rather by its power in convincing or satisfying its readers.

We might even say that Empson's reading of *Alice* can be seen as an almost Rortian redescription, the translation of a familiar cultural artefact, a remapping, that opens new discursive territories for exploring a text destined to be and become a palimpsest of the highest order. This multiplicity of interpretive mediations is suggestive of a picture of theory conceived as a plurality of discourses that disrupt our normal habits of thought, but which are nonetheless commensurable – that is, they have something in common, but they are also continuous with the text itself. To return to Eagleton:

[i]f there is a 'pastoral irony' between critic and reader, the same can be said of the relationship between critic and text. Empson's outrageously rationalistic paraphrases of sacred literary documents...are intended in one sense to parade the grotesque disparity between literary and critical discourses...The interplay between poetic statement and critical commentary forms a kind of pastoral indeterminacy...In one sense the prose commentary humbly flattens itself before the poetry, caricaturing in its breezy colloquiality its helpless incapacity to adequate it, wryly acknowledging an unsurpassable rift between the two registers. In another sense the commentary is considerably more elaborate than the texts, tempting us [...] to believe that its own subtle turns are merely derivative of the poem in the very act of outdoing it in intricacy. The two discourses seem at once continuous and incommensurate.<sup>63</sup>

For Empson, in *Seven Types, Some Versions* and *Complex Words*, the chief objective of verbal analysis is indeed to 'provide a "machinery" of rational understanding which may not', as Norris writes, 'satisfy the aesthete (on grounds of tact, sensibility or mere good taste), but

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<sup>62</sup> Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, 126.

<sup>63</sup> Eagleton, Terry. 'The Critic as Clown' in *Against the Grain: Selected Essays*, New Left Books, 1986; third impression, London and New York: Verso, 1991, 155.

which can at least give heart to the critic in search of more solid grounds for debate. For Empson, if poetry makes sense, then its sense-making properties are likely to be continuous with those of our everyday “prosaic” understanding, even if raised to a much higher power of semantic or syntactic condensation. At any rate it is better to work on this assumption than to take refuge in a wholesale aestheticist creed which elevates the mysterious nature of poetry to a high point of critical doctrine<sup>64</sup>. This kind of principle is central to Norris’s most recent work on Empson, which, rather like Eagleton’s, draws out the implications of Empson’s implied commensurability thesis for current anti-realist doctrines in philosophy of language and post-structuralism. Norris observes that

[c]ritics who take [the opposite line to Empson] are in much the same position as cultural relativists who argue that there exist languages, world-views, scientific paradigms, or ‘universes of discourse’ that differ so radically from our own (modern Eurocentric) standpoint that there can, in principle, be no question of ‘translating’ reliably between them, or at any rate of knowing for sure when such translation had in fact occurred. For you could only be in a position to assert this incommensurability-thesis if you had at least understood sufficient of the language or world-view in question to register the problems of achieving any reasonably accurate or truthful grasp. And then of course this would self-deconstruct, since the very fact of claiming to be in that position, i.e. to know where the difficulties arose, would constitute a standing reproof to the claims of any wholesale cultural-relativist outlook.<sup>65</sup>

Thus: ‘while Empson is quite prepared to admit that there may well be “things temporarily or permanently inexplicable”, whether these have to do with some radically alien set of cultural beliefs, practices or life-forms or some passage of especially opaque poetry, nonetheless, without at least some measure of shared understanding across and between languages, disciplines and cultures the sceptic’s position would be strictly unintelligible, since it would lack any means of making its point with respect to particular or well-attested cases of misunderstanding’<sup>66</sup>.

This is suggestive of Empson’s faith in a kind of Davidsonian ‘common public world’. At the beginning of the chapter on ‘They That Have Power To Hurt’ in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, Empson says:

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<sup>64</sup> Norris, Christopher. ‘For Truth in Criticism: William Empson and the Claims of Theory’, in *The Truth about Postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, pp. 100-181, 101.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

There is no reason why the subtlety of the irony in so complex a material must be capable of being pegged out into verbal explanations. The vague and generalized language of the descriptions, which might be talking about many sorts of people as well as feeling so many things about them, somehow makes a unity like a cross-roads, which analysis does not deal with by exploring down the roads; makes a solid flute on which you can play a multitude of tunes, show solidity no list of all possible tunes would go far to explain. (P 86)

Likewise in the Habermasian space or Davidsonian public world that Empson's approach is evolving towards, we are not required to dance the same dance to the same tune, but we will do best to cultivate a faith in Norris's and Eagleton's commensurability thesis, which would at least make it possible to appreciate and understand the tunes each of us is dancing to.

The theoretical interest of the allegorical dimension of Empson's pastoral mode, as well as the outline of its basic operative procedures provided by Lecercle, is that criticism thus construed is not interested in positing a variety of incommensurable theoretical discourses or language games, but rather assumes that we can find middle ways, interpretive moves or translational concessions that operate as fruitful reminders that critics or theorists are engaged in a pursuit of ever finer articulation, of a refinement, and perhaps an extension, of what we already share. Indeed, the Empsonian allegory of criticism as pastoral suggests that while distinctions of sophistication and simplicity, of life-forms and cultural beliefs do indeed exist, they are a poor thing in comparison with what he repeatedly calls our 'common humanity'.

#### **VI. The Problem of Pluralism: *Complex Words* and Beyond**

Empson's interest in language in *Complex Words* harbours precisely this ambition of returning criticism to its basis in the 'ordinary' or natural language we all speak, in the complex structures, both rhetorical and logical, of the deceptively simple phenomena of everyday speech. It is in this respect that his picture of language is basically pastoral, since it privileges a sort of intensification of the familiar grammar of our speech, a heightening of those connections and associations that Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, calls the 'possibilities of phenomena' and that others call the tacit, the prosaic, the dramatic. For Empson's logico-semantic machinery is designed to expand the compression or density at

work in the use of quite ordinary words in order to demonstrate the weight of social implication they can be made to carry. This assumes that there is no such thing as a hierarchy of complexity in language; instead Empson insists on the vertiginous rhetorical dimension of everyday language use, from which much of the richness of literary texts derives. Again, this presupposes another denial, that of the specificity of literary discourse; for Empson language in literature does what ordinary language does, and each partakes of the resources and limitations of the other.

By this time Empson thus saw the relation between theory and practice as one in which the two are not clearly demarcated as distinct, isolated activities:

The connection between theory and practice, where both are living and growing, need not be very tidy; they may work best where there is some mutual irritation. Also the difference between any two conflicting theories is partly a matter of what they put first, that is, what they ask you to think of first; by the time that you get hold of the refinements and exceptions the theories may come to much the same, and you may be too muddled to know how much. (CW 451)

The sets of equations offered in *Complex Words* may thus fairly represent ordinary discourse as a complex operative medium, but they are arrived at on the basis of a large number of such encounters with ordinary usage and are not designed as an 'a priori' conceptual frame-work that enables and regulates practice. Certainly the metalanguage of criticism deployed by Empson is not presented as a closed set of critical principles that defines the course of practical interpretation; indeed, it would be misleading to present the central categories of ambiguity, pastoral, and complexity as part of a series of propositions designed to represent faithfully the 'literary' as a clearly demarcated homogeneous entity.

Empson was keen to maintain that theory in the realm of literary and philosophical semantics should never be isolated from the practical business of interpretation. Since one of the things it is called upon to explain is how reasonably successful communication can occur in the first place, it needs to reckon with the resourcefulness and richness of ordinary discourse. Semantic theorizing reflects upon and clarifies the roots and implications of that 'rich obscure practical knowledge' that makes communication possible and that must at any rate be a presupposition for speakers, interpreters, or theorists to engage in dialogue in the



first place. So a viable semantic theory is neither divorced from communicative practice nor is it something that should fail to explain how such practice is conducted on the basis of a shared background of knowledge and belief. It is in this sense that the conception of language and meaning implied in *Complex Words* articulates Empson's picture both of the conditions required for the activity of practical dialogue and of the form of theory – theory reveals the depth of what we share by relying upon and further refining the roots and conditions of communicative success and consensus, while confronting those murkier regions of controversy that map out the limits of what we share with a view to fostering mutual understanding and extending the reach of our common world beyond the horizon of current theorizing.

For Empson, an analogous principle applies to our investigations into the nature and forms of moral reasoning and to the way in which our analyses of the way our moral concepts operate relate to and inform the practical human endeavour of ethical judgment and conduct. In response to a reviewer who had remarked, in Empson's own words, that his 'appendix on Theories of Value confuses the necessary distinction between metaethics and ethics, because it assumes that theories about the meaning of ethical terms also make ethical recommendations', Empson maintained that 'the idea that a theorist is not part of the world he examines is the one of the deepest sources of error, and crops up all over the place' (CW xxxi). As he remarked, when a theorist attempts to refute another theorist's speculations for assuming that the meaning of ethical terms also make ethical recommendations, it may well be that such refutations proceed merely on the basis of a disagreement over the kinds of ethical recommendations that metaethical analysis should reflect upon and clarify. In such cases 'a man can generally see that other people's [theories about the meaning of ethical terms] do [make ethical recommendations], though he tends to feel that his own are universal common sense' (CW xxxi). Thus it is that (aesthetic, ethical, semantic, etc.) theorizing needs to cultivate its intimate relationship with that which supports and enables it. For while ethical theorizing will inevitably take as its object terms that are assumed to form our 'universal commonsense' it still needs to reflect upon the degree to which such terms are indeed

constitutive of our shared background of knowledge and belief. Only thus can theory have consequences for practice, since theorizing about the operation and meaning of our ethical terms can be useful in practice because it helps to clarify the various forms taken by the activity of ethical judgement and conduct that must be presupposed if theorists are to engage in metaethical analysis; moreover it can proceed on the basis that the objects of metaethical analysis can be set up against one another and comparatively assessed with a view to improving practice.

There is thus embedded in Empson's metaethics the assumption that cross-cultural or cross-ideological comparison in the realm of ethics is possible, and that different ethical theories or systems are therefore not incommensurable. In a letter to Norris in 1971, Empson wrote:

I agree that ethical theory is a crucial matter, but I had not and have not got one. I used to think it was better not to have one, but am now not so sure....I hope I would always have agreed that ethical judgements are relational; no sense can be made of the subject otherwise; but I never thought of Laird as a man whose advice I might actually take. A class-based attitude, strongly expressed by Fielding and Trollope, still affects me a good deal; it says that properly educated or trained men agree with the working classes on essentials, but that most of the noise about ethics is made by Nonconformist lower-middle-class intellectuals whose instincts have been perverted (Samuel Butler said it too, of course). 'The great gay Englishman of Elizabeth's time', wrote G.K. Chesterton, about Carlyle, I think, 'is presented as a solemn cad'; this made a great impression on me as a schoolboy, so I could at once recognise Leavis as the type case of the solemn cad. (SL 502-503)

Likewise, the purpose of *Complex Words* was not merely to draw up lists of meanings for complex words, but to find the logico-semantic relations within complex words that would issue not in a list of isolated atoms of meaning but in a (relatively) coherent structure of related meanings, an axis of commensurable and interacting senses. Empson's interest in the 'inner grammar of complex words', as he put it in the 1977 'Comment for the Third Edition', contrasts in this respect with Richards's interests in 'merely a list of senses' in *Mencius on the Mind*. Empson was thus led to question his mentor's focus in a letter to Richards: 'Wouldn't you say that the notion of a list of definitions is inadequate, because the important thing is to see how the parts of the list interact, why the word wants you to think of them as connected?' (SL 46).

In reviewing a new edition of *The Foundations of Aesthetics* by Richards, Ogden, and Wood, Empson's preoccupation with the epistemological quandaries raised by the claims of any aesthetic theory found a fruitful burrowing ground, going to work on the earliest formulation of Richards's theory of value. It is a moot point whether or not the overarching purpose of the book was to offer a positive, absolute doctrine about the nature of art or beauty since, in Empson's own words, 'the main argument of the text is that people have meant a great variety of things by beauty – sixteen meanings of the word are tabulated – and that though a unifying concept can be adumbrated in a general way at the end one need not expect people to stick to that' (ARG 212). Empson was thus quick to pick up on the cause of so much subsequent scholarly dispute among Richards scholars, namely that 'there is an inherent tug between the tentative solution to the problem, offered in the last chapter, and the theory of Multiple Definition presented above' (ARG 212):

This is inherently concerned to say that in such cases one should tabulate the sixteen or more meanings of the term in question and expect nothing further. What you have gained by your tabulation is that you can no longer be deceived – never again will an argument by an aesthete prevent you from appreciating something unusual but good, or force you into admiring a narrow type of mysticism. But if the last chapter gives the answer, the proper meaning for the word, and furthermore if all the deluded aestheticians were actually fumbling after this solution, so that they would be convinced once they had been given it, then the whole position is quite different. All their sentences are simply wrong even from their own point of view, and they could be made to see it, had we but world enough and time. (ARG 212)

But this apparent tension was not enough to dampen Empson's enthusiastic though not unequivocal defence of what he thought a 'valuable book', because far from being a defect 'this fundamental ambivalence of course makes [it] more interesting' (ARG 212). Yet Empson's taste for ambivalence, ambiguity or irresolution hardly explains the paradox. While he saw ambiguity and indecision as constitutive features of both poetry and life, he still maintained that abstract philosophizing should produce answers and so would never have endorsed a thoroughly relativistic ethos of critical inquiry. The systematic investigations of the philosopher demand that problems be not merely addressed, but sorted out and satisfactorily explained.

The tug that seems to bedevil the project of Richards, Ogden, and Wood is merely the

familiar paradox of relativism, that ‘any serious attempt at establishing a relativity turns out to establish an absolute’ (ARG 213). Empson’s thinking about the problem is nonetheless undercut to some extent by a more problematic tension between the rival claims of relativism and pluralism. He once wrote that ‘the bottom, to quote one of Mr Eliot’s solemn thoughts, is a great way down’ (ARG 76); he may have been motivated here by the perception that conflicts between theories only arise when they fail to ‘go all the way’:

This does seem to me the deepest truth about the matter. [...] There is the same position about a moral or ethical theory; however firm your belief in it, however definite its ruling on a particular case, you still have to see whether your feelings can be brought to accept the results in that case. If they can’t, well, you may be wrong; but if it gets too bad, you have to give up the theory. All the same, there is clearly a need for such theories; for one thing, without a tolerable supply of handy generalizations, you can’t stretch your mind to see all round a particular case. And the theory alters the feelings no less than the feelings alter the theory. (ARG 104)

Yet Empson remains confident that ‘[i]t may be that the human mind can recognize actually incommensurable values, and that the chief human value is to stand up between them; but I do not see how we could know that they were incommensurable till the calculation had been attempted’ (ARG 83), thus maintaining his faith in the possibility of a non-relativist adjudication of values.

In claiming furthermore that the best theory is perhaps one that ‘frees the individual to use his own taste and judgement’ (ARG 214), and that ‘after you have been faced with the variety of aesthetic theories you are less likely to have your judgement distorted by any one of them’ (ARG 214), Empson was keen to warn against the reductive strictures of theories. Even his statements on the ethical rewards to be gained from reading imaginative literature imply a hovering between the two poles of relativism and non-relativism. In 1973, he wrote that the ‘main purpose of reading literature is to grasp a wide variety of experience, imagining people with codes and customs very unlike our own; and it cannot be done except in a Benthamite manner, that is, by thinking, “How would such a code or custom work out?”’ (ARG 49-50). This wavers between relativism and non-relativism since encounters with cultural difference are inherently valuable, though there is a hint of the possibility that a true, trans-ideological evaluation can be established.

Commenting on the theoretical framework of *Complex Words*, he warned that ‘we must not develop tender feelings towards our little bits of machinery; they need to be kept sharply separate from the delicacy and warmth of the actual cases they are to be used on...there might really be a harmful effect from using this kind of analysis if the two things were liable to get mixed up’ (CW 19). What all this suggests is that it ‘is not even clear that you want a theory, because its findings must always be subject to the judgment of taste’ (ARG 54). Discussing the implications of any aesthetic theory for our everyday commonsense habits of reading, he remarked that the ‘thing becomes disagreeable to read, and also likely to excite suspicion, quite rightly I think, because the only way to decide about the examples is by “taste” (granting that taste needs a good supply of examples and an adequate assurance that contrary ones have not been suppressed), and if you are being badgered by theory at the same time it is hard to keep taste in focus’ (AG 55).

Empson’s dilemma is partially the result of his perception of the conflict between the need to establish some standard of judgment and his reluctance to grant any one (ethical or aesthetic) theory a privileged status. In the first appendix of *Complex Words*:

...I do not see how a man can claim to know that a general ethical theory is true without claiming to have experienced all possible moral situations. But I think something can be said to make more definite the idea of a correspondence between a moral feeling and the universe or the outer world. It seems to be based on a sort of biological claim, that each kind of feeling of which a creature is capable must have a natural rudiment, and that the rudiment at least cannot be a mere delusion. (CW 418)

Thus, while Empson offers a non-relativism of human universality rooted in biology, he simultaneously disparages any general theory of morals.

Nevertheless, Empson had no objection, in principle, to a belief in universals or absolutes. His only fear, and one that he entertained throughout his entire career, was that an over-zealous commitment to such absolutes might provide a breeding ground for dogmatic rulings of socio-political conduct or intellectual practice. Writing in 1949, he remarked:

twenty years ago we were too frightened of absolutes, because of a confusion with politics which even the most abstract mind can hardly escape. To believe in an absolute goodness or beauty does no political harm, so long as you don’t believe that you yourself have got a secret ticket into its bedroom which you can put up for sale. As soon as a body of priests or commissars or what not is organized (as has been done

so often), on the specific basis of claiming that each such official has been issued with the secret key – there you have got something to worry about. (ARG 212-213)

But such caution is not so much concerned with ruling out the possibility or the desirability of absolutes, but rather with warning us about their use, their practical application and socio-political consequences, for ‘once these two ideas are separated there is no reason, I think, to be shocked by the idea of an absolute Goodness or Beauty, which mankind can in varying degrees approach but must not claim to have attained’ (ARG 212-213). In aesthetics then, ‘a theorist on Beauty who tries to approach it is merely doing his job’ (ARG 213). The driving motivation behind Empson’s qualified defense of an inquiry into absolutes is the idea that belief in the truth (about art, beauty, morality, or whatever) on the one hand must have a close connection with a humble respect for practical success. Thus it is that ‘to forward any theory, however, modestly, is to suggest that it is true and therefore presumably “absolute”. No doubt it is good manners and good tactics to keep your claims moderate, and then you can also set out to give a survey of what everyone else has said, and even claim this gives you a basis on which any later attempt to reach an absolute must build. But you could not well combine this with a claim that you had refuted all Absolutist theories’ (ARG 212-213). The sole test of a theory can thus only be its practical results and consequences, its role in the primary business of ‘making sense’, its contribution to a more refined understanding and appreciation of texts.

Empson was thus quite explicit about putting theories and philosophies to the test of practice. Every theory should help in freeing our mind from cant and helping us to enjoy and appreciate the variety of beliefs and values in life and literature. But his emphasis on the ethical rewards gained from encountering a plurality of different beliefs, codes or customs in the reading of imaginative literature comes along with the claims for the universal ‘rudiment’, the eventual wisdom of taste, the correspondence between moral feeling and the universe, all variants of his basic need for a machinery capable of reconciling the variety of judgements which the pastoral critic as teacher is faced with. At roughly the same time as *Complex Words*, Empson can be found making highly relativistic pronouncements. In 1950, he opined that ‘[t]here is a tendency to feel that, if the critic is offering a really efficient machine, it

ought to be able to say whether marmalade is better than sausages; but even the most expert cook cannot say that; sometimes you want one, sometimes the other' (ARG 106). This tension will be explored at greater length in later chapters.

## VII. Conclusion: Some Notes on Irony and Truth in 'Tom Jones'

In his essay '*Tom Jones*', Empson argued that '...modern critics, whether as a result of the neo-Christian movement or what not, have become oddly resistant to admitting that there is more than one code of morals in the world, whereas the central purpose of reading imaginative literature is to accustom yourself to this basic fact' (UB 142). Empson thus portrays Fielding as putting across 'a relativistic idea' in *Tom Jones*, adding that Fielding 'does not find relativism alarming, because he feels that to understand codes other than your own is likely to make your judgements better' (UB 142). For *Tom Jones* is well-suited to Empson's pluralistic interests and biases. 'The style of Fielding is a habitual double irony', deriving from the reader's sense that Tom Jones's behaviour has Fielding's covert support despite the book's 'firm assertions that Tom is doing wrong', because Fielding is really manoeuvring for support from both Tom's advocates and his detractors. From this perspective the 'secret message' of *Tom Jones* is that 'if good by nature, you can imagine other people's feelings so directly that you have an impulse to act on them as if they were your own; and this is the source of your greatest pleasures as well as of your only genuinely unselfish actions'. And yet in reading the novel critics have, in Empson's view, all too often failed to confront the multi-directional complexity implied by Fielding's use of honour, and have consequently missed out on what makes the novel such an engaging and rewarding text, since 'the whole interest of the survey of ideas of honour is that different characters hold such different ones; no wonder critics who do not realize this find the repetition of the word tedious' (UB 141).

For it is not merely the 'ruling class code of honour' that interests Fielding, but the plurality of ethical codes that the idea of honour can be employed to cover. Thus: 'having taken into his [i.e. Fielding's] head that he is a moral theorist, he has enough intelligence to be interested by the variety of moral codes in the society that surrounds him' (UB 141). Empson

liked *Tom Jones* precisely because Fielding could judge character as a magistrate, as a man well capable of assessing the wide range of human motives and intentions, as well as their merits and limitations. This pluralistic ethos is dramatically reflected in the basic operative procedures of double irony in *Tom Jones*:

Single irony presumes a censor; the ironist (A) is fooling a tyrant (B) while appealing to the judgement of a person addressed (C). For double irony A shows both B and C that he understands both their positions; B can no longer forbid direct utterance; but I think can always be picked out as holding the more official or straight-faced belief. In real life this is easier than single irony (because people aren't such fools as you think), so that we do not always recognize its logical structure. Presumably A hopes that each of B and C will think 'He is secretly on my side, and only pretends to sympathize with the other'; but A may hold some wise balanced position between them, or contrariwise may be feeling 'a plague on both your houses'. The trick is liable to be unpopular, and perhaps literary critics despise its evasiveness, so that when they talk about irony they generally seem to mean something else; but a moderate amount of it is felt to be balanced and unfussy. The definition may seem too narrow but if you generalise the term to cover almost any complex state of mind it ceases to be useful. I do not want to make large claims for 'double irony'; but rather to narrow it down enough to show why it is peculiarly fitted for *Tom Jones*. (UB 132-3)

Thus, in engaging with the ethiccity – the impulse of mutuality – of Fielding's use of double irony, we imagine 'a person fit to sit on the bench as a magistrate, [one who] needs to know all about the people he is to judge; indeed, the unusual thing about Fielding as a novelist is that he is always ready to consider what he would do if one of his characters came before him on the bench' (UB 157). Empson's meditations on irony are partly designed as a celebration of the novel's hearty pluralism; but they are also concessions that the ironist must at last not know all the answers to the questions he is asking. Irony thus becomes not poise or mastery but the deepest kind of doubt, a recognition that we may not know the whole truth, that there may indeed be no transcendent truths. While double irony may be useful as a form of 'protection against rival moralists', its most valuable function 'is to express the balance of their judgement', 'to express imaginative sympathy for two codes at once': 'the value of the state of mind which finds double irony natural is that it combines breadth of sympathy with energy of judgement, it can keep its balance among all the materials for judging' (P 57). I will argue in the following chapters that Empson himself attempted to foster a similar kind of balance in his own criticism, 'balanced' as it appears to be between unimpeded expressive



autonomy and the constraints of psychological, ideological and social determinants, between, indeed, two (or more) critical 'codes'. I will thus tentatively delineate some of the strains or constraints inherent in Empson's encounters with texts and critical audiences and in his dealings with the forces that dissolve the myth of complete, authentic, unimpeded communication between rational beings.



## Chapter 3

### Analysis: Reach and Limits

#### I. Introduction

Chapter two argued that Empson's critical theory relentlessly pursued the rational conditions of critical dialogue in order to foster a democratic forum of critical debate. Reason, for Empson, was something we all share in, and any criticism that claimed to reach out to the 'ordinary' or 'tolerably fit' reader had better proceed on the basis of this faith rather than any assumption about the cultural or theoretical sophistication of its audience. His ambition to provide the reader with 'the general assurance which comes of a belief that all sorts of poetry may be conceived of as explicable' (ST 25) was driven by a faith in the analysability and translatability of textual phenomena:

the business of analysis is to progress from poetical to prosaic, from intuitive to intellectual, knowledge...to put the object known into a field of similar objects in some order so that it has some degree of balance and safety; you may know several ways of getting to the thing; other things like it but different. Enough of its ingredients and the way they are put together to retain control over the situation. (ST 278)

The assumption behind this faith was a belief in the sovereignty of the rational subject. A subject's rationality can be overpowered, but the fact of its rationality cannot be denied. While this faith may assume a belief in an essentialist conception of man as a rational animal and may thus limit the appeal of Empson's work for those who champion the postmodern dissolution of the subject, it is important to see how this faith is indeed just that: it is the product of a conscious, reasoned decision on Empson's part to view the mind as essentially rational and sane, as something capable of self-knowledge and self-understanding. Fry notes that 'Empson normally respects what many would now call the "essentialist" category of the "human", defining "man" categorically as a rational animal who is always slandered by any imputation of inability to act decently (this is an Empson keyword) – and what matters most to him always therefore seems unattached to time or place, the effects of which he is apt to

minimize<sup>67</sup>. There is much truth in this view of Empson's humanistic essentialism, but it is important to understand how Empson arrived at this faith, as well as the role that his more particular conception of rational agency plays in his critical theory generally. This chapter will thus focus on whatever may appear to limit the scope of discursively-articulated rational analysis from an Empsonian perspective.

Empson's interest in the forces that limit the expressive authenticity and agency of the human mind, as well as in the critical theories that deny the existence or accessibility of intentions, was not merely, nor indeed primarily, an abstract theoretical concern. Rather, it was a matter of the most urgent practical and ethical importance, since it raised for Empson a number of problems for his own cherished faith in the ultimate rationality of the human mind. That he remained uncertain about the implications of subjective, psychological or deterministic forces for the reach of rational agency and analysis will be seen as a tension that owes more to his willingness to concede the limiting commitments of his rationalist choices than to any actual philosophical inconsistency. I will nonetheless argue that Empson's concessions to the limits of theory and analysis, to the forces that limit our capacity, as rational agents, for autonomous, unimpeded communication, to that which cannot be articulated in language or that simply exceeds the expressive power of language as an adequate means of expressing the full depth and complexity of human experience, are indeed significant enough to pose some serious problems for the idea of Empsonian rationalism more generally. However, before delineating some of the limits of this faith in rational agency, it is important to outline some of the principles upon which the faith can be seen to rest.

## **II. The Commitments of Empsonian Rationalism**

The theoretical Empsonian subject can think and act for reasons that we can understand and articulate, and so she is not assumed to be driven blindly by indefinable forces produced by the determining factors generating ideologies. Hence his belief, for example, that 'the independent mind, the feeling that it is worth while to use one's own reason, that one has a

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<sup>67</sup> Fry, Paul. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 12.

fair chance of seeing the thing for oneself apart from tradition, fashion or caprice, is developed by a process of learning that makes you feel able to understand the things you may have to judge and the world at large' (ARG 94). The human mind can understand and articulate the reasons why we think and act the way we do; we are not altogether determined by ideologies, though such articulation might involve a difficult (because hypothetical) reconstruction of those factors that contribute to the shaping of an individual's opinions and actions. Thus '[w]e can none of us be sure how we first arrived at our opinions, and can only test whether we have adequate grounds for them now' (ARG 479). This was the basis of his principled resistance to relativism, which construes human activity as being the result of inescapable forces that explicit beliefs and theories merely attempt to rationalize. Hence also his arguments against determinism; though determinism is not necessarily false, we neither speak nor think as if it could be true. While a certain conception of determinism may thus be partially true, we do not speak as if it were true, and a conception of the world based on an unqualified belief in determinism is difficult to imagine.

Empson's sturdy faith in the resilience of reason, and his stubborn refusal to accept the defeat of intelligence implied by the Symbolist 'revolt against reason' – a blind reaction against realism, a cultivation of symbolism, aestheticism, formalism, imagism, the text burning with the gem-like flame uncontaminated by the world – are the political commitments of this faith in rational verbal articulation. Reactions against this faith suggested to Empson, in his important essay 'Rhythm and Imagery in English Poetry' (1961), that the 'the residual legatee of all the anti-intellectual movements has been simple old fundamentalism, with a strong flavour of political conformity' (ARG 164). Thus, the 'great delusion' of imagism is charged with playing a key role in the 'revolt against reason'. Connected to this is the use made of the term 'imagination' in aesthetic theory and the care with which words related to it ought to be used: 'the great word "Imagination" is from the same root, and there must be some good uses for such words, but it is a misfortune that aestheticians refuse to outgrow a stage of thought which can only be recognized as inevitable for primitive man. Or, to make the complaint as small as possible, the people who give

'Images' a high specialized meaning need to be more aware of the delusions caused by the ordinary meaning' (ARG 160). There is thus an explicit ethical and socio-political dimension to his defence of the power and resilience of reason and rationality.

In his review of Joseph Needham's *The Sceptical Biologist*, Empson offered a brief meditation on the endemic parochialism of Western philosophical dilemmas, and its seemingly obsessive attachment to one particular dilemma:

The European mind has kept on getting itself hag-ridden by philosophical dilemmas...and the chief dilemma is this: either the universe is merely a fortuitous concourse of atoms, or else the atoms...only do what was ordered by a man-like lawgiver, who is God; in either case our minds cannot be expected to do what we want of them...It feels wonderful to Dr. Needham (instead of invincibly stupid) to see how the Chinese mind habitually winced away...from the belief that there had to be a personal lawgiver before the Laws of Nature, at all their levels, could exist, with at their summit the Natural Law of man. (ARG 597)

He concluded that 'the line of thought which [this book] suggests is the only one offering a future to mankind' (ARG 598)<sup>68</sup>. In *Some Versions*, Empson remarked of the implications of Marxism for the individual's autonomy that the 'belief that a man's ideas are wholly the product of his economic setting is of course as fatuous as the belief that they are wholly independent of it' (P 19). Thus it 'may be that men always go in droves, and that all versions of the claim to individualism are largely bogus; but that gives the reason why the prop of individualist theory is needed' (P 22). Once the rational subject had recognized and accepted this fact, she could stake a claim to a relative degree of freedom in the course of shaping her own beliefs and actions. As he put it in the notes published along with one poem: 'Our earth

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<sup>68</sup> What Empson was thus keen to emphasize in his brief remarks on Needham was that the scientific ideal was not compatible with a necessary belief in autonomy or freewill – the desired object of vitalism. Thus: 'Science is a closed system of pointer-readings about what is measurable; it is built up by assuming that individuals can be regarded as members of classes, that conditions are repeatable, and that induction is valid. It is a product of the mind; a product, too, of the universe which allows it to yield results; and cannot make final statements about either. There should, then, be some mode of thinking other than the scientific one, but to mix the two will only confuse both. Thus, vitalism, in so far as it denies necessity within the organism, must recede before a scientific advance such as it would desire; in so far as it introduces purpose among other causes, it has introduced something not conceived as measurable, and is therefore incapable of fitting it into the scientific scheme. Mr Needham is indefinite about the other modes of thought; they include the apprehension of beauty, the acceptance of one's apparent power of choice, and the practice of a religion after rejecting its verifiable dogmas. He admits that true beliefs may destroy one's power to act rightly, and is concerned to show, in the case of determinism, that this might be avoided as a matter of philosophy, rather than avoided as a matter of psychology. On the face of it the belief "science and religion are equally subjective" (p. 261) drains a lot of sap out of both of them'. (ARG 528-529)

without a god's name is compared to some body of people (absurd to say the "present generation") without fundamental beliefs as a basis for action' (CP 252). For Empson there clearly was a need to act, and to do so with a strong sense of one's responsibilities as a moral agent in a deterministic universe. We shall see in due course, here and in chapter five, that Empson was more interested in how we deal pragmatically with determinism than in merely stating the fact of its existence. For Empson never really departed from the pragmatism that informed his response to Sparrow's attack on Richards's grapplings with beauty:

Surely everybody who talks about these matters nowadays has heard of the problems about verbal fictions, and the philosophy of *As If*? The prime intellectual difficulty of our age is that true beliefs may make it impossible to act rightly; that we cannot think without verbal fictions; that they must not be taken for true beliefs, and yet must be taken seriously; that it is essential to accept it unanalysed; essential to believe that the universe is deterministic; essential to act as if it was not. (ARG 198)

Or as he put elsewhere:

Scientific research is an activity of the human spirit, and must be accepted like any other. If you are using the scientific method, you must assume that determinism can always be applied to the matter in hand; if however you are not using the scientific method (for instance, if you are deciding not to use it), then you must assume that determinism does not apply to the matter in hand. These actions are not conflicting but complementary, and the distinction between them is one of method, not of subject matter. From another point of view, if the organism shows purpose in fitting its environment, so does the environment show purpose in being such as can sustain an organism; the first form of purpose is no more within the field of science than the second. All things are alike determined, all things are alike free. (ARG 528)

Empson probably learnt about the value of the concept of 'verbal fictions' from Hans Vaihinger's *Die Philosophie des Als-Ob* (1922), a book mentioned in translation – *Philosophy of As If* – in *Complex Words* (CW 423), and also implied, as we have just seen, in his run-in with Sparrow. He may also have learnt about it via Richards from Bentham's *Theory of Fictions*. Certain ideas or arguments, though they cannot be proven, or notwithstanding their undoubted fictitiousness, may serve as regulative ideas; we act as if they were true. We may not always be able to differentiate between a fiction and a hypothesis, but while a hypothesis – such as the deterministic nature of the universe – is in principle capable of being confirmed and may thus lose that status if found to be true, a fiction can never be confirmed. Indeed, it may not need confirming or disproving, since we may happen to know that it is just that – a fiction. Its validation comes in being justified. So the fiction that we must act as if the

universe were not deterministic is justified by the moral attitudes and actions that result from that belief.

In Fry's view, the 'passage from Empson's run-in with Sparrow cannot be considered "Nietzschean", and so is not quite anticipatory of the gay scientism marking literary theory in the 1970s':

First, as a running counter-logic to the sceptical sense of the passage, there is deep-seated belief in belief: not the cynical view that we cannot help but believe, but a melioristic trust that belief is 'essential'...And second, there is the willingness forthrightly to express unresolved contradictions without knowingly putting them 'under erasure'. In this case there is an open and palpable contradiction between holding pernicious true beliefs (one feels a natural hesitation in trying to guess what such beliefs might be) and never mistaking the verbal fictions with which one necessarily thinks for true beliefs. Thus you both know and do not know that you have true beliefs.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to his resistance to determinism, Empson was also keen to stand up against the Romantic exaltation of inexpressible states of mind, the ineffable privileged, for example, in the aesthetics of Symbolism:

During the chapter on Symbolism, the sun bursts for a moment through the clouds. After pointing out that the French never really had any Symbolist theory, only a determination to express what could not be expressed, Professor Hough tells us that later criticism – and he reports only from the English, not the French – has sometimes succeeded in explaining how these apparently ineffable communications were achieved. Naturally I find this cheerful, as I am listed among those who sometimes did it. But the chapter ends in gloom, reflecting that these explainers may only have created an inferior imitation of the same inexplicable thing. Come now, there are many things we do not have to explain in ordinary practice. A person engaged in the large profession of Eng. Lit. is expected to be able to make the 'magic' of a poem available to many people who could not otherwise have experienced it; if we can agree on ways of doing this, the mystery is no longer particularly oppressive. (ARG 176)

Empson's poet is not the heroic or prophetic demi-god of Romanticism, and so Empson the critic cannot claim to discover the sole truth, and nothing but the truth, of the poet's special insight or prophecy. Empson frequently insisted that a work of art may mean more than the individual writer knew or intended. In fact he gave more than just a nodding glance to his own acknowledged 'masters of suspicion', writing in 'Rhythm and Imagery':

This is the first century which has tried to appreciate all the art works that ever were, anywhere, and combining this with the first effects of universal education, let alone a variety of revaluations of opinion, was bound to produce a kind of traffic jam. The

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<sup>69</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice*, London: Routledge 1991, 15.

artist was free to an extent which he often found baffling, and so was the critic. Four major thinkers, Darwin, Marx, Frazer, and Freud, gave grounds for the belief that the artist often does not know what he is doing. Darwin, for one reason, because the artist will always be exemplifying a stage in an evolutionary trend (one could extract others here), Marx because his mind will be hag-ridden by a group memory or human sacrifice, and Freud because he will be expressing his own unconscious desires; clearly he had better do what he feels like, and the critic had better say what he likes, he also, in his turn. An interpreter of the art work cannot set out to bring all this to consciousness, where it does not naturally belong; his main function must be to mediate between the unconsciousness of the artist and the public he works for. When I was young I did not mind this, but I find now I have become one of the old buffers who were always made fretful by it. I think that modern art has gone too far, and that aesthetics ought to curb and prune it; and that aesthetics ought to be curbed and pruned too. (ARG 147)

The preservation of this belief in explicability and relative expressive autonomy was important to Empson because the twin ideas of argufying and relative interpretive charity imply a loosely-articulated 'principle of humanity'. Interpretation for Empson rests upon the humanist-rationalist belief that the human mind, is essentially 'sane', despite the inevitable conflicts and contradictions that it is forced to negotiate. As Eagleton puts:

to interpret is to make as large-minded, generous allowance as one can for the way a particular mind, however self-broodingly idiosyncratic, is striving to work through and encompass its own conflicts, which can never be wholly inscrutable precisely because they inhere in a public intelligibility. Empson's critical project is thus not the aridly apolitical enterprise that the New Critics thought possible, but is itself a political position, inscribed by a whole range of militantly humanistic beliefs – a trust in the intelligibility and sense-making capacities of the mind even at its most divided, a dogged refusal of symbolic mystifications, a recognition of conflicts and indeterminacies.<sup>70</sup>

There is thus a distinctly normative dimension to Empson's flexibly-articulated principle of humanity, suggesting as it does that we regulate our procedures of communication and interpretation by maximising the extent to which we see the subject as humanly reasonable, rather than the extent to which we see her as right. From this perspective the text is seen as the end of a complex intentional activity with diverse (more or less consciously realised) motivating factors that are more or less amenable to rational understanding. Language is a public extension of the rational mind, and in reading and interpreting literary manifestations of it we need to make the author's views as coherent and cogent as reasonably possible by our

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<sup>70</sup> Eagleton Terry. 'The Critic as Clown', in *Against the Grain: Selected Essays*, New Left Books, 1986; third impression, London and New York: Verso, 1991, 149-165, p. 159.



own lights.

In this respect there are clear resonances with Habermas's concession to those social and linguistic forces that may impede or limit the desire for rational communication, and yet this is not enough to rule out the redemptive prospect of an 'ideal speech-situation' where such obstacles would no longer work their mischief and language would achieve at least the possibility of a working rational consensus. There is however, as Norris has noted, a crucial point on which Empson and Habermas part company. For Empson's principle of humanity would commit him to the view that such a principle extends to literary language rather than applying only to those discourses where truth is more obviously in question. As Norris writes:

[I]t is Empson's belief that any too-willing acquiescence in poetry's power to insinuate paradoxes, straightforward falsehoods or 'profound' pseudo-truths may itself give rise to serious distortions in our dealing with language in its everyday uses. Thus for Empson – unlike Habermas – there is no question of fencing poetry off in some privileged domain of 'aesthetic' truth or where the standard requirements simply do not apply. On the contrary, he argues, any adequate reading of a poem will make every effort to explicate its sense in rationally accountable terms. Only then – at the point of ultimate resistance – will the critic have to recognize that there may indeed be structures of meaning that elude his or her logical grasp, though not because they somehow embody a wisdom (or an order of 'paradoxical' truth) that shows up the inherent limitations of rational thought as applied to poetic language. For if this were the case then one would have no choice but to regard poetry – and the best poetry at that – as belonging to a realm of 'aesthetic' value where questions of truth and falsehood were simply irrelevant.<sup>71</sup>

Empson thus remained highly optimistic about the powers of rational human understanding and much concerned to emphasize the importance of fostering human welfare and dignity. There is an obvious sense in which this seemingly unerring faith in the possibility of the autonomous, self-conscious, rational, autonomous self is incontestably at odds with the postmodernist insistence on the inevitably fragmented, splintered, historically conditioned nature of personality and motivation characteristic of postmodernist orthodoxy.

### III. Acknowledged Reminders

For it is clear that at least in principle Empson was keen to defend the rational mind, as well as the rationally accountable character of meaning. This meant resisting any imputation of

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<sup>71</sup> Norris, Christopher. 'For Truth in Criticism: William Empson and the Claims of Theory', in Norris, Christopher. *The Truth about Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, 168-169.

weakness or irrationalism to the human mind, and articulating the apparent remainder of psychological or ideological determinism in rationally-accountable and publicly-intelligible terms. Nonetheless, there are throughout the Empson corpus many concessions to the remainder that is beyond reach of analysis. In a letter to Julian Trevelyan in 1930, Empson made this double-edged comment on his interest in critical analysis: 'Myself, of course, I am in favour of being chatty and explaining everything, but that is undergraduate of me. Once you begin to parley with the reasons for the impossibility of explanations you are whirled o'er the backside of the world far off' (SL 20). Indeed, it is precisely the extent to which Empsonian criticism may sometimes have been compelled, or willing, to be 'whirled o'er the backside of the world far off', that the remaining pages of this chapter will now consider.

It is important to recognise first of all that Empson made frequent and fairly explicit concessions to the limits of rational analysis. In a double review of Richards's *Speculative Instruments* and a selection of critical essays edited by John Wain, he remarked: 'The epilogue of Mr G.S. Fraser, "On the Interpretation of a Difficult Poem", gives some sensible warnings, especially that even an analytical critic must always be prepared to say, "This is good, but I don't know why"' (ARG 140). Likewise, in a review of Constantine Fitzgibbon's study of Dylan Thomas (*The Life of Dylan Thomas*), Empson noted: 'There seems to be a growing irritation with his poetry, caused by a belief that it is a hoax, not really meaning anything. A great deal of it, I confess, I have never cracked, and when people make sense of it I feel: "This is not enough"' (ARG 405). And in a review of A.E. Housman's *More Poems*, he conceded that 'it is a fishy game, to play the amateur of tragedy. A thing like the stinging nettle poem is splendid verse, therefore not fishy, but you would have to talk for a long time to give an adequate account of why not' (ARG 419).

Empson was thus quite prepared to concede that analysis could not always 'go all the way' – that rational analysis could be limited by inhibiting factors whose implications even the analytical critic, with all the tools of modernity at his disposal, could not even begin to fathom. One such factor is the element of intuition in critical response – an ineffable, indefinable mode of understanding:

[i]f intuition, in the sense of arriving rapidly at a judgement without conscious process, is to be made part of 'intelligence', the nature of whose division from the other parts can only be made clear by further understanding of the problem of consciousness [...] then, pending such understanding, there does not seem much to say. (ST 34)

In *Seven Types*, there is already the suggestion that the mode of apprehension of poetry is not fully available to analysis, for after all 'whenever a receiver of poetry is seriously moved by an apparently simple line, what are moving him are the traces of a great part of his past experience and of the structure of his past judgements' (ST 16). The act of appreciation is founded on an appeal to highly complex layers of unconscious knowledge that are necessarily involved in the apprehension of the poem as poem such that 'there is always in great poetry a feeling of generalisation from a case which has been presented definitely; there is always an appeal to a background of human experience which is all the more present when it cannot be named. I do not have to deny that the narrower chisel may cut deeply into the heart' (ST 16). This is also likely to have been the basis of his response to one of his critics in the *Kenyon Review* in 1949 who had claimed that Empson wanted a scientific proof for everything: 'He wants to keep the whole range of poetry open to analysis... [whereas] I feel that there is a great deal of poetry that he wouldn't care to explicate...It can hardly be considered scientific to try to explain scientifically what we do not know scientifically' (ARG 179). Empson's response was to

assure him that I habitually believe things without scientific proof or any completion of a verbal analysis, and that I think other people had much better do the same. We have to pick up a sense of the world as best we can; but there are danger-points in this process which need to be isolated. Perhaps the most obvious comes in the almost neurotic form 'because my opinions were arrived at by intuition I can ignore any future evidence'. I may be wrong in thinking that the subject can be taped down at all tidily, but otherwise I don't think Mr Smith and I really disagree...My convictions about Dr Leavis (a state of mind on the whole greatly in his favour) are an 'intuition', built up of a rather long experience almost every detail of which I have totally forgotten. This of course illustrates how an ordinary practical judgment is built out of things not at all in reach of 'verbal analysis' (and by the way I have not yet seen evidence to think this one wrong). All I would want to say is that the feelings you get out of a printed text *are* likely to be in reach of verbal analysis, and had better be so regarded. (ARG 180)

The point of Empson's concessions to the limits of analysis and theory in *Seven Types* is partly that if the poem does indeed resist our best efforts of analytical inquiry, the only appeal

may indeed be to intuition, though rational justification remains the sole basis for genuine critical dialogue. For although his analytical method is designed to steer a middle course between appreciation and analysis, thus acknowledging that intuition contributes to analytical understanding, still the complex process of understanding will remain a mystery.

While the nature of 'intuition' may by definition remain beyond our powers of understanding as they stand at present, there are frequent concessions to the critical insights arrived through a process that could only be described as 'intuitive'. Thus:

I have continually employed a method of analysis which jumps the gap between two ways of thinking; which produces a possible set of alternative meanings with some ingenuity and then says it is grasped in the preconsciousness of the reader by a native effort of the mind. This must seem very dubious; but then the facts about the apprehension of poetry are in any case very extraordinary. Such an assumption is best observed by the way it works in detail. (ST 239)

There is a sense in which the concluding chapter of *Seven Types* reveals Empson's willingness to acknowledge the weight of the case *against* critical analysis: 'many works of art give their public a sort of relief and strength, because they are independent of the moral code which their public accepts and is dependent on; relief, by fantasy gratification; strength, because it gives you a sort of equilibrium within your boundaries to have been taken outside them, however secretly, because you know your own boundaries better when you have seen them from both sides' (ST 284). He then goes on to remark that '[s]uch works give a valuable experience, and such a public cannot afford to have them analysed...Under these rather special circumstances one should try to prevent people from having to analyse their reactions, with all the tact at one's disposal nor are they so special as might appear. The object of life, after all, is not to understand things, but to maintain one's defences and equilibrium and live as well as one can; it is not only maiden aunts who are placed like this' (ST 247). Certainly the exercise of tact is in one sense difficult to reconcile with the apparent violation of tact that inevitably occurs when the analyst sets out to explicate the detail of an ambiguous word, phrase or concept, and the identification of a possible delicacy of effect, intrinsic to the printed page, is thus balanced by the concomitant desire for fantasy and equilibrium.

*Seven Types* is thus shot through with intuitive judgements; in the preface to the

second edition (1947), Empson describes his analytical method as a means of understanding such responses:

I felt sure that [an] example was beautiful and that I had, broadly speaking, reacted to it correctly. But I did not at all know what had happened in this 'reaction'; I did not know why the example was beautiful. And it seemed to me that I was able in some cases partly to explain my feelings to myself by teasing out the meanings of the text. (ST x)

But there may also be other cases where 'teasing out the meanings of the text' analytically may not always prove to be the best way of appreciating the beauty of an example. As Alpers has written, '[f]or most critics, descendants of Coleridge, completeness of understanding is of the essence of imaginative apprehension. For Empson, critical analysis is simply a human aid like any other – one that is sometimes inimical to aesthetic experience'.<sup>72</sup>

Empson's willingness to concede the impossibility of such completeness of understanding is reflected in his concessions to the limits of linguistic analysis, concessions which have more to do with the rationalist spirit of *Complex Words*. Responding to Richards's invitation to take part in his project of Multiple Definition, Empson made these observations on the limits of analysis:

I suspect that many important philosophical words get their usefulness, not from a mere ambiguity, but from being like an unattainable limit, or like a continuous scale that can be pivoted at any required point. The process of analysis, in some such cases, cannot be finished, can only be carried to the degree that is needed for some purpose. So that the philosophical point of view, which claims to be independent of 'practical' purpose, necessarily cannot conduct an analysis of them. (SL 34)

Furthermore:

It is no use thinking that the philosophers were wrong to be ambiguous, that the comparative and analytical method is going to clear things up simply by avoiding ambiguity. Even when there is one complex of meaning it is unwise to assume that any linguistic machinery is going to supersede what has been found, first by generations of use, then by the mind of the philosopher, to the most effective one. One has some hope of showing by these methods how words have been used, but not till a much later stage, at any rate, how they ought to be used. (SL 34)

So for Empson, '[t]he moral is that one shouldn't try to analyse such words but that one should try to analyse them as far as is useful and then show how much has been left (in any particular case) to be absorbed unanalysed, as the word itself was in the original example' (SL

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<sup>72</sup> Alpers, Paul. 'Empson on Pastoral', *New Literary History*, Volume 10 (1978-1979), 56.

34-35). This is why analysts need to be on their 'guard...against the scientific attitude to truth, the idea that the mind is outside the universe and, otherwise passive, collects propositions about':

Any attempt to survey language is a little of this sort; some of the philosophers whose language is being surveyed would say that one was applying the scientific method to a suprascientific use of language. And the notion of 'openmindedness' involved is a difficult one; in trying not to take any one metaphysical view one is liable to fall into a materialist view and think of it as commonsense. In doing such work one would be saying what has often been said already, so as to bring into play new machinery; and the main thing would be to keep in mind what you were doing it *for*. (SL 35)

There is a similar tension for Empson between theory and sensibility (or feeling), whether in the domain of ethics or literary aesthetics ('[t]here is the same position about a moral or ethical theory', (AG 104)). The question raised by this particular tension is to know just to what extent it is possible, as Empson wants it to be, to see all round a case. After all,

however firm your belief in [a theory], and however definite its ruling on a particular case, you still have to see whether your feelings can be brought to accept the results in that case. If they can't, well, you may be wrong, but if it gets too bad, you have to give up the theory. All the same, there is clearly a need for such theories; for one thing, without a tolerable supply of handy generalisations you can't stretch your mind to see all round a particular case. And the theory alters the feelings no less than the feelings alter the theory. (ARG 104)

This reflects the tension between theory and sensibility first expressed in the final chapter of *Seven Types*:

[O]ne often finds the surrealist type of critic saying that poetry would have been just the same if criticism had never been written. So Pope, for instance, would have written just the same if he had had no critical dogmas. Now it is unwise to say blankly that a theorist is talking nonsense (for instance, it is no use saying that all men are *not* equal) because he may consciously be making a paradox to imply a larger truth; thus, even here, there would be a little truth in saying that Pope could afford to forget his dogmas, so deeply had they become part of his sensibility. And certainly one is faced with the problem about the hen and the egg; the dogma produces the sensibility, but it must itself have been produced by it. But to say that the dogma does not influence the sensibility is absurd. People only say it when they are trying to put the sensibility in a peculiar state of control over the dogma. The conflict between the scientific and the aesthetic points of view, between which I have been trying to arbitrate, gives them a reason; people feel uncertain as to what sort of validity a critical dogma can have, how far one ought to be trying to be independent of one's age. (ST 292-293)

Taken together, these tensions raise the question as to what extent Empson believed his own (and other) critical statements to be theory-laden: did they only make sense in the light of a set of theoretical principles? Did he believe that all statements are theory-laden, and none has

the status attributed by the logical positivists to basic or protocol statements, of giving a theoretically innocent report of unvarnished experience? Such concessions reflect a more profound ambivalence concerning the various kinds of resistance, as well as the different varieties of unarticulated remainder, that complicate any defence of Empsonian rationalism. Empson wanted to make our tastes available for articulated critique, and thought that this required a theoretical machinery of sorts: 'it is an excellent thing for people to discuss their differences of taste, and they need machinery to do it with, but it is hard to feel that an adequate theory of literary criticism, if obtained, would be much more than a device for stopping inadequate theories from getting in your way' (ARG 100). But how can a meta-theory of this kind be possible? In other words, is Empson's faith in autonomy, well represented in this passage, best served by ridding itself of theory altogether? The answer to this question, as we shall see, will involve a consideration of Empson's dealings with that which contributes – indeed, determines – the shaping of individual taste. And this will help to evaluate the fairness of MacCabe's complaint that what limits the appeal of Empson's criticism for more recent theory is precisely an unfortunate gap between theory and practice:

Empson brilliantly dissolves words and syntax into the discourses in which they figure, but like his Cambridge mentor I.A. Richards, he is finally committed to a theory in which the individual has complete conscious control of language. This belief, which rarely impedes the practical analyses or the machinery of classification, is expounded most fully in the final chapter of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, when he considers the problem of how to limit the endless proliferation of potentially interpretable ambiguities within a text. Empson remains convinced that all the subsidiary meanings must be held together by a criterion of relevance. He will not finally abandon a notion of the unity of each passage and is forced to locate that unity in the mind of the poet. Although his practice and his machinery of analysis outstrip this notion of a conscious author who controls his meanings, he is unwilling to follow through with the theoretical consequences.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, that Empson was so unwilling to 'follow through with the theoretical consequences' might be that to do so would just be too difficult, perhaps even too painful. It would amount to an articulated acknowledgement of the madness beneath the reason. The case for this claim, however, will need to wait till the end of the present chapter. It will be taken up again from a different angle in chapter four.

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<sup>73</sup> MacCabe, Colin. 'The Cambridge Heritage: Richards, Empson and Leavis', *Southern Review: Literary and Interdisciplinary Essays*, (19:3), Nov. 1986, 242-249, 245-246.

#### IV. Unacknowledged Remainders

Having argued that Empson was prepared to make fairly large concessions to that which cannot be articulated rationally, I will now argue that the appeal of such concessions is severely limited by Empson's actual negotiations with these acknowledged resistances – whether psychological, ideological or whatever. Returning briefly to *Seven Types*, Empson's first book is not only concerned with linguistic or grammatical ambiguities. While Empson remarks that such ambiguities are more amenable to analysis, he also admits that they only go so far and that to isolate them from psychological ambiguities is to falsify the function of language, and to oversimplify the factors that make language so ambiguous, such as rhetoric, style, rhythm etc. Empson's taste for analytical clarification thus never overrides his willingness to confront the verbal elements that resist verbal articulation – such as the psychological ambiguities expressed in language – because language and mind are for him continuous. In fact, there is a sense in which this early recognition, and later, in the 'Verbal Analysis', of the unconscious psychological forces that shape and inform our apprehension of meaning is contained by his assurance that nothing in the unconscious that yields to rational articulation would surprise and force us to revise our initial, pre-analytical response. Thus:

The kind of criticism that most interests me, verbal analysis or whatever one calls it, is concerned to examine what goes on already in the mind of a fit reader; sometimes bringing it up from levels of unconsciousness deep enough to make it look rather surprising, but even so not expected to make much difference to the feelings of the fit reader after he has got over this surprise. Like all theories about the action of the mind, in short, there is a sense in which it does not need to be expounded; if it is true, we are already acting on it all the time. The only use of it is when something goes wrong; but this is true of a good deal of knowledge, such as the ordinary car-driver's knowledge of the working of the carburettor. A quite practical problem therefore often arises, as to how much of the analysis needs to be written down; often a very great deal could be written down which though true doesn't need saying (except indeed to forestall a certain type of objector, who likes to tell the critic he was ignorant of what was too obvious to need saying). If you are trying to tell your audience what it is missing, what the Elizabethans for example would feel about a passage whose language has been dulled, it is clear that you need to know your audience as well as your topic. (ARG 107)

Empson's need to negotiate the problems thrown up by the depth psychological approach from *Seven Types* through to *Some Versions* and beyond was thus held at bay by the belief that a knowledge of the workings of the mind would add little, if anything, to critical



understanding and self-understanding. These problems had been both fostered and partially acknowledged in the closing chapter of *Seven Types* and in other early writings.

It may be true that, as many commentators have argued, Empson's adherence to Freudianism in particular is best approached in the light of an oblique reference to the Alice chapter in *Pastoral* wherein he qualifies the use to which he had put depth psychology in *Seven Types*: 'there is too much self-knowledge here [in the Alice tales] to make the game of psychoanalysis seem merely good' (P 218). However, the trouble with this view is that it ignores the difficulties of Empson's answer to that which may limit such self-understanding. This major difficulty concerns, as we shall see, an uncertain wavering in his version of a vague psychoanalytical triad – the unconscious, the subconscious and the preconscious. Richard Sleight remarked in his review of *Complex Words* that Empson's method runs into trouble in trying to explain the 'mostly unconscious methods used by people to communicate verbally', and concludes that 'trying to explain irrationality by conscious thought-processes usually only succeeds in underlining its irrational character'<sup>74</sup>. This, indeed, identifies the central problem of Empson's largely social conception of language and meaning. The key to the hesitation beneath this problem lies with Empson's constant shuffling between the terms 'unconscious', 'subconscious' and 'pre-conscious'. The privileged term in this relation is 'preconscious' since, for Empson, the 'preconscious' represents something that is both more amenable to rational analysis and less likely to present any large degree of variation from one individual to the next. It is a faculty that Empson never really fleshed out in any detail, and yet it is evidently important for the cogent account of rational agency that his critical theory requires. One rationalisation might be to align it with a structuralist account of how the generation of meaning depends on certain general operations or faculties, such as literary competence. This is the view taken by Culler in some brief remarks on *Seven Types* in his *Structuralist Poetics*, wherein he argues that for Empson, as indeed for the structuralist,

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<sup>74</sup> Sleight, Richard. 'Mr. Empson's Complex Words', *Essays in Criticism*, 2/3 (July 1952), 325-337, reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 261-273.

‘reading poetry is a rule-governed process of producing meanings’<sup>75</sup>. There is some plausibility in this view, since one of Empson’s theoretical objectives in *Seven Types* was to ‘show how a properly-qualified mind works when it reads the verses, how those properly-qualified minds have worked which have at all understood their own working’ (ST 248). Another, similar rationalisation might follow the route of a vaguely Chomskyan account that seeks to shift the focus from syntax to semantics. This rationalisation is the one favoured by Norris, especially in his account of *Complex Words*:

In *Complex Words* Empson puts the case for a broadly rationalist approach to all kinds of language, poetry among them, and sees no need to suspend this principle when dealing with particularly complex, resistant or paradoxical forms of expression. Other theorists – notably Chomsky – have likewise argued that language reflects the very grammar of human rationality, its ‘deep’ logical structure as opposed to its surface relativities from culture to culture...But for Chomsky these linguistic universals are derived by starting out from the level of syntax and applying a series of increasingly abstract rules and transformational procedures. In its early form at least, the theory made no allowance for the ways in which meaning (the province of semantics) might have to be included in any such generalised picture. Subsequent versions went so far as to build in a structural-semantic system of rules, such that meaning could be given its place in a more refined and adequate theory of language. But syntax has remained the chief interest and methodological focus of this whole ‘transformational’ approach in linguistics, philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology. For Empson, conversely, semantics is the main route of access to whatever truths about human rationality language has to show. It is in the structures of semantic implication contained in certain ‘complex words’ that Empson locates the most significant (and humanly revealing) facts about language. And so it becomes a matter of unpacking those words, not merely to pile up multiple meanings (like the conjuror producing rabbits from a hat), but in order to show how their senses relate through a ‘grammar’ of semantic entailment which in turn points back to the normative structures of human understanding in general.<sup>76</sup>

There is some truth in both these views of Empson’s rationalising claims, but the trouble with postulating the unproblematic existence of some kind of structuralist literary competence or the existence of a grammar of human rationality is that such accounts tend to overlook those moments where the resistance to meaning overcomes our rationality; these may merely be exceptional marginal cases that do little or nothing to alter the overall truth of these rationalist accounts. But they may also point to a shortcoming in Empson’s own account of language

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<sup>75</sup> Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, 126.

<sup>76</sup> Norris, Christopher. ‘Introduction: Empson as literary theorist: from Ambiguity to Complex Words and beyond’, in Norris, Christopher and Mapp, Nigel (ed.). *William Empson: the Critical Achievement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 6-7.

and meaning.

Before offering a tentative solution to this hesitation by outlining the exact nature of the resistance to the availability of meaning that emerges from Empson's rationalism, it is important to understand just what the postulate of an Empsonian universal competence or grammar of human rationality tends to suppress. From *Seven Types* onwards, Empson speaks of the 'preconscious' as a form of shared faculty or common knowledge that enables meaning – both its production and its reception. In fact, the theoretical rationale of *Seven Types* depends upon the casual identification of 'normal sensibility', 'conscious theory' and the 'pre-conscious':

[n]ormal sensibility is a tissue of what has been conscious theory made habitual and returned to the pre-conscious, and, therefore, conscious theory may make an addition to sensibility even though it draws no (or no true) conclusion, formulates no general theory, in the scientific sense, which reconciles and makes quickly available the results which it describes. (ST 254)

This matters to Empson because he sees the function of criticism, after the rise of the masters of suspicion, as something that seeks to bring out into the open air of public debate the essentially unconscious forces that shape and inform the production of meaning. After all, as we have seen when Empson deals with his own masters of suspicion, 'the main function [of the modern interpreter] must be to mediate the unconsciousness of the artist and the unconsciousness of the public he works for' (ARG 147). Likewise when he writes in *Complex Words*: 'These extra meanings are present, not in any deep unconscious, but in the preconscious levels where we handle lexicon and grammar, in our ordinary talk, at the speed we do (surely the various current uses of the word must be in the mind somehow, or how can we pick out the right one so quickly?)' (CW 41). Or as he put elsewhere, revealing the fear of the preconscious in reviews of *Complex Words*:

This little worry in the reviewer I think comes from fear of the Preconscious (I use the word only to recall the distinction from the deep Freudian unconscious); he expresses this fear all the time, and it is worth bringing up because it may be common among literary persons who dislike science. Your Preconscious is known because if it goes wrong you get one or other type of a clear-cut well-documented mental disease; for instance, you can't read a capital letter written on a blackboard till you have traced it with your finger. It is ordinary medical knowledge that we need an elaborate equipment, of which a separate bit very seldom goes wrong, before we can carry on the behaviour which we consider elementary. I did not mean any satire on the race of

man when I took this for granted. (SL 208-209)

In *Complex Words*, the emotion attached to a word, not unlike one of the senses or meanings of a word, is an 'extremely public object', and we implicitly presume that 'anybody would feel it under the circumstances' (CW 54). Although many words do not convey emotion, in poetry they tend to, and these emotions are frequently moral in intention, that is, they assert judgements and ask for approval or disapproval. Whether these feelings are akin to the consciousness of a bodily reaction like 'sweating' or the Richardsian 'tendencies to action' is, for Empson, not strictly relevant. The important point is that moral feelings claim not to be private ones – "if nobody knows what is right except me they still ought to know' (CW 34-35). Poems build themselves up out of these emotions, feelings, and senses, which leave themselves open to the same kind of questionings made of any other public utterances. The critic must measure the poem's total meaning against standards of 'open-minded reasonableness' and an equally generous-minded scepticism. This is important for Empson because in thinking through the relation between thought and feeling he wants to emphasize the critical, self-conscious function of thought. Thus: 'Feeling and thought are not separate objects; in one of their senses they are more like an inside and an outside. At any moment you may be conscious of either side in any proportion; you are more conscious of thought, for instance, if the thing in hand is a novelty; more conscious of feeling if it is urgent and not unusual. But if what you are conscious of as a feeling is badly thought, that is part of what you feel; you wish then to be conscious of it as thought, and put it right' (ARG 196).

The inability of his critical theory to deal with the unconscious elements involved in feeling one's way through meaning is most in evidence in the chapter on 'All in *Paradise Lost*' in *Complex Words*, a case at the opposite extreme to the previous chapter on the clear-cut sociable example of 'wit' in Pope. With 'all', Empson concedes from the outset that it is an 'obviously important word for which an Emotive theory seems about all that you can hold' (CW 101). He is thus led to wonder 'how far an exegesis of literary effects can go in terms of equations between connected meanings in single words, and how far we have to fall back on an Emotive linguistic theory instead' (CW 104):

If this case is a fair sample, it looks as if one could say that the real contrast is between the different depths of unconsciousness which are being tapped. One could draw up senses of the word as whole contexts in which it has become habitual. But they would no longer be tracing a clear-cut, even if sub-conscious, mental operation, like those which let us talk straight ahead and get the grammar in order; they would be concerned with something more like a Freudian symbol. Even so, I think the critic would still be dealing with verbal effects to which a 'purely emotive' linguistic theory could not be applied. Of course I do not mean to deny that a reader can best absorb them by accepting and trusting his own emotions as he reads. (CW 104)

Empson gives no justification for the view that 'the critic would still be dealing with verbal effects to which a "purely emotive" linguistic theory could not be applied'; nor does he suggest any means of bridging the gap between the 'grammar' of the 'subconscious mental operation' and the unconscious Freudian symbol that emerges from the contextual redefinitions of 'all'. Indeed, the real interest of this remark is that it isolates, albeit loosely and unsystematically, the central problem in Empson's dealings with the determining effects of the unarticulated psychological remainder. While it concedes that 'different depths of unconsciousness...are being tapped', it still wants to draw a line between the more or less generalisable yieldings of the subconscious and the unconscious Freudian symbolic variations that allow of little or no rationalisation. Indeed, the third, most generalisable term in this tension – the preconscious – is nowhere present in the chapter on 'all'. Thus, while the case of 'all' is a marginal one, since *Complex Words* constantly tries to qualify this possibility wherever it appears, Empson simply admits defeat not because he maintains that 'all' reflects a structural tension between Milton's conscious theology and his unconscious hatred of it, but because he fails to provide any explanatory bridge between the conscious and unconscious operations at work in his dealings with this tension.

By contrast, the splendid conclusion to an epistolary essay on Jane Austen strives as much possible to keep everything in the open air of public debate and to avoid the appeal of depth analysis:

It is wrong to assume...that Jane must *either* have had 'an ambition of entertaining a posterity of urbane gentlemen' or some dark psychological need to write something that would let her complexes creep out and yet pass off as normal. What any tolerable urbane gentleman enjoys in her writing is precisely her full illustration of the moral which she herself clearly drew. In any tolerable society, whatever its political arrangements, you will have a variety of people meeting each other, and therefore Politeness will be necessary, and to maintain Politeness is liable to involve serious

sacrifices. Yet they are worth it; if only because Politeness is the outward sign of more serious values less often called on. That is what all the urbane jokes are made out of. It may be very offensive to a communist. But really it isn't buried in the unconsciousness of the author or the normal reader. (ARG 458)

Empson is thus led to criticise one Austen critic on the grounds that 'the things Mr Harding thinks he is discovering in her Unconsciousness or in her secret tricks with an unconscious public are quite simply in the sunlight of her writings, and in the experience (one would presume) of any reasonable critic who praises her' (ARG 458). Such, indeed, is Empson's main bone of contention with Thomas Hardy's novelistic use of psychological determinism; thus for instance: 'Many of the selections from it deal with the World Will, which is actively malevolent whenever Hardy chooses to give us a good dig but otherwise wholly unconscious though described as half-conscious' (ARG 422). And again: 'The belief that Nature is deliberately planning to make human efforts ridiculous seems to be really nasty backwash or superstition, with no scientific evidence in its favour, bred among the Victorian rationalists in their struggles to get away from God' (ARG 468).

Furthermore, whenever Empson can be found thinking about the difficulty of reconciling meaning, context and idiosyncratic variations to particular words, he wants to make room for as much generalisation as possible. Indeed, as Fry has observed, when Empson uses the term 'context' in *Complex Words*, the sense of the word hovers uncertainly between language and mental atmosphere: 'I do not know whether any experiments have been done on which meanings people think of first when a word is given without a context, but I should expect the results to be very mixed; the technique seems a psycho-analytic rather than a linguistic one' (CW 47). This is why Empson himself admitted that with *Complex Words* he was 'trying to write linguistics and not psychology; something quite unconscious and unintentional, even if the hearer catches it like an infection, is not part of the act of communication' (CW 31). Thus for Empson, '[i]n an ordinary literary use both the meanings are imposed by the immediate context, which has been twisted round to do it, and the suggestion is not "as everyone admits, so that language itself bears me out" but "as I by my magic can make appear"' (CW 74). Or as he put it more casually in *Seven Types*: 'One may

know what has been put into the pot, and recognize the stew, but the juice in which they are sustained must be regarded with a peculiar respect because they are all there too, somehow, and one does not know how they are combined or held in suspension' (ST 32-33).

Indeed, when Empson does make concessions to context as a determining factor in the production of meaning it is usually to underline the social and institutional nature of meanings. Cleanth Brooks noted that the shift from *Seven Types* and *Complex Words* sees Empson abandoning James Smith's distinction between a 'noumenon' and a 'phenomenon':

how does an equation differ from the ambiguities treated in Empson's earlier books? Principally in that an equation has its origin in the history of the language whereas an ambiguity is the result of the stylizing of language by an individual writer. Empson puts it thus: In 'literary double meanings [about which 'I have written two books'] both the meanings are imposed by the immediate context, which has been twisted around to do it'. It is an individual effect which the poet suggests 'can [by his magic be made to] appear' whereas the equation, on the other hand, suggests an appeal, not to the writer's magic but to the nature of the language itself since he seems to say 'so that language bears me out'.<sup>77</sup>

Still, there is a sense in which style in *Complex Words* is not altogether repudiated as a viable critical concept: chapter two considers a word as 'a sort of solid entity, able to direct opinion, thought of as like a person' (CW 55) According to this conception of structural complexity, each individual lexical word is a structure, but one that has references to what has preceded it inhering in its very meaning. Structures are thus not independent of history, but formed and determined by a diachronic series. This connects with Empson's conception of the social nature of language: '[I wonder] how much is "in" a word and how much in the general purpose of those who use it; but it is this shrubbery, a social and not very conscious matter, sometimes in conflict with organized opinion, that one would expect to find only able to survive because somehow inherent in their words. This may be an important matter for a society, because its accepted official beliefs may be things that would be fatal unless in some degree kept at bay' (CW 158). Such a conception assumes a high degree of rational, conscious thought; as he put it in his objections to Raymond Williams: 'Part of the gloom, I think, comes from a theory which makes our minds feebler than they are – than they have to

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<sup>77</sup> Brooks, Cleanth. 'Hits and Misses', *The Kenyon Review*, 14/4, Autumn 1952, pp. 669-678; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp.283-292, 284.

be, if they are to go through their usual performance with language' (AG 184). In other words, even our weakest commonplaces involve a greater degree of conscious choice, of idiolectal shaping, than any sort of argument from 'verbal fictions' like 'the spirit of the age' (CW 432) gives them credit for. 'I suspect there is an unwary reverence for "history" going on', Empson wrote in a review of critical essays, 'an idea that, at any given date, everybody in England had the same opinion...[V]iz., the official or fashionable one' (AG 134). What irritates Empson here is the implied assumption that no degree of rational resistance could enable the individual to resist the concealed impositions of orthodox thought.

Still, for Empson meanings are essentially conventional and thus sufficiently generalisable not to disrupt his faith in language as a rationally-intelligible, shared social medium. This particular emphasis comes through in his dealings with 'Implications' in *Complex Words*, especially his attempt to explain how a meaning can attach itself to a word, and how connotations (or Implications) can even overtake a word. Empson suggests that an Implication will come from an habitual context of the word (not from its inherent meaning) and will vaguely remind you of that sort of context. A more general notion of the sociality of meaning also emerges from Empson's discussion of 'Moods' in *Complex Words*. He writes that

the main argument in its favour is sufficiently obvious; language is essentially a social product and much concerned with social relations, but we tend to hide this in our forms of speech so as to appear to utter impersonal truths. (CW 18)

However, the problem with this view is that it allows little or no room for any bridge between the rational choices of individual speaking agents and the mostly preconscious and subconscious (not, crucially, unconscious) operations that contribute to these choices. Indeed, as Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe are at pains to show in an important essay on *Complex Words*, Empson never gave an adequate account of the 'social unconscious' that shapes meaning, despite his alleged preference for theories that insist on the social nature of language and meaning: 'In stressing the social dimension of meaning in Empson's work...we run straight into the fundamental conceptual problem of how to reconcile notions of the historical formation of individuals and their autonomous existence. Crucial in thinking through this



problem is the development of a concept of a social unconscious. Empson sets himself pointedly against any such notion...insisting that the processes are conscious and intentional'<sup>78</sup>. Indeed, it could even be said that the positing of a more or less else universal 'preconscious' essentially plays the part of the absent 'social unconscious', but even so, as Durant and MacCabe again point out:

The deep conflict in Empson's position is that it is difficult to believe that he takes speakers and writers of English to be conscious of the syntax and lexis of English as they write – especially given his justification for the structure of *Complex Words* in the confidence and speed of routine human interpretation. On the other hand, given Empson's evident respect for literary artifice and argumentative control throughout his work, it is difficult not to believe he attributes a great deal of the subtle effects of words to deliberate choices consciously made by the speaker or writer. If we are ever to resolve this conflict, we appear to need much more sophisticated notions of intention than Empson seems to be working with: notions which have to allow an existence of a social unconscious.<sup>79</sup>

Yet Empson was still keen to include in his theory a strongly social conception of linguistic meaning and understanding.

That Empson was so unwilling to allow for the existence of an individual or social unconscious might be accounted for by his paradoxical engagement with the opposite of reason – madness. Indeed, it could even be said that Empson's obsession with a shared, public reason needs to be taken along with its opposite – his equally striking obsession with the particular, and particularly idiosyncratic, products of a brilliance bordering on madness, reflected in the chapters on 'fool' in *Complex Words* and elsewhere. Empson's belief in the possibility of transcending his own individual and historical limitations by appeals to a universal preconscious and by acts of imaginative identification is, as I shall argue in chapter four, combined with a strong sense of his own idiosyncratic personality, in both manner and matter. His firmness in keeping any conception of the subconscious (whether individual or social) out of the domain of verbal criticism can thus be seen as an attempt to ward off the temptation of identifying the insights of his own highly idiosyncratic subconscious with the insights of other, less sophisticated or idiosyncratic minds. This is one of the clearest outward

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<sup>78</sup> Durant, Alan and MacCabe, Colin. 'Compacted Doctrines: Empson and the meanings of words', in Norris, Christopher and Mapp Nigel (eds.). *William Empson: the Critical Achievement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 192.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

signs of his suppressed sense of pastoral isolation; it is a difficulty that ultimately concerns the repression of an eccentric, implicitly elitist brilliance.

Eagleton has observed that 'if he is one of the few English critics to have taken the pressure of Freud, [Empson] does so with notable unease and discomfort'<sup>80</sup>. A good example of this unease is the history of Empson's reading of Herbert's 'The Sacrifice' in *Seven Types*, where the debt to Freud in the penultimate chapter was later repudiated by Empson. So it is that for many critics the seventh type bears a mark of repression so that, in Empson's words, the ambiguity both carries the 'notion of what you want and involves the notion that you must not take it'. The 'unease and discomfort' of the pressure of Freud on Empson has been well documented by Lyndsey Stonebridge in a remarkable study of the 'destructive element' in British modernism. For Stonebridge, while Empson may have engaged more fully with the 'destructive element' than Richards, still the later revision by Empson of the Freudian thesis implied in his reading of Herbert points to a tendency in British modernism to 'fix psychoanalysis as a form of regressive individualism which must be resisted at all costs'. After all, in the 1947 preface to *Seven Types* Empson expressed regret that 'the topical interest of Freud distracted him'. The reading of Herbert, Empson now claims, was not 'concerned with neurotic disunion but with a fully public theological poem' (ST 9). As Stonebridge remarks: 'Freud might have replied that it was precisely the coming together of personal neurosis and the publicly theological that was at issue'<sup>81</sup>. Stonebridge then quotes another passage from the 1947 preface to *Seven Types*: 'Some literary critics at the time were prepared to "collaborate" with the invading psycho-analysts, whereas the honest majority who were prepared to fight in the streets either learned fire-watching technique or drilled with the Home Guard' (ST 9). As Stonebridge puts it:

Typically perhaps for Empson, this disclaimer of psychoanalysis is curiously psychoanalytic: compare Freud's description of the ego as 'a kind of frontier-station with a mixed garrison' that may or may not collaborate with the symptom, the 'foreign body'. The passage is also anachronistic: Empson pastes the rhetoric of

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<sup>80</sup> Eagleton, Terry. 'The Critic as Clown', in *Against the Grain: Selected Essays*, New Left Books, 1986; third impression, London and New York: Verso, 1991, 164.

<sup>81</sup> Stonebridge, Lyndsey. *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism*, London: MacMillan, 1998, 29.

World War Two over an earlier historical moment (while psychoanalytic ideas invaded the English intellectual scene throughout the 1920s, the psychoanalysts themselves did not really begin to 'invade' until the 1930s). It is as if the in-fighting of modernist criticism can only be couched in the language of war-time Britain: psychoanalysis is the alien invader, English literary criticism is the plucky Home Guard.<sup>82</sup>

There is a sense in which Empson's withdrawal from the full implications of the destructive element was indeed to a great extent motivated by an Enlightenment fear of 'regressive individualism'. But it is a fear that has more to do with his own highly idiosyncratic, even highly eccentric individualism than with any unwillingness to concede too much ground to the workings of the unconscious in general. This tension is most in evidence when Empson is approaching those literary cases that evidently put a strain on his own faith in the normal machinery of rational communication. Indeed, though his treatment of these pathological cases may perhaps be the sign of a willingness to engage with the destructive element, still they are ultimately treated as marginal or exceptional cases that only serve to confirm the rule. In his run-in with Rosamund Tuve over his reading of Herbert in *Seven Types*, Empson argued that Herbert's intention was not traditional but individual and independent, entailing feelings of which he is not fully conscious. Tuve, whose trust in philology suppresses the possibility of original thought, counters by suggesting that Herbert's 'unconscious' (not subconscious) intention may only be the conscious opinions of late Empson. The question as to whether an individual and independent intention can be discovered in a mind not mirrored by one's own must linger, and Empson is aware of this difficulty.

Perhaps the key to this tension between the temptations of a 'regressive individualism' and the sociable standard of a shared public reason is in fact already contained in some very suggestive remarks by James Jensen in a fascinating article on the limits of *Seven Types* entitled 'The Construction of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*' (1966). While Empson might be aligned with Richards and Riding, and more generally, as Stonebridge would argue, with a fear of regressive individualism (as Jensen puts it: 'his mind was open to both (or all) sides [Richards and Riding]; I would suggest that it was exactly his indeterminateness which

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

made him such a sensitive transmitter of the period-sensibility' (430)), still there remains a sense in which it was his own *specific*, idiosyncratic individualism, more than any general fear of individualism, that made him retreat from, and thus not fully engage with, the destructive element – the unconscious, the subconscious, but not, of course, the preconscious.

Jensen writes:

In saying that his types are ranked in 'stages of advancing logical disorder', Empson must mean that the early types are sufficiently simple to lend themselves to analysis almost solely in terms of grammar; but as 'disorder' increases, it becomes more difficult to keep the other dimensions out of the analysis, which as a result grows more complex or apparently ambiguous. This, in fact, proves true of the structure as it may be confirmed by referring to Empson's definitions of the various types: the first three are definitely weighted toward the grammatical side; the fourth, fifth, and seventh focus mainly on the mind and intention of the author and are thus 'psychological'; and the sixth depends on the reader's conscious recognition. But in none of the types is any of the dimensions independent; each in some proportion figures in every example of ambiguity, which, however, must be analyzed according to the incomplete perspectives of ordinary communication, and this in turn means that one or the other dimension must be stressed to the exclusion or near-exclusion of the others.<sup>83</sup>

This connects, according to Jensen, with Empson's shift in his definition of ambiguity of the second type from his early essay 'Ambiguity in Sonnet XVI' to *Seven Types*: 'The difference is that the earlier definition reflects a primary preoccupation with, and a belief in the immediate availability of, the author's mind...; but in the second, access to the author's mind is restricted and must be mediated by attention to grammar..., and perhaps can get no further

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<sup>83</sup> Jensen, James. 'The Construction of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 27/3, September 1966, pp. 243-259; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 414-430, 424. Jensen's article opens with some incisive remarks on the limits of *Seven Types* that might equally well be applied to the Empson corpus generally: 'The influence of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* has been as enormous as it is incontestable. But one may still conclude that its potency as literary criticism has been exerted mainly through its presence as a clarifying landmark and its availability as a recognized model, rather than the cogency with which it argues its methods. In so far as it undertakes to rationalize and to implement a coherently workable critical theory, *Seven Types* fails in its task. It fails by what seems a nearly deliberate structural ungainliness, which may be confused with, but is not the same thing as, its real, authentic, difficulty. The genius of the book is at odds with its structure, yet the structure imposes itself before anything else, with the very title, which announces a scheme and then swallows it in the last word: an ambiguity ceases to be ambiguous once it is classified, but on the other hand, there is supposedly nothing in the classifications which is not ambiguous. Already one is uncomfortably caught up in the dynamics of redundancy. Of course, no one seriously regards the value of *Seven Types* as in any way contingent upon its theoretical structure; readers have always been explicitly discouraged from doing so by Empson himself, who blithely admits that the title makes a pretension that the book does not sincerely want to claim'. Jensen, James. 'The Construction of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 27/3, September 1966, pp. 243-259; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 414-430, 414.

than grammar'. Jensen notes here the connection with Richards's 'extreme scepticism about communication...rooted in [his] deep conviction of the personal isolation of the individual and his experience'<sup>84</sup>. 'It is an outlook which has certain affinities with Riding's solipsism, though it takes a different turn after the fact of isolation is accepted'<sup>85</sup>. Still:

to Riding, egoistic isolation, although it leads to a view of the world requiring some rigor to maintain, has its compensations; once it is accepted, the self is free to fall back completely on its own resources, both actual and potential, which the fact of isolation has made absolute. The objective world is vastly diminished, but the self comes into its own. But according to Richards, the self is not so fortunate. Its isolation, instead of making it free to exploit its own subjective responses, exposes it to the relentless indifference of the neutral 'scientific' universe. So far from being autonomous, the self is merely a factitious identity, a 'mental organization' having value and validity only as it is brought to conformity with the nonemotive, objective world....Subject-object relations such as are implied by the processes of ordinary communication are partial emotive organizations which may be completed only by an overarching and unifying impersonal order which obliterates them as separate identities.<sup>86</sup>

It is for this reason that 'Richards regarded Empson's subjectivist venture with irony. His reasons for insisting that an objective structure be imposed on the book would have been based on his belief that by this means alone could it be saved from an unredeemed act of egoism'<sup>87</sup>. Empson can thus be seen as being caught between a view of the isolated self as having its redeeming features (for Riding, 'all that remained was for the individual to have the courage of the apocalyptic moment and accept his egoistic fulfilment') and Richards's 'categorical imperative', the notion that 'subject-object relations such as are implied by the processes of ordinary communication are partial emotive organizations which may be completed only by an overarching and unifying impersonal order which obliterates them as separate identities'. Jensen is thus led to the conclusion that:

[n]either its structure nor even the intention with which it was written has made *Seven Types* the striking and durable critical example it is, for the book inadvertently reverses its deliberate program, goes back on its original premises. Its ungainliness is un-Ricardian: instead of moving toward rational clarification by carefully unscrambling submerged and ill-defined meanings, the impetus of the whole types scheme is toward further complexity, toward a greater and greater involvement in emotive detail. In Empson the unique self is not defined away, as in Richards's dialectics, by the progressive rationalization of partial perspectives – the self is at

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 421-422.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

once the starting point and the destination of his analysis. Along with Riding and Graves, Empson is incorrigibly drawn to an idea of self which ends, not in an apprehension of impersonal order, but in a perception of the value of individual experience as unique, conscious but non-rational, and substantive. The personality of the book says this most clearly: sometimes eccentric, occasionally impenetrable, it remains always a distinctively individualistic performance.<sup>88</sup>

There is a sense in which *Some Versions* attempts a reconciliation of all these basic antinomies. It is precisely the complexity of consciousness that draws him to engage, for example, with the Marvell poem at such great length in chapter four of *Some Versions* ('The Ideal Simplicity approached by Resolving Contradictions'). Indeed, the chapter on Marvell raises precisely the question of the extent to which Empson was willing to engage with such 'deep' ambiguities by the method of depth psychology, but ultimately it does no more than offer the most eloquent and desperate expression of a faith in the resilience of conscious, reflective, articulated self-knowledge as opposed to the darker, deeper roots of the unconscious and, ultimately, of the sublime.

## V. Conclusion: Empson on Consciousness and the Sublime

There is a tendency among postmodern critics of Empson such as Neil Hertz, Paul de Man and Paul Fry to insist on those moments in Empson's writing that approach the 'secret places of the Muse'. At such moments, so the argument goes, the fundamental rules of logic are made to dissolve and one is made to feel 'something of the awe and horror which are felt by Dante finally arriving at the most centrique part of earth, of Satan, and of hell' (ST 196). There may be an element of truth in such readings; after all, *Seven Types* culminates with a type of ambiguity that sets up the greatest degree of resistance to our capacity for rational sense-making, to our faith in rational analysis and analysable or articulated meaning. Thus Hertz is perhaps right to say that this chapter offers an 'allegory of reading', a liminal experience, an 'end-of-the-line' encounter<sup>89</sup>. On this reading Empson can be seen struggling

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>89</sup> See Hertz, Neil. *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*, New York:

to express a deeply-felt malaise concerning the irrational threats to the conscious mind, threats that emerge in the form of unanalysable conflict, paradox or logical disorder. On this account both the seventh type and the chapter on Marvell in *Some Versions* may act as reminders that although poetry may indeed evoke mental states that are 'neither conscious nor unconscious', still it may also help to foster a 'conceited' metaphysical style, a sense of pastoral self-reassurance, as in Marvell: 'Here as usual with "profound" remarks the strength of the thing is to combine unusually intellectual with unusually primitive ideas; thought about the conditions of knowledge with a magical idea that the adept controls the external world by thought' (P 99). Readers of this poem have tended to sense that its power has much to do with the way it negotiates a mystical relation to these antinomies, a state of mind quite remote from Empson's. After all, for Empson 'the chief point of the poem is to contrast and reconcile conscious and unconscious states, intuitive and intellectual modes of apprehension...like the seventh Buddhist heaven of Enlightenment' (P 99).

The balance implied between instinct and reason, will and self-knowledge, unconscious impulse and reflective awareness in Empson's reading of Marvell is perhaps unachievable in principle. While Hertz may thus be right to suggest that with the seventh type Empson is approaching the 'secret places of the Muse', it could also be said that Empson is more keen to identify traces of primitive, prelogical confusion in psychological ambiguities that may be overcome by construing them within the terms of a structure of rationally intelligible thought: 'although such words appeal to the fundamental habits of the human mind, and are fretful of irrationality, they are to be expected from a rather sophisticated state of thought and feeling' (ST 195). Here the Seventh Type approaches the pastoral example of Marvell, a mode of understanding that wants to see such ambiguities in the light of self-conscious, articulate, speculative thought.

The real focus of Empson's theoretical rationalising drive is thus contained in those

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Columbia University Press, 1985. See also Hertz, Neil. 'More lurid figures', *Diacritics* 20:3 (1991), pp.2-27; expanded version reprinted as 'More Lurid Figures: de Man reading Empson', in Norris, Christopher and Mapp, Nigel (ed.). *William Empson: the Critical Achievement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 213-242.

elements of conscious, articulated, rational, 'witty' or reflective self-knowledge sought by poets to reach a point where they can view such vexing antinomies without falling prey to a disabling state of mind where aporia and neurotic deadlocks limit the possibility of creative thought. Empson's purpose, in *Some Versions*, as in *Seven Types* and elsewhere, is thus to steer clear of critical modes that seek out the deep psychological and epistemological conflicts as a way of stressing the limits of rational discursive thought. Hence his desire to frame the sublime, and its pastoral alter-ego, within the terms of the pastoral process of 'putting the complex into the simple', thus finding a form of public expression that externalizes and makes available for public debate private neuroses and subliminal experiences. The 'grand theme' may have its 'root in magic' but is still very strong, Empson suggests, 'among the mountain climbers and often the scientists' (P 100). This is to say that for Empson we can choose how to treat the sublime, and the criteria for making this choice are ultimately practical, social and moral. It is, *in fine*, an expression of Empson's faith in our capacity to carry out highly complex mental operations that we call 'intuitive' only because we do not yet have the required analytical or descriptive machinery. This, indeed, is why this chapter began with a brief outline of Empson's belief in the possibility of rational choice without foundations. His decision to privilege rational, self-conscious thought over psychological neurosis or the more abstract disabling effects of the sublime is perhaps the most fundamentally unanswerable of such choices.

This particular choice is one that contrasts starkly with the postmodern insistence on the disarticulating potential of the sublime. Empson's reading of the idea of 'transcendence' in Marvell's description of the state of contemplation fostered by pastoral construes the paradoxes of the poem within a frame-work of rational sense-making, despite the concession that there are indeed states of mind ('unconscious', 'subconscious' or whatever) that ultimately resist rational paraphrase or articulated discursive understanding. What is involved at this point is

a transition from the correspondences of thought with fact to those of thought with thought, to find which is to be creative; there is necessarily here a suggestion of rising from one 'level' of thought to another; and in the next couplet not only does the mind



transcend the world it mirrors, but a sea, to which it is parallel, transcends both land and sea too, which implies self-consciousness and all the antinomies of philosophy. Whether or not you give transcendent the technical sense 'predicable of all categories' makes no great difference; by including everything in itself the mind includes as a detail itself and all its inclusions. (P 104-105)

As Fry observes, there is a sense in which Empson approaches all literary periods as frames of mind that are best defined in opposition to what they are not, and often what they are not is the frame of mind found in another literary period or era. Empson is clearly ambivalent about the particular, and particularly central, divide of consciousness and the unconscious (allegorized in his uneasy resistance to the overwhelming forces of the sublime) and hesitates about where his preferences lie. Witness this passage on Wordsworth: 'Different, in that his most effective passages are not metaphysical at all; it is often an apprehension of Nature, not an intellectual activity, which is at the focus of consciousness; Wordsworth possessed an edition of his poems; the accident is historically an important one' (ARG 260). Or this passage on Herbert and Vaughan:

The point is not that this shows interest in Nature; Herbert often had such lessons played upon him, but he was interested in working out the particular lesson, not in the experience that extracted it from Nature; at any rate he would not have thought a generalisation about it had enough point or colour to be poetical. Nor does Vaughan seem anxious to remember what the lessons were, he is thinking merely of a state of melancholy peace experienced when he was out walking, and implied that it did him good, without conscious effort of his own. (ARG 258-259)

As he put it: '[o]nce you are interested mainly in such influences the whole seventeenth-century emphasis on conscious will and the discursive intellect becomes unnecessary and unwise' (ARG 259). On the other hand, resistance to the disarticulating effects of sublimity can become very tenuous indeed:

Sublimity mentioned but not expressed, 'wholesome', the streams of a stream (or a bank) introduced for the sake of rhyme, and this entirely debased use of 'mystical' – it is surprising to find it all outside the nineteenth century. It is the Romantic movement's effect; dark hair, tidal water, landscape at dusk, are dissolved in your mind, as often in dreams, into apparently direct sensory images which cannot be attached to any one of the senses. This dreamlike or hypnotic intensity is never far out of sight in Vaughan's work (hence, like the Romantics, and unlike Herbert, the ruck of his work is merely bad); when it can be combined with the self-respect of conceits he is very impressive. (ARG 263)

In view of this tension between Empson's seemingly obsessive faith in the ultimate rationality of the conscious mind (which finds perhaps its most eloquent expression in his reading of the

Marvell poem) and his concessions to the overwhelming forces of the unconscious and the sublime, it is perhaps not all that surprising to see just how often Empson's readers have coped with his rationalising eccentricities through imputations of madness. Indeed, many of his commentators have viewed Empson as a figure straight out of the Alice tales, a Carrollian solipsist more interested in his own hypothetical constructions than in making sense to other beings. The image of the irresponsible analyst was neatly encapsulated in one of the first reviews of *Seven Types*. Referring to Empson's unerring faith in the explanatory powers of rational analysis, an anonymous reviewer of *Seven Types* likened Empson to Humpty Dumpty, who claimed that he 'can explain all the poems that ever were invented'. Alongside this voracious need for explanation, so the reviewer claimed, Empson constantly displays a solipsistic taste for semantic and interpretive subjectivism; after all, Humpty Dumpty also believed that 'when I use a word...it means just what I mean – neither more nor less'<sup>90</sup>. Indeed, Empson has often been attacked for radically isolating mind and language. As Wihl puts it:

To Elder Olson, Empson reads literature like a child who toys with grammatical arrangements and ignores the moral implications of a word's meaning. So too Hugh Kenner looks upon Empson as an Alice in his own Empsonland, a Carrollian solipsist writing his own kind of literary hallucination. This in spite of Empson's attempt to 'lock poem, poet, language and reader inside a communicative situation'. And where Empson is praised as an ordinary language philosopher, unfettered by metaphysical imponderables, it is because he seems to devalue psychological explanations. To Stanley Cavell, Empson directs us primarily to what sorts of literary meanings may be elaborated between certain speakers, in defining to what is sayable in the context of literary criticism.<sup>91</sup>

These criticisms all seem to capture a problem that has as much to do with Empson's strictly philosophical dilemmas as with the tensions that underlie his social role as a critic, his desire to reach beyond the idiosyncratic findings of his rationalising criticism and to connect with an audience that might validate – or at the very least respond to – such findings. The extent to which Empsonian criticism is both able and willing to elaborate the meanings it discovers and

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<sup>90</sup> Anon. 'Analysis of Ambiguity', *The Saturday Review*, 150/3919, 6 December 1930, p. 750; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 26-28.

<sup>91</sup> Wihl, Gary. "'Resistance' and 'Pregnancy' in Empsonian Metaphor", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 26, No.1, Winter 1986, 48.

to convey them sociably and democratically to 'other minds' is thus further complicated by the tensions that emerge from his critical manner and style, as chapter four will presently argue.

## Chapter 4

### Style and the Critical Community

‘The cosy chortle of the snob is out of place here,  
because it assumes more knowledge than we have got’. (ARG 266)

#### I. Introduction: Changing Paradigms

In the final chapter of *Seven Types*, Empson proposed a moderate view of the social responsibility of criticism as a vehicle of pragmatic consensus, a means of fostering a contingent sense of community, writing:

The position of the literary critic is far more a social than a scientific one. There is no question of dealing finally with the matter, because insofar as people are always reading an author he is always being read differently. It is the business of the critic to extract for his public what it wants; to organise what he may indeed create, the taste of his period. So that literature, insofar as it is a living matter, demands a sense, not so much of what is really there, as of what is necessary to carry a particular situation ‘off’. (ST 282)

One is reminded of Barthes in ‘What is Criticism’, where he affirms that ‘criticism is not an homage to the truth of the past or the truth of “others” – it is a construction of the intelligibility of our own time’<sup>92</sup>. Empson’s own sense of fostering the ‘taste of his period’, his belief in the ‘shared experience of his readers’<sup>93</sup>, was not, however, chiefly motivated by a loss of faith in truth as a standard or ideal for criticism. In *Seven Types*, Empson conceived the poem as the focus of a communicational situation in which poets and readers are constantly re-evaluating their relationship to one another. On this account partial truths take precedence over absolute truths, and man’s obligation is to make rational sense to other human beings, in so far as it is possible, thus seeing as far as humanly possible all round a case. This is why Empson favoured critical arguments that used multiple viewpoints: argument practised thus becomes the enabling condition of a critical community, attempting as it does to bring as many readers as possible into the orbit of its conversation.

The previous chapter outlined some of the fractures beneath Empson’s rational-

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<sup>92</sup> Barthes, Roland. ‘What is Criticism’, in *Critical Essays*, translated by Richard Howard, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972, pp. 255-260, 256.

<sup>93</sup> Day, Frank. ‘Introduction’, in Day Frank (ed.), *Sir William Empson: an Annotated Bibliography*, New York: Garland, 1984, xxx.

humanist belief in intelligible sense and rational articulation. This chapter argues that although Empson maintained a faith, however problematic or theoretical, in truth as a guiding principle for our critical and theoretical investigations, he was, in a manner akin to Barthes, more concerned to foster a sense of consensual intelligibility, a shared 'taste' articulated by his own critical rationalisations, careful though he was not to erect his own theoretical or epistemological commitments (such as his concern with truth as a standard or norm of inquiry) into hard and fast dogmas demanding unequivocal assent. There is in this respect a peculiar degree of self-reflexivity in his view of Richards as a moderate, pragmatic negotiator: 'He was by nature a negotiator, and on principle did not expect any doctrine to be more than an approximation to the truth; but his analytic power always made people regard him as an extremist' (ARG 227). In fact, Empson frequently opposed the doctrinal commitments conveyed by the 'high siren voice' of Richardsian theory to the more practical and seemingly more humble business of close reading. On one occasion he opposed Richards's theoretical disquisitions (writing that 'one might indeed complain that some of the talks are so broad and so "stimulating" that they suggest nothing definite', ARG 137) to '[t]he team of practical critics organised by Mr Wain...at the opposite extreme, each of them nose down all the time to the detailed text of a poem printed in full' (ARG 138). Nonetheless, the latter are, in Empson's view, 'just as much concerned with education' (ARG 138) as Richards ever was; after all,

Mr Wain says in the preface that he wanted 'to get people to be less frightened of literary criticism', to effect a rapprochement between the reading public and these experts on reading, who tend to have little influence outside their universities. This indeed, I think, makes them rather uncertain how much needs to be said. Till the English School came in it was assumed that the public could read, and the modern worry about exegesis is a recognition of a new situation. The only forerunners who thought it necessary were those (mainly Puritan) preachers who 'divided the Word of God', that is, extracted from any given text, with 'seventeenthly' and so forth, the whole of their theological position. This is not always a good way to teach a subject, and it seems possible that Mr Wain will only frighten the reading public more than ever. But it is less easily frightened than bored; I felt myself that the essays were dull unless I disagreed with them, except of course when they produced a new idea, in the old manner. Still, it does seem to be happening in this field that one is now required to write a full exegesis, on pain of being accused of not knowing what had seemed too obvious to say. (ARG 138)

The purpose of this chapter is precisely to outline the ambivalent sense of audience that

Empson was led to cultivate as a critic and poet writing in fear of the accusation of snobbishness and obscurity – of ‘not knowing what had seemed too obvious to say’. He once noted that modernist poets addressed a far smaller reading public than their Victorian predecessors; whether he thought this the cause or the result of shifts in subject-matter and technique is unclear, though one is inclined towards the former:

Poetry nowadays is no longer in the luxuriant condition of its nineteenth-century prosperity, when young ladies all over the country drank in the sentiments of the Laureate; a great part of the reading public for novels and biographies will not stand for poetry at all. As a result of this fact, or perhaps as another effect of its causes, the poets are now writing concentrated and distilled things, such as could only be said in poetry; they assume a small public interested in poetry as such. This tendency may have a good or a bad influence on poetry, but a poet can hardly ignore it. ‘Enoch Arden’ itself, for instance, if anyone is writing it now, had much better be done as a novel... (ARG 356)

Aware of the pressures of academic specialisation, of increasing theoretical sophistication, and of ideological self-consciousness, Empson was also too tactful to ignore the changing paradigm of criticism. For criticism was no longer – if indeed it ever had been – an orderly field of quiet cooperative labour with a clearly defined central focus that unified its seemingly disconnected objectives. But Empson knew that the fractures borne of the rising demand for specialisation were inevitably reflected in his own work. The way to deal with this, so he thought, was to find the right balance of tone in critical prose; he once commented on a review of Richards’s *Coleridge on Imagination* that had attacked the book’s alleged arrogance: ‘[t]here was a review of this extremely good book which gave much space to complaints about its arrogance, chiefly because it claims to be right because of psychology and does not give the evidence. It is hard to tell arrogance from humility, and the question is one of public convenience’ (ARG 203). Empson concurred that ‘experts should be made to put their cards on the table, and it would be better if Dr Richards had put in bits of evidence that would seem to him obvious and scrappy; the common reader, like myself, knows dimly what is hinted at but not how far there are reputable schools of psychology that disagree, and would like to be told of a nice book to read about the matter’ (ARG 203). Indeed, though he always stood out against excessive specialisation, writing that ‘the academic world is becoming too specialised to do large correlations precisely when its labours ought to be

making them possible' (ARG 132), still he knew just as well that the same criticism could be levelled against his own work, admitting in his application for the Sheffield professorship: 'It may be felt that my published work has been rather specialized, but I would try to provide what was wanted in the post and not merely indulge my specialities'<sup>94</sup>. His chief working principle was that '[w]e must have free communication between the expert and the outsider, who may be an expert at something else, or the whole business of forward development and democracy and so on will stop' (SL 162).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the tensions beneath Empson's ostensible desire to foster the benefits of shared knowledge, particularly when he attempts to undercut the pompous elitism of academic discourse as a forum that excludes the ordinary reader. It argues that Empson's democratic, Benthamite standard of mediating for the greatest possible number, his principled amateurism, his strong sense of audience struggled to contain the rhetorical, discursive and critical effects of his own highly specialized tastes and always vied uncomfortably with their darker opposites – the combined perils of extreme specialization, unarticulated taste and discursive obscurity, which all tend to weaken the sense of pastoral intimacy, the common humanity, which the Empsonian critic wishes to foster between himself and the wider community. Keen though he was to foster a sense of community, of common belonging, Empson was still unwilling to make clear just what the founding principles of his community might be. This conflict is reflected in the ambivalent implications of his preferred mode of critical address – a conversational style which, though claiming to see through all forms of cant, still caused much resistance (even resentment) because it was so often accompanied by 'a hearty indifference to other people's feelings' (AG 122), as Empson once put it. But it is perhaps most in evidence when Empson is talking about the social role of the critic, something he often does in private. Empson was often quite explicit about his philosophical and political beliefs in his letters, far more so in fact than in his published writings. As he once put it: 'It's all right for me to say "this is the proper place

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<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Ricks, Christopher. 'William Empson'. *The Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. 71, (Oxford University Press, 1985), 541-554; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 540-555, 549.

to be” in a private a letter, where I am talking about myself, but as soon as I have it published I am obviously hinting about other people, and I want to avoid that’ (SL 127-128). The refusal to speak out on political matters can obviously limit the critic’s socio-political influence, while the concealment of the critic’s philosophical views in published writings suggests an elitism that is unwilling to articulate the theory behind the practice, to make available for public debate the theoretical rationale of the critic’s interpretive pronouncements.

The resulting tensions in Empson’s critical project oppose his own particular scholarly devotions and a more selfless ambition of fostering a sense of audience that would enable criticism to reach a broader, non-academic public<sup>95</sup>. Paradoxically, he seemed to bemoan the ever larger size of the academic community and the resulting loss of individuality and personality in criticism. In a letter to Ricks in 1978, he wrote:

When I was young there were about a dozen people writing for journals who didn’t need to sign their names; you knew who it was from the style after one or two sentences. Now I don’t think there are any – you, when you are really engaged, but not most of the time. So the use of the language has got much deader and flatter, but that doesn’t amount to a change in it. I should say that the inflexible machine of education is too good at preventing change. (SL 646)

Indeed, it is a major paradox of Empson’s work that, as David Fuller puts it, ‘a belief in the possibility of transcending one’s individual and historical limitations by acts of imaginative identification is combined with a strong sense of the critic’s idiosyncratic personality, in both manner and matter’<sup>96</sup>. In a similar, though less problematic vein, Dodsworth writes: ‘[b]oth criticism and poetry are strongly marked by his personality, above all in their style. It is

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<sup>95</sup> This is not to say that academia was not, in Empson’s view, a healthy choice for a young, independent mind. As he remarked in a letter to Boris Ford in 1959: ‘You must remember that, if a young critic makes the great renunciation, saying “It is beneath me to read all these horrid essays”, the next thing he will have to do is turn out a lot of shockingly coarse hackwork, which really is beneath him and will remain permanently in print to shame his later years. A university job does at least mean that you are free to print in a decently considered manner; and, so far from trying to stop you, most of the English universities make your promotion actually depend on eventually printing something good enough. It therefore seems to me very mistaken when young writers imagine that this is a shameful way to come to terms with the society they are living in; though I must say I never understand why they don’t try [to] become postmen in country districts, surely much the best job for the type of writer who needs to feel uncontaminated’. (SL 292)

<sup>96</sup> Fuller, David. ‘William Empson: from verbal analysis to cultural criticism’, in Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 152-165, 160.



difficult to mistake a passage from Empson, in prose or verse, as coming from any other author, but the matter of personality goes further than that. F.R. Leavis is also a distinctive stylist; so is (to take a present-day example) Jacqueline Rose, but in both these cases it is as though the writers cannot help being themselves; there is an element of conformity to academic convention which is overcome by the intimations of personality. Empson, by contrast, sets out to be himself, in his prose at least. It is a kind of principle<sup>97</sup>. Practice, however, often resisted the principle.

## II. The Principle of Irenic Sympathy

Before outlining the tensions concealed in Empson's critical manner, it is important to understand the abstract principle at work beneath the ambivalent practice. When he was invited to state his 'credo' at Kenyon College in 1950, Empson was asked to outline his views on the 'co-operative work of critics, and the social responsibilities which their method of work requires them to assume, as well as the vital philosophy from which it must have proceeded' (ARG 109). While he did 'not wish to appear flippant' (ARG 109), he nonetheless admitted that he could not 'at the moment raise the spirits to answer in the high tone which these questions deserve' (ARG 109). His answer to the first issue was characteristically prudent, offsetting any potential threat of prescriptivism, and somewhat blowing the gaff on the grand pronouncements (and requests) of academic critics: 'As to co-operation, I hope I don't refuse it, but I have noticed that, when you give a party, the best thing is not to rush at everybody and try to force them to talk to each other; in a party that goes unexpectedly well (in the way of making disparate groups talk to each other) you often notice that the host has been stuck away in the corner most of the time, talking to some expert about a technical point he is really interested in' (ARG 109). So the argument of this chapter does not involve a dissolution of technical, theoretical, philosophical, or political biases and preferences. Rather, it posits that we have a positive interest in striving for some kind of mutual understanding despite these differences of interest.

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<sup>97</sup> Dodsworth, Martin. 'Empson and the trick of it'. *Essays in Criticism* 51 (1):101, 2003, 110.

Empson himself was deeply aware of the dangers of a world in which people of different disciplines or theoretical specializations made no concerted effort to talk to each other, or indeed to the people outside the confines of their own sophisticated though limited interests; otherwise 'the whole business of forward development and democracy and so on will stop' (SL 115). As for the social responsibilities of criticism, Empson responded thus to his American hosts:

As to responsibility, there was an earnest lady in the last war who took the opportunity of an introduction to President Roosevelt to urge upon him the great weight of the responsibility which she trusted he was properly conscious of, and his only reply (with a rudeness quite unusual to him) was an impatient movement of his hand. Obviously it would have made his judgement fatally bad if he worried all the time about his responsibilities. Even in so humble a walk of life as literary criticism, it seems to me, a man might feel the same; the best thing for him to do as a critic is to do his work as best he can, and he has still plenty of responsibilities as a social being. It seems clear that critics have been making a steady effort to act on them. (ARG 109)

Empson's ideal of communicative critical practice does not therefore recommend dull homogeneity. After all, mutual understanding still allows for hybridism and pluralism. The critical community, however specialized, fragmented or disparate, can operate more fruitfully on the working assumption that 'if you attack a view in any detail that proves you to have some sympathy with it [...] there is already a conflict in you which mirrors the conflict in which you take part; that is why you understand it sufficiently to take part in it. Only because you can foresee and enter into the opposing arguments can you answer them; only because it is interesting to you do you engage in argument about it' (ARG 83). To engage in any controversy over the proper business of theory will thus tend to reveal the depth of what we share; and though our dialogue will address itself to those matters upon which we do not agree (since there is little point in mulling over a consensus), we still require a modicum of sympathy and communion for the argument to take place. It is those disagreements that are closer to the surface that we need to actively engage in and embrace with a view to promoting a more refined consensus that is not limited to the unquestioned assumptions or beliefs that constitute the deeper layers of communal agreement. It is only because such dialogue aims to foster understanding and mutual understanding that we choose to refine and improve our capacity for sympathy and altruism – the Empsonian 'generosity of spirit' – in order that such

conflicts result in a broader consensus.

This is why ‘controversy demands imagination; you must try to understand your opponent’s position, so that you can select the things worth talking about; so that you can find the root of his errors, or of your disagreement with him’ (ARG 10). The belief that criticism and theory can foster solidarity and mutual understanding by revealing the depth of what we share and by further cultivating such tacit consensus is in fact reflected in Empson’s own more technical interest in the relation between our common sense forms of natural language understanding and the elaboration of a truth-theoretic formal semantics. Above all, however, Empson’s ethical defence of imaginative sympathy, its importance both for everyday communicative uptake and in the reading of imaginative literature, suggests an enlightened conduct of literary theorizing, since it reminds us that to engage in theory is already an act of starting a dialogue. Theory cannot therefore defend solipsism, which for Empson would be the most absurd result of the strictest anti-intentionalist logic. Empson’s belief that ‘some degree of imaginative sympathy is necessary if criticism is to be possible’ (ARG, 194) is suggestive, as Norris writes, ‘[of] a space for “communicative action” (in Habermas’s phrase) where it is assumed *firstly* that we have a rational interest in achieving the best possible degree of enlightened mutual understanding, and *secondly* that any real advance in this direction will involve criticism of existing (“commonsense”) ideas and values where these serve only to promote some partisan, self-authorized, or class-based set of interests’<sup>98</sup>.

Critical writing that cultivates this sense of audience constitutes a move in the construction of a community – not so much a common social reality as a sphere of exchange and debate in which difference and conflict are fully expressed though never without due regard for what we share. The value of such writing is that it helps to reveal the depth of what we share, what we want to share – our common humanity. This is why Empson’s criticism, no less than many of the works that he admires, are permeated with a strong belief in the possibility of intimacy and of the concrete consequences of sharing a common discourse. That

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<sup>98</sup> Norris, Christopher. ‘For Truth in Criticism: William Empson and the Claims of Theory’, in Norris, Christopher. *The Truth about Postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 100-181, 158-159

we do share something is for Empson the satisfaction of a deep human longing, the realization of an almost desperate hope. It is the hope that we are enough like another to sense one another, to be able to live together in this, our common world. To be sure Empson does explore moments in literature or criticism where such hopes are dashed by the conscious designs of the writer or the conditions that certain traditions or forms of writing reflect and sustain. For Empson's humanism is not naively optimistic; it is always ready to acknowledge moments of separation that put a strain on his optimism.

Central to this ambivalent optimism is the pastoral web of attitudes reflected in the tone of Empson's critical prose, but also in his most revered literary examples. Again, for Empson, although distinctions of sophistication and simplicity exist, they are still a poor thing in comparison with our 'common humanity'. As Eagleton writes:

pastoral, in exposing such distinctions, is more than a ruling-class conspiracy because it also reveals them as continually ironized and encompassed by a wider ambience, a general sustaining Nature as it were, which transcends them in its importance. Pastoral may give us an intimation of a potentially tragic separation of mind from world, the cultivated from the simple, self-reflexivity from spontaneity; but it includes this moment within a richer, more complex relationship in which it is recognized that the intellectual must be taught by the masses, that the mind is after all a part of Nature and not just its other, that the rich are poorer as well as richer than the common people, and that even the intellectual – hard though it sometimes is to credit – shares a common humanity with others, which ultimately overrides whatever demarcates him or her from them.<sup>99</sup>

While 'the artist never is at one with any public' (ARG 22), still for Empson the pastoral attitude is a more ambiguous one: 'I (the artist/critic/intellectual) am in one way better (than the worker/peasant), in another way not as good' (P 31). Or, as he puts it more precisely elsewhere: 'Some people are more delicate and complex than others, and...if such people can keep this distinction from doing harm it is a good thing, though a small thing by comparison with our common humanity' (P 164). Eagleton also speaks of the 'immediately deconstructive' move of all propaganda or popularization, a move which involves the characteristically pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple:

if the complex can be put into the simple, then it was not as complex as it seemed in the first place; and if the simple can be an adequate medium of such complexity, then

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<sup>99</sup> Eagleton, Terry. 'The Critic as Clown', in *Against the Grain: Selected Essays*, New Left Books, 1986; third impression, London and New York: Verso, 1991, 154.

it cannot after all be as simple as all that. A mutual transference of qualities takes place, forcing us to revise our initial estimate of both terms, and to ponder the possibility that a translation of the one into the other was made possible only by virtue of a secret complicity between them.<sup>100</sup>

Indeed, the process of translation that Empson favours, for instance, between the complex, sometimes, muddled rhetoric of Wordsworthian sense and the translational simplification of the doctrine in Basic English in his essay 'Basic English and Wordsworth' (1940) is premised on the assumption that the two discourses – Wordsworthian doctrinal verse and Basic English – have more in common than it might appear on a casual reading, that, indeed, such translation 'was made possible only by virtue of a secret complicity between them'. Writing out in Basic the sense of 'sense' or other such complex words in Wordsworthian poetry is merely the application of Wordsworth's own belief that 'poetry had better be made out of the "simple language of men", though he made good poetry out of hard words as well' (ARG 232). While the political implications of the pastoral mode may be deeply ambiguous (not unlike those of Basic), still that is so only because the Empsonian critic or theorist, drawing upon the allegorical power of pastoral, is keen to find a middle way between the philosophical and rhetorical sophistication of high Theory (or high doctrinal poetry) and the common standards of reasoning (the prose of critical paraphrase) that apply to any discourse regardless of its degree of sophistication or disciplinary identity. Indeed, though simplification may involve some form of expansion of the density and compression of poetic verse, still a process of this kind will help to set the critical conversation off in the right direction – in the direction of a debate that takes the publicly-available cognitive material of poetry as its object. As he put it in the same essay on Wordsworth: 'In looking for the reasons why your first answer was wrong, you are sent on to the important questions about poetry. So this process makes the structure of the poetry much clearer' (ARG 234) After all: 'We do not commonly get the ideas opened up, and see the reasons for the feelings. So all this argument about the effect of the lines has come straight out of our attempt at putting the sense into Basic. Without that start we would probably not see what was important, in the structure of the thought' (ARG

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

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### III. Empson's Ideal Community

Such is, at any rate, the principle beneath the practice. As an enemy of the esoteric and a champion of a language that we could, potentially, all share in, Empson was committed as a matter of principle to clarity and intelligibility. In a letter to Charles Madge in 1937, he wrote:

The idea that one must write very esoteric stuff because nobody will read [it] anyway seems to me nonsense – you get plenty of readers if you give anybody a chance. Surely even a communist can have a reasonable amount of democratic feeling; the point about writing as plainly as you can is that you are testing your ideas against somebody who is not a specialist and just knows about life in general. Really subjective writing seems to me nasty to touch, gluey on the outside like David Gascoyne. I feel I have some right to be rude about this because [I am] so much open to the same faults. You had much better imagine before you write anything that England has long been a settled communist state, and that the only difficulties before you are (a) making the comrades hear what you want to say (b) convincing them you are not talking nonsense; assuming the future to have arrived is a piece of symbolism quite in your manner; you will find it works much better both as making you write better and making people buy your books. (SL 98)

Empson knew just how difficult it was for our language not to be difficult, though this did not deter him from attempting to understand, and thus clarify, the nature of these difficulties. The problem for Empson was to find how to articulate them, a problem which resulted essentially from a recognition of the differences of interest within and beyond the academic community. As Empson is always keen to remind us, the critical community is not limited to critics, let alone academic critics – nor should it be, since it would seem that the wider the circle of community and cooperation, the greater the force or validity of its products. But in criticism as in poetry, Empson was acutely aware that he was writing in a formless age that lacked the firm sense of a common and still compelling tradition; he knew that there was no solid community of practice or principle upon which to rely for consent. Reviewing several works of contemporary criticism, Empson once wrote: 'I have felt rather startled, comparing these books, to realise how much is still going on in the different booths under the big top, so confident, so able and busy, so determinedly out of contact with each other. It does look as if somebody might co-ordinate them a bit more' (ARG 116). The difficulty for him was to find how there could be any real hope of discovering or fostering common principles for the

pursuit of criticism amidst the chaos of sharply conflicting critical practices and aims that Empson could not help but recognize as dominating contemporary criticism. His chief complaint against such practices was that they could no longer include the 'ordinary' or 'tolerably well-informed' reader within their sophisticated, specialised ambit. But he was also forced to concede that any modern critical practice, however pastoral in inflection, was also confronted with the same problem.

In fact, Empson addressed this sense of fragmentation from the very outset. In *Seven Types*, it is because the critic can no longer appeal to the common sympathies and shared knowledge of a relatively homogeneous reading public – and by 'reading public' Empson usually means the readers of literature *and* criticism – that he feels compelled to defend the more democratic practice of analytical criticism, which for all the apparent cleverness of its critical apparatus, is fortified by its reliance on a rock-bottom faculty of shared rationality, and not on any presumption that the critic and his readers form a privileged caste of highly cultivated literary sophisticates with little or no need for pedagogical explanation and clarification. Hence his repeated insistence that the critic could no longer rely upon a culturally and socially homogeneous community of interests and beliefs, and the assumption that the critic could or should do so was for him a sign of snobbery. His vision of a community of readers is thus made possible by a shared use of commonsense reasoning, not by any preconceived notions about a shared background of cultural interests and values. Indeed, this is the principle behind his search for a critical machinery that relied not on any assumptions of general knowledge, but on a belief in sense-making capacities shared in common by poets, critics and readers alike. This is why Empson made these remarks on the 'poetical public' in his run-in with Sparrow, thus extending the principle to critics and poets alike:

[H]e gets in a good hit about the 'poetical public'; a clumsy phrase of mine; the matter is much more complex than either of us implied. Of course a poet must not pander to a public, but he must be intelligible, and so much of poetry is a matter of tone towards an imagined public (of good critics, but good critics of a certain sort) that a poet who does not expect ever to find such a public does not in fact write well, if at all. The matter is a topical one nowadays because much of the best modern poetry is so difficult to read, I said that it would be useful nowadays, both for the poet

and the public, if the 'poetical public' had some process of interpretation for the verbal subtleties involved in poetry. And I used that clumsy phrase (assuming it would not be misunderstood) because I wanted to say this briefly, without tedium to the reader; it seems to me rather a pity that Mr Sparrow could only understand that one phrase. (ARG 201)

Commenting on the limitations of *Complex Words*, Hugh Kenner wrote that 'it is around the eighteenth century that the grip of his machinery on buried implications is most impressive', since 'in the eighteenth century...a social matrix – what the speaker was doing against a background of social usages and implications – was predominant enough to give such analysis a main handle'<sup>101</sup>. In a similar though less critical vein, Roger Sale has repeatedly praised the most insightful passages in Empson's criticism as 'moments that create a community'<sup>102</sup> between author, critic, and reader, seeing him as a 'hero who seeks to create with his readers a community such as those created earlier by pastoral literature'. The new critical 'machinery' is thus required to accommodate the fragmented contemporary community of readers addressed by poets and critics alike; hence Empson's response to the problem of belief in the final chapter of *Seven Types*, motivated as it is by a profound awareness of the rapidly-diminishing field of common knowledge:

The problem as to belief in poetry might well be mentioned here; as to whether it is necessary to share the opinions of the poet if you are to understand his sensibility. Very often it is necessary to believe them in a behaviouristic way; you have to be well enough habituated to them to be able to imagine their consequences; thus you have to be a person who is liable to act as if they were true. Certainly, if this is so, then it becomes puzzling that we should be able to enjoy so many poets. The explanation seems to be that in the last few generations literary people have been trained socially to pick up hints at once about people's opinions, and to accept them, while in the company of their owners, with as little fuss as possible; I might say, putting the case more strongly, that in the present state of indecision of the cultured world people do, in fact, hold all the beliefs, however contradictory, that turn up in poetry, in the sense that they are liable to use them in coming to decisions. It is for reasons of this sort that the habit of reading a wide variety of different sorts of poetry, which has, after all, only recently been contracted by any public as a whole, gives to the act of appreciation a puzzling complexity, tends to make people less sure of their own minds, and makes it necessary to be able to fall back on some intelligible process of interpretation. Thus one finds it hard, in reading some passages of Keats, to realise that they were long enjoyed empirically, without the theoretical reassurance now given by the psycho-analysts; the same applies to the 'anthropological' writings of

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<sup>101</sup> Kenner, Hugh. 'Alice in Empsonland', *The Hudson Review*, 5/1, Spring 1952, pp. 137-144; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 251-258, 255.

<sup>102</sup> Sale, Roger. *Modern Heroism: Essays on D.H. Lawrence, William Empson, and J.R.R. Tolkien*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, 143.



mystics, like those lines from Crashaw in my last chapter. (ST 243-245)

The 'present state of indecision of the cultured world' is for Empson the latest stage in the history of critical alienation; the original community of mythical pastoral will never recover from the dissolution traced in *Some Versions*, just as the 'whole man' of Renaissance honesty, encompassing, though never fully synthesising, all the contradictions and conflicting ideas of his society in a generous cultivation of worldly 'good judgement', is dissolved in the variants of the pastoral critic, all gradual embodiments of this disintegration, right up to the advent of the archetypal modernist reader imagined in *Seven Types*, who is only able to entertain a wide variety of beliefs because of the absence of any definite foundations for belief.

This is why the substance of Empson's pastoral model of critical argument is already contained in his suggestive outline of an implied ethics of critical dialogue in the final chapter of *Seven Types*, where the appreciative/analytical divide is approached, to a great extent, as a stylistic and ethical problem, involving questions of tone and respect for the reader of criticism. Empson writes that '[i]t is as arrogant in the author [the critic] to hint at a subtlety as to explain it too fully; firstly because he implies that those who do not know it already are not worth his notice; secondly because he assumes that there is no more to know' (ST 289). It follows that '[n]ot to explain oneself at length [...] is a snobbery in the author and excites an opposing snobbery in the reader; it is a distressing feature of modern aesthetics, due much more to disorientation and a forlorn sense that the matter is inexplicable (it is no use appealing to the reason of ordinary people, one has got to keep up one's dignity) than to any unfortunate qualities in the aestheticians' (ST 289). A similar desire to appeal to the common reader surfaces in his discussion of 'wit' in *Complex Words*; as he noted in a letter to F.W. Bateson in 1953: 'It is true that in interpreting a period "equation" (between two meanings of a word) I act as a historian and say what I think the equation then meant, and there is often a slight jump; but I think that whenever a group of people (for example) assume that "the poet is a bright social talker" they will slide into thinking "the tone of polite society is the final judge of the arts". I too wanted not to be intolerable to the ordinary reader, a forlorn hope perhaps' (SL 208).

In a 'A Note on Notes' in *The Gathering Storm*, Empson refers to the puzzle interest of poetry as a perfectly legitimate poetic pleasure; and for him the pleasures of puzzle poetry are akin to the pleasure we take in a popular art form, the crossword puzzle. He then says:

Aldous Huxley has written very well about snob interest in poetry, 'that delicious thing old Uncle Virgil said, you remember'; and, as most people would, he treats puzzle interest as a branch of this. They are both good things, but I will not have my puzzle called their snob. There is no longer the field of 'general knowledge' that old Uncle Virgil used to be in, because there are now more interesting things to know than anybody (or any poet) knows. There is no longer therefore a justification for snob treatment of them; nobody any longer can say, even as a joke, 'what I don't know isn't knowledge'. We are left with puzzle interest, and this though it has most of the virtues of the old snob interest has a distinguishing feature; it is not offended by seeing the answers in the notes. (CP 113)

The essential, Empson remarks, 'is for the author to repeat the audience in himself' (P 61). Though Empson's preferred model for poetic and critical communication was indeed the theatre, he occasionally used other, more ambivalent models to convey essentially the same point. Commenting on Lytton Strachey's introduction to George Rylands's *Words and Poetry*, he noted: 'There is a charming introduction by Lytton Strachey, about Poetry being written with words, but it is a tiresome dogma...In fact, all the bad poetry of the moment seems to be written with words; I believe myself poetry is written with the sort of joke you find in hymns' (ARG 69). Fry has skilfully interpreted this passage as meaning:

that poetry written as an exercise in wordplay...is empty stuff, a mere 'complicated structure', whereas the true occasion of poetry is the longing for the reciprocal attention of other minds, a longing made absurd in hymns by the non-existence of the other mind addressed but marking for that very reason the poignancy and urgency of all poetry projecting its words into a silence.<sup>103</sup>

Fry also comments on Empson's sense of language and literature as essentially a dramatic phenomenon: 'not just drama but all poetry – indeed all uttered language by 1951 – is at bottom a stage where characters confront each other and perhaps meet; but in developing this idea with his greatest persistence in *Complex Words* Empson will naturally find his attention drawn most by the drama'<sup>104</sup>. Empson once wrote that '[g]ood writing is not done unless there are serious forces at work; and it is not permanent unless it works for readers with opinions different from the author's' (P 3). Literature thus conceived is a reflection of the

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<sup>103</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 17.

communicative model of drama: reading literature involves seeing it as drama, as if all the language of literature were dialogue or public rhetoric, propaganda delivered rhetorically, anticipating and denying responses simultaneously. But literature is an act of communication because language itself is an almost animate dramatic form. Hence Empson's permanent concern for the 'poetical public' and for the 'sense of audience' that writing, creative or critical, requires.

Indeed, when Empson implies a vision of his community of readers, his audience, he often relates this community to the theatre audience, noting degrees of similarity and difference. On this account, human communication, in life and in literature, is construed as the complex dialogue and exchange of feelings, emotions, and motives characteristic of a play, its characters and the aptly responsive audience creating a space of ironic intimacy and mutuality:

Probably an audience does to some extent let loose the hidden traditional ideas common to its members, which may be a valuable process, but it also forms a small 'public opinion'; the mutual influence of its members' judgements, even though expressed by the most obscure means or only imagined from their presence, is so strong as to produce a sort of sensibility held in common, and from their variety it may be wider, more sensible, than that of any of its members. (P 59)

This is why the Elizabethans, particularly Shakespeare, are so crucial to Empson's critical consciousness. Just as in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* his praise of Shakespeare had been a self-reflexive critical gesture, so in *Some Versions of Pastoral* the Elizabethans provide the examples with which Empson has the greatest empathy. The Elizabethan community constantly fosters what Empson termed 'a breadth of sympathy and judgement', a sympathy for all the conditions of mankind, but always in the ironic mode, or to quote Empson at some length on 'dramatic irony':

The two phrases 'dramatic irony' and 'ironical cheers', both concerned with an audience, take a wide view of irony as a matter of course. Dramatic irony, as the term is used, need only make some point (not a simple comparison) by reminding you of another part of the play. And the best ironical cheers do not mean 'obviously you are wrong' but 'obviously we can grant that; taking the larger view, your argument is in our favour'. [...]. Language seems to agree with me here, that double irony is somehow natural to the stage. The value of the state of mind which finds double irony natural is that it combines breadth of sympathy with energy of judgement; it can keep its balance among all the materials for judging. The word sympathy here is suspicious; it may range from 'able to imagine what some one feels and so understand

him' to 'prepared to be sorry for him, because you are safe and superior'; indeed it may have shrunk towards the second. (P 63-4)

For Empson, the greatness of the best Elizabethan drama and of the kinds of theatrical experience it typically affords derives precisely from the fact that, as Alpers writes, 'it accommodates so great a variety of people and still, by the power of the theatrical experience, makes them feel they are members of single audience'<sup>105</sup>. This invigorating process emerges from the sense of belonging that it inspires in its audience, thus helping to foster a space where multiple voices, experiences are viewpoints are able to co-exist and interact:

Mob thought may kill us before our time, but the scientist's view of it should not be warped by horror, and the writer who isolates himself from all feeling for his audience acquires the faults of romanticism without its virtues. Probably an audience does to some extent let loose the hidden traditional ideas common to all its members, which may be a valuable process, but it also forms a small 'public opinion'; the mutual influence of its members' judgements, even though expressed by the most obscure means or only imagined from their presence, is so strong as to produce a sort of sensibility held in common, and from their variety it may be wider, more sensible, than that of any of its members. It is this fact that the theatre is more really public than the public of novelists which has made it so fruitful, and makes its failure or limitation to one class a social misfortune. (P 65)

Because subsequent 'versions of pastoral' mark the breakdown of this ideal relationship between members of the community, the pastoral mode is suggestive of Empson's negotiation of the relationship between the ironic contradictions of intellectual sophistication and social commitment. And since 'literature is a social process', the pastoral mode firmly relates a writer to an audience. It is therefore also a firmly socialising act, setting forth the conflicts within the individual as mirroring the conflicts of society. It provides in short a more concentrated locus for the representation of divisiveness and conflict within a humanly sociable form, externalizing in a more public form the sense of commonality expressed in the central lines of 'The Garden': 'The mind, that Ocean where each Kind/Does straight its own resemblance find'. The size of the community will obviously depend on the background knowledge needed to enter it. We might even postulate a slightly modified version of the Davidsonian 'Principle of Charity': criticism (like the rationality that underlies its procedures

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<sup>105</sup> Alpers, Paul. 'Empson on Pastoral', *New Literary History*, Volume 10 (1978-1979), 115.

and forms of argument) is that on which we may ultimately agree, if we spend enough time talking to each other. After all, as he noted in 'Verbal Analysis':

The kind of criticism that most interests me, verbal analysis or whatever one calls it, is concerned to examine what goes on already in the mind of a fit reader; sometimes bringing up from the levels of unconsciousness deep enough to make it look rather surprising, but even so not expected to make much difference to the feelings of the fit reader after he has got over this surprise. Like all theories about the action of the mind, there is a sense in which it does not need to be expounded; if it is true, we are already acting on it all the time. The only use of it is when something goes wrong; but this is true of a good deal of knowledge, such as the ordinary car-driver's knowledge of the carburettor. A quite practical problem therefore often arises, as to how much of the analysis needs to be written down; often a very great deal could be written down which though true doesn't need saying (except indeed to forestall a certain type of objector, who likes to tell the critic he was ignorant of what was too obvious to need saying). If you are trying to tell your audience what it is missing, what the Elizabethans for example would feel about a passage whose language has been dulled, it is clear that you need to know your audience as well as your topic. (ARG 107)

Empson therefore steadfastly refused to accept the idea that the specialised authority of the theorist or analyst of language puts him beyond the dialogical reach of less analytically-inclined readers. After all, his claim in *Seven Types* and elsewhere was to 'show how a properly-qualified mind works when it reads the verses; how those properly-qualified minds have worked which have not at all understood their own working' (ST 248). This is important for Empson 'because I am treating the act of communication as something very extraordinary, so that the next step would be to lose faith in it altogether' (ST 243). But he still maintained that 'if analysis gets in your way, it is easy enough to forget it; I do not think that all these meanings should pass through the mind in an appreciative reading of [a poem]; what is gathered is the main sense, the main form and rhythm, and a general sense of compacted intellectual wealth, of an elaborate balance of variously associated feeling' (ST 79). After all, '[i]t is ordinary experience that our minds work like this; that we can often see our way through a situation, as it were practically, when it would be extremely hard to separate out all the various elements of the judgment. Most children can play catch, and few children are good at dynamics' (ST 11). He therefore insisted that the claims set forth in the practical chapters of close verbal analysis in *Seven Types* could be made easily available to the less consciously analytical mind since they merely reflect the common experience of every 'fit'

(i.e. competent, in structuralist-chomskyan terms) reader and thus formulate publicly the preconscious experience of every such reader. But he was also keen to point out that such public formulations were not altogether necessary, since they merely repeated in articulate form the 'main sense', 'a general sense of compacted intellectual wealth'.

There is in this respect a curious tension between Empson's claim to repeat what already goes on in the mind of a fit reader and the more performativist conception of critical statements that he seems to imply elsewhere. After all, he insisted in *Seven Types* that the analyst 'must convince the reader that he knows what he is talking about' (ST 287) and 'must coax the reader into seeing that the cause he names does, in fact, produce the effect which is experienced; otherwise they will not seem to have anything to do with each other' (ST 288). As Culler notes, the claims of analysis 'are not to be verified by surveys of readers' reactions to poems but by readers' assent to the effects which the analyst attempts to explain and the efficacy of his explanatory hypotheses in other cases'<sup>106</sup>. This is because Empson was deeply aware of the sophistication built into his own hypotheses, asking of his own responses to the texts he studied in *Seven Types*: "'To whom do they suggest such things?'" the reader may ask; and there is no obvious reply' (ST 85). He would thus always question the validity of his own claims, noting that such effects 'must rely, not perhaps on flashes of fancy in the directions I have indicated; I doubt if such occur in the normal reader; but on a sense that the words themselves, in such a context, include, as part of the way in which they are apprehended, the possibility of flashes of fancy in the directions I have indicated' (ST 116). For what Empson's method aims at is, as Lisa Rodensky argues in an excellent recent essay on *Seven Types*, 'an explicit working through of the possible meanings of the line in order to help readers identify what is already in their minds somewhere if they are actually understanding what they are reading'<sup>107</sup>. While the analytical critic may thus hope to unearth or identify the unarticulated contents of the ordinary reader's response, still all she can really

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<sup>106</sup> Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, 125-126.

<sup>107</sup> Rodensky, Lisa. 'New Impressions III: Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*', *Essays in Criticism* 53:1 (January 2003), 54-67, 59.

hope to do is convince the reader of the validity of her own response and thus begin the critical conversation. As Rodensky puts it elsewhere, conceding a similar tension between the veridical representation of a common response and the desperately sophisticated rhetoric of critical performance: 'you do not have to think exactly what I think, but these are the sorts of things that occur to us; this is the direction in which we move, and my naming these things for you will help you find your way to your own form of words'<sup>108</sup>.

This is not the only problem with a critical practice that claims to see 'all round a case'. Empson's taste for identifying multiple reasons for enjoying a single piece of writing, and for analysing a word's various meanings as possible interpretations made by readers with differing viewpoints, is meant to accommodate as many readers as possible. But this ambition sometimes had the opposite effect from the one intended, excluding rather more readers than it actually accommodated. Empson's tendency to multiply meanings and reasons has been perceived by some at best as a relativist lack of commitment and at worst as the outward sign of a complete subjectivism that denies any hierarchy of meaning and value. Thus, while his preferred form of critical argument involved using multiple viewpoints, the charge levelled against him was that criticism would undercut the collaborative dimension of criticism. Uncommitted to any particular point of view, such criticism obscures the focus of critical debate; simply put, it is much easier to compare two interpretations that both have a clear though different focus than to take issue with an interpretation that has no focus or centre to start with. Reviewers of *Seven Types* complained from the beginning that Empson included too much, that he was just too willing to consider any irrelevant detail in his discussions of individual poems or extracts; and indeed the same charges were levelled against later works, with one notable exception – *Complex Words* – which, rather than obscuring the object of critical debate by too wide a focus, tended rather to exclude too much (and too many readers) by taking an excessively restricted focus in the form of an individual complex word for each work it studied.

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

#### **IV. Reason, Feeling and Sympathy**

The charge levelled at the absence of any clearly defined hierarchy of values in Empsonian criticism is the corollary of a hesitation that ultimately concerns a reluctance on Empson's part to commit himself to a coherent and fully-articulated rationalist criterion of evaluative judgement. If his purpose was indeed to explain 'what goes on already in the mind of a fit reader', it was not for him to infer from such explanations how the fit reader should evaluate a text; rather, the critic's job was merely to articulate a common analytical ground as a means of initiating critical discussion. However, this apparent lack of interest in questions of value is difficult to reconcile with Empson's statements elsewhere on the ethical value of imaginative reading. For while he was reluctant to say what he believed the value of a particular passage might be, he was on principle keen to defend a view of literature as something that provides an insight into other people's minds and fosters social harmony – and therefore as something that has considerable ethical value. After all:

The main purpose of reading imaginative literature is to grasp a wide variety of experience, imagining other people with codes and customs very unlike our own; and it cannot be done, except in a Benthamite manner, that is, by thinking, 'how would such a code or custom work'? (ARG 75)

This is why he upheld the democratic pluralist creed of Benthamism:

The idea of making a calculation to secure the greatest happiness for the greatest number is perhaps inherently absurd, but it seems the only picture we can offer...the only alternatives to Bentham are arty and smarty moralising; giving unreasoned importance to a whim of one's own or the whim of a social clique. (ARG 217-218)

Yet when Empson does use terms of value in his discussions of particular passages, it is not always clear how they are designed to reflect his theoretical belief in the Benthamite calculus of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Nor is it clear just how such local valuations reflect his interest in cognitive truthfulness or rationalism as the standard and norm of critical interpretation. He once remarked that '[t]he catalogue of a picture exhibition is often very intimidating; a steady iron-hard jet of absolutely total nonsense, as if under great pressure from a hose, and recalling among human utterances only the speech of Lucky in 'Waiting for Godot', is what they play upon the spectator to make sure of keeping him cowed' (ARG 148). In literary criticism, however, it is the job of the critic to foster a rationalist, cognitivist



standard of critical debate; Empson wants to preserve the democratic element in criticism by demanding that a poem be defended by rational means; and a defence cannot exclude the process of cognitivist evaluation since any such defence will involve the appraisal of different ethical 'codes or customs' in terms of their truth-value.

Yet there is a sense in which Empson the practical critic contradicts this principled belief in Benthamism and truthfulness as criteria for rational judgement. This is especially true when Empson is discussing texts that evidently present a challenge to his own humanist beliefs, such as overtly religious poems or poems that involve a state of mind that is at the furthest extreme from his own sociability. In a conversation with Ricks, Empson complained:

I said, 'He has a singing line, hasn't he?' Meaning, as I thought, that he had the root of the matter in him. This chap pounced and said, 'That's it, you've got it! Just a writer of lyrics!' He thought that if it sounds pretty that means you're bad. Well, I thought he hadn't got the root of the matter in him. Milton could say 'God damn you to hell' and make a singing line, but these people think it's got to be ugly or they aren't sincere.

To a certain extent these valuations are in line with Empson's widespread use in his writings, from *Seven Types* onwards, of terms such as 'taste' and 'judgement', terms that do not fully embody the democratic rationalist principle that Empson wishes to defend in theory. The problem therefore is to give a coherent account of Empson's appreciative evaluation of good poetry, of poetic beauty, that does not contradict his defence of Benthamite virtue. It may be, as Dodsworth has commented, that

aesthetic appreciation gives pleasure without diminishing the pleasure of others, that it must always be a plus because it can never take away from others' happiness. Empson, however, does not argue this; it would entail locking 'taste' into an aesthetic sphere separate from that of truthfulness. The aesthetic is nevertheless important to him. This is suggested by his writing about the pleasures afforded by Donne and his peers rather than those afforded by Agatha Christie and other popular writers who have Bentham-friendly mass readerships. Of course, this preference might be based on some version of truthfulness, but it is not clear when he talks of 'all Donne's best poems'...he might as well have said 'most truthful poems'.<sup>109</sup>

As Dodsworth observes, the presence of terms such as 'bad line' and 'good poems', but also of 'force' in his essay 'Donne and the Rhetorical Tradition', is a sign of this implicit reliance on aesthetic values that are not fully defined but that are difficult to reconcile with any

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<sup>109</sup> Dodsworth, Martin. . 'Empson and the trick of it'. *Essays in Criticism* 51 (1):101, 2003, 103.

standard of realist truthfulness. Writing about Donne, Empson comments:

His repeated metaphor of the separate world...only stood for a subtle kind of truth, a metaphysical one if you like, and in a way it pretended to be only a trope; but it never stood for something so real that he could brood over it again and again. The question is one of truth, or rather truth-feelings... (ER1 69)

Thus, '[e]ven to say that the issue here is one of truthfulness is to say too much. The substitution of "truth-feelings" for "truth" does, after all, remove the emphasis from reason to emotion, even to aesthetics, though of course it need not imply a separation between the two. It is an outward sign of the underlying tension. That tension is present, for Empson, at least, even *within* the word "truth-feelings", because it is obviously related to the pseudo-statements of Richards, whose relegation of poetry to the merely aesthetic by use of this term Empson always found difficult to accept'<sup>110</sup>.

Even when Empson explicitly uses truth as his criterion of judgement, there is an ambiguity in his use of the word that reflects this same tension – the tension between truth and truth-feelings, between analytical truth and appreciative taste. This conflict between aesthetic judgement and scientific rationalism is exemplified in Empson's constant appeal to the dual process of understanding and imagination in reading. He wants to foster understanding above all else, including self-understanding – since he wants to articulate what already goes on in the mind of the fit reader – and this will require imagination, even imaginative sympathy, in order to appreciate unfamiliar beliefs or values. But as Dodsworth rightly notes:

Still, understanding the 'subtle kind of truth' in Donne is a deeply ambivalent process, since it could be taken to mean one of two things; either he wants to see Donne as telling the truth about the world in some way that could be validated by argument. His frequent use of the term 'argufying' in his discussions of Donne suggests this might be the case, but there is also a strong tendency to take 'true' in a psychological or dramatic sense. According to this way of thinking there is no need for what a poem says to be literally true; it need be true only in the sense that its more or less palpable untruths cast light on the state of mind of the person from whom these statements are supposed to come.<sup>111</sup>

This is precisely the point of Empson's treatment of a Housman poem in the opening chapter

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

of *Complex Words*, where he briefly outlines his own solution to the problem of belief thrown up by Richards and Eliot. According to Empson, nearly every statement in the poem is untrue, yet the whole poem is very good:

This kind of untruth (which need not be imputed) does not hurt the poem because you still have to imagine a person who is deeply convinced of the general case he is making out. And it seems clear that you can feel invigorated and deepened by the process of imagining this character, without agreeing with him at all. (CW12)

It may well be that the 'subtle kind of truth' in Donne is akin to the 'kind of untruth' in Housman. However, here it would be difficult to make a case for aesthetic value along the lines of such a criterion, since as Dodsworth notes 'any kind of untruth can lead us into contemplating the state of mind of the person who utters it, whether that person seems "deeply convinced" or not. No aesthetic judgement is implied at all, and even if such a judgement were implied it would not be founded on the worth or truthfulness of the beliefs making the particular state of mind reflected in the poem, but merely upon the reader's realization of the inherent otherness of that state of mind'<sup>112</sup>. In fact, Empson's reading of the Housman poem, intended as a partial response to the Richardsian problem of belief, goes some way towards balancing the tension between truth and understanding, reason and sympathy.

For with the Housman poem, the issue for Empson was to determine how a reader can appreciate and enjoy a poem without sharing the beliefs expressed in or underlying the poem. He is at great pains to show that our appreciation of most literary works is clearly not diminished by differences of belief, though this does not mean that a work's structure of beliefs is unimportant or irrelevant to its literary appreciation. To set aside the beliefs expressed in the poem would drastically reduce the depth and relevance of our appreciation. It is not that the beliefs expressed in the text need not be attended to or ignored; but their integration into the act of appreciation and the broader experience provided by the poem depends upon our ability to adjust our pragmatic engagement with these beliefs so as neither to discount them entirely nor let them shape our enjoyment of the poem. This ability to

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

pretend and accept is not truly believing nor disbelieving; rather, it is an imaginative projection and reconstruction of the pragmatic implications that would follow from the hypothesised application of the beliefs expressed in the poem. Such an ability characterises Empson's conception of the act of imaginative sympathy upon which his solution to the problem of belief depends: 'The solution to the problem of belief, as to how one can enjoy the literary expression of beliefs which we don't hold, is not that we separate them from their consequences but that we imagine some other person who holds them, an author or a character, and thus get a kind of experience of what their consequences (for a given sort of person) really are' (CW 9). The reader is enjoined to see beyond the actual value of the beliefs expressed in the text and to carry out the requisite pragmatic adjustments that allow for an assessment of the internal logic of the beliefs that inform the world of the text – this is Empson's way of resisting the fallacy of taking the value of the represented values at face value. The enjoyment of a work that is founded upon alien modes of belief and the concomitant pleasure involved in its reception and analysis thus depend upon the pragmatic nature of our interaction with the text and upon a passing sympathy with structures of belief we do not necessarily share. To engage with a fictional literary world in this way will invariably allow readers to feel what it is like to experience things they have never experienced before and perhaps never could. The mode and conditions for the enjoyment of a poem, irrespective of the beliefs it expresses, therefore also determine the extent to which the ethical dimension of literature is liable to be fully realised and manifested. The act of imaginative sympathy is thus the precondition for both the enjoyment involved in the reception of the text and for the realisation of the ethical dimension of literature.

In Empson's view, both the literal and the metaphorical meanings of the poem are absurd and 'plainly untrue'. He nevertheless contends that 'it is one of [Housman's] finest poems, which is saying a good deal' (CW 12). His point is that 'one must not be led aside into supposing that its merit depends on a belief that Housman was sincere' (CW 12), for if that were indeed the case, the analytical critic would be hard put, once again, to 'write with pleasure about its merits' (CW 12). The text can only be fully appreciated if the reader is able

'to imagine a person who *was* in the "mood" expressed by the poem, who did believe these assertions, and who faced them with the pride, calm, and pity which the poems conveys. The point is not that their truth or falsity is irrelevant, but that you are asked to imagine a state of mind in which they would appear true. True perhaps within a particular world of experience, maybe a narrow one, but true somewhere' (CW 12). But Empson further argued that to commit the fallacy of taking the represented beliefs at face value without allowing for subsequent critical detachment is likely to generate error and delusion and thus to lend weight to Plato's claim that literature and art falsify, misinform, and propagate undesirable beliefs and attitudes, particularly in the young. Empson taught the Housman poem to a Japanese class in 1931. His students' readings were strikingly off the mark precisely because they committed the fallacy Empson is arguing against; he summarised the gist of their response: 'We think Housman is quite right. We will do no good to anyone by being killed as soldiers, but we will be admired, and anyway we are better dead' (CW 13).

To further substantiate this point, Empson engaged in a critical revision of Richards's work on poetry and belief. Richards had argued in *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Science and Poetry* that the kinds of statement made in poetry are essentially emotive (i.e. non-cognitive, or non-referential) and depend for their effect, not upon the truth or falsity of the propositions, but upon the attitudes which their acceptance evoke. Empson, who acknowledged that Richards subsequently modified his view on this issue quite significantly, was careful not to deny that poetry tells 'excellent lies' (CW 11), but he did argue that the acceptance of untrue assertions is as likely to generate undesirable, i.e. unpleasant, absurd, and dangerous attitudes as it is to foster sound or desirable beliefs: 'I do not feel there is much puzzle about pleasant lies [...]; the puzzle is rather over lies which are unpleasant and yet readily absorbed by the reader' (CW 11). He therefore set out to determine the correct pragmatic attitude to poetic statements that would otherwise evoke or generate displeasure on account of the blatant absurdity of their application or their perceived undesirability. The result was a tentative revision of Richards's concept of pseudo-statement, a notion that more or less defines the logical status of literary propositions and is a logical extension of his

emotivism, since 'a pseudo-statement is "true" if it suits and serves some attitude or links together attitudes which on other grounds are desirable' (CW 11). Empson's main objection was to Richards's claim that 'except occasionally and by accident, logic does not enter at all' (CW 13). The point is that if Richards's characterisation were correct, not only would the attitude expressed in the Nettle poem be 'a very *un*-desirable one' (CW 13), that is 'if we regard its pseudo-statements as a series of stimuli imposed on the organism of the reader' (CW 13), but the failure to appreciate correctly the internal logic of its structure of belief will invariably result in a failure to engage in the imaginative experience of perceiving 'some other person in this frame of mind' and in an uncritical acceptance of the 'active false logic of persecution mania' that the poem *seems* to recommend. Empson was therefore careful to maintain a pragmatic and recognizable distinction between poetic, pretended acceptance and real belief, while at the same time acknowledging that the two are recognisably related and, more crucially still, not radically isolated. The pleasure involved in the reception of ostensibly unpleasant beliefs expressed in the text is therefore not impeded; what is more, the mode of reception thus defined does not allow for a commission of the fallacy that the solution to the problem of belief is designed to resist. An adequate understanding of the problem of belief, and the pragmatic care which has to accompany our engagement with the representation of widely differing beliefs, was never overlooked by Empson, and so the cheerful analysis of a large variety of literary texts, read and analysed with pleasure and understanding, remained one of his fundamental critical assumptions.

Still, Empson's apparent unwillingness to pass truth-value judgements on states of mind in poetry may justify the levelling of a relativist charge that he would otherwise disown in principle; it might also justify a criticism of the significance of his concessions to emotivism. But the relativist element in such judgements is merely the product of his apparent reluctance to commit himself to an evaluation of the state of mind expressed in the poem. The ideal of sympathy presupposed in Empson's dealings with other minds in literature thus leaves itself open to a number of tensions. In fact, a similar problem surfaces in his critical modes of address, both in public and in private, especially the typical openings he uses to

bring the ordinary reader into the orbit of his common sense. That Empson was so unwilling to tell people what to think is reflected in those openings that appeal to the common sympathy of the reader. In one sense, the self-deprecating appeal to the sympathy of the reader reflects Empson's own ideal of imaginative sympathy in literary experience. Dodsworth writes that:

The highly personalised terms in which Empson couches his appeal to the imaginative resources of Housman's readers ('you still have to imagine...you can feel invigorated and deepened...without agreeing with him at all') mirrors his own frequent use of the first-person singular in his writings, which serves to remind us that in reading we always encounter another person, and along with that person, another set of codes and customs. The personalisation of criticism is a corollary of his rejection of the intentional fallacy, part of the process of bringing the reader into the heart of a writer, and therefore into the heart of that writer's purpose. Thus, whilst apparently in line with Empson's doctrine of truth in literature, this aspect of his style and practice effectively distracts attention away from the relation of aesthetic values to truth by emphasizing sympathy (and sympathy with the critic, at that) as an alternative value.<sup>113</sup>

There is indeed, as Dodsworth notes, a sense in which Empsonian criticism, though it is usually thought of as the one of the great intellectual, cognitivist projects of twentieth century literary criticism, is in fact to a great extent founded not on truth or reason, but on feeling and sympathy. This paradox emerges from the analytical critic's reliance on his taste, a word which occurs significantly in his earlier work, but is really present all throughout the Empson corpus, as I argued in chapter two: 'in any training for literary criticism one needs to get quite clear what I think usually is clear to those concerned, that they are expected to use their own Taste, and that it would be a very bad sign if they never disagreed with Teacher' (ARG 105).

As Dodsworth writes:

Criticism is about arguing the rightness of one's taste, making the case that the feelings one experiences are on rational grounds to be considered good. It follows that on occasion the critic will be right to trust his taste though the rational justification for it is not yet forthcoming: 'a literary critic must be prepared to say, "The is good, though I don't know why; not yet anyhow"...' [...] This is why he is always so tenacious in argument, for the critic so placed writes in fear of exposing himself to the superior rationalizations of another critic.<sup>114</sup>

In fact, this tension between reason and taste, reason and sympathy, is one that strikes at the very root of Empson's ambivalent sense of audience. On the one hand, to defend the role of

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<sup>113</sup> Dodsworth, Martin. 'Empson and the trick of it'. *Essays in Criticism* 51 (1):101, 2003, 107.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

articulate theoretical and cognitive generalizations in criticism is to admit the possibility of a critical discourse that is open and frank about its own intellectual assumptions because it wants to pose the conditions required to foster a democratic forum of critical debate. To theorize and to articulate cognitively is to reach out to an audience whose members are willing to submit their theoretical assumptions to close critical scrutiny not merely in the hope of achieving a finer understanding of themselves and the resistance that literary works set up to their assumptions. It is to proceed on the basis of a shared faith in communicability – in the possibility of making sense of, and fully articulating, our finest and most elusive assumptions about human experience and literary art. Theory assumes an essentially democratic belief in common sense, and seeks to improve the cash value of common sense through ever more articulate expression. In this sense, theory is a form of democratic intellectualization.

On the other hand, to maintain some indefinable, inarticulate criterion of taste is to acknowledge, however reluctantly, that there are many things that theory simply *cannot* express or articulate, that theoretical generalizations are necessary though ultimately inadequate substitutes for the idiosyncratic response of each individual to irreducibly specific events in life or literature. A criterion of this nature lays itself open to the charge of elitism, since it cannot (or will not) make its own theoretical assumptions available for discussion and maintains a veil of obscurity over the intellectual mechanisms that characterize its own sophisticated interpretive procedures. It defends itself by claiming that its subtlety is something that remains out of reach of articulate expression and resists our best efforts at communicating its theoretical implications. In doing so, it limits the possibility of discussing the logic of its own ultra-refined encounters with specific events, with which it engages on terms set by the event itself and by the individual's highly stylized critical sensibility. In this sense, taste is a form of anti-democratic intelligence. It is sensibility raised to the highest point of exclusive refinement. At best it will foster a highly exclusive critical community; at worst it equates to a self-imposed form of solipsistic elitism. At any rate, this tension evidently complicates the notion of an Empsonian critical community, since taste thus defined represents an obstacle to participation in such a community. Participation presupposes an



engagement in rational discussion where the assumptions that underlie any claim a participant makes are subject to public assessment and appraisal. Empson's rationalism might thus be seen as a difficult, conflict-ridden attempt to stave off the dangers of individual taste and personality, and in particular his own taste and personality. Deeply aware of his idiosyncratic attitudes, Empson felt compelled to resist the urge to indulge his personality lest the critical work lost contact with its intended audience.

### V. The Limits of Irenic Sympathy

The tensions that partially undercut Empson's ambition to persuade by rational means are also reflected, as I have briefly mentioned above, in his critical manner and tone. For despite his desire to win the sympathy of his readers by presenting himself as an ambivalent equal to other rational subjects, usually the advantage he wins is a matter of argument that consciously and deliberately seeks to disagree with his fellow academics and not, crucially, with the ordinary reader, with whom Empson wishes to identify himself – at least in theory. In *Seven Types*, Empson wrote that '[m]y attitude in writing it was that of an honest man erecting the ignoring of "tact" into a point of honour' (ST ix). Elsewhere he claimed that he was 'attracted by the notion of hearty indifference to one's own and other people's feelings, when a fragment of the truth is in question...' (AG 122). One may ask just how likely such statements are to create a community, particularly since it is not merely the possibility of persuasion that is at stake here, but the very desire to persuade. Empson's typical openings begin with *disagreement*, not agreement: '[p]erhaps the best way into this good book is to quarrel with it on points of detail; that is often the best way of showing that a thing is interesting' (ARG 207). Or: 'I have been reading Mr Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* with enjoyment and admiration, and want to write down the points at which I disagree with it. The minds of critics often work in this disagreeable way, and I hope I am right in taking for granted that the book as a whole does not need summarising or defence. Indeed I agree so fully with his general position that if I were attacking him I should be attacking myself' (ARG 282). And again: 'A short review of such a book had best look round for the

points of disagreement, but the main body of it seems to me true and convincingly argued' (ARG 341). And finally: 'As I want to attack this book I had best say at the start that it is worth attacking, and contains important truths, and is in line with other influential writers' (110). The principle beneath such disagreement may have been that 'to decide why such a critic is wrong is to discover real issues' (ARG 566), but it is not certain that the agonistic tendencies suggested by these openings could be made to square completely with the theoretical principle of irenic persuasion outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

For what all this tends to obscure is the fact that even if criticism starts with disagreement, still what we ultimately seek is irenic agreement – a fact that Empson was keen to defend as a matter of principle: 'What else does one write criticism for except to win agreement?' (SL 534), as he once put it in a letter to Ricks. Elsewhere he remarked, in a rare moment of immoderation:

I will now try to say what mankind really does want, regardless of platitude and of the narrowness of my own experience. They like affection and good humour on the basis of adequate mutual respect. Of course you do not want people too soft, but toughness is not an end in itself, only the basis for securing affection. We tend to under-rate the craving for company because we are seldom short of it; but after a few weeks of complete solitude most people will 'do anything' (as they say) for company; it is a much more imperious craving than sex. Our whole mental life is based on being social animals. Of course the man may quarrel with his company when he gets it, and feel pleased about that; but what he chiefly needed was the company. The test of Pascal, in short, is I think the decisive one, though he chose to draw exactly the wrong conclusion from it. (ARG 560)

I have already intimated how much evidence there is to suggest that the company Empson wished to agree with was non-academic, that he was, in fact, addressing himself to the general reader. So Dodsworth may be right to stress 'Empson's appeal for sympathy' by self-deprecation, but it is important to see just why the sympathy thus sought was not universal. In fact, it excluded precisely those who were most likely to listen – his fellow academics – and appealed to the sympathy of a being whose existence even Empson himself had begun to doubt – the ordinary, tolerably well-informed reader. Dodsworth only quotes the more irenic openings, 'those which self-deprecatingly confess to a limitation'<sup>115</sup>, but it is a confession designed only to impress the ordinary reader: 'To prate about Death and its Desires is almost

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<sup>115</sup> Dodsworth, Martin. 'Empson and the trick of it'. *Essays in Criticism* 51 (1):101, 2003, 111.

necessarily silly, if only because the mood of theorizing is so far from the mood of experiencing...' (ARG 535). Or again: 'I have been requested to give a talk on Basic, and it might seem there is not much to be said' (SSS 162). For Dodsworth, the appeal for such sympathy is a corollary of Empson's defense of sympathy in the reading of imaginative literature, but it is important to see that such appeals are strategically designed to gain the sympathetic support of a certain class of reader – the ordinary reader. A further problem is that they are often undercut both by the paradoxical effects of Empson's populist style, to which I will shortly turn, and by the frailty of his faith in the existence of the ordinary reader as a nub or focus for critical debate.

Another problem with Empson's irenic desire for sympathy emerges from his taste for informality, for the colloquial subversion of pomposity. Haffenden observes that Empson 'loved the disarming kick of informality'<sup>116</sup> in his prose, but there is a sense in which the disarming kick may become just too agonistic. As Stefan Collini puts it in a perceptive review of Haffenden's edited selection of Empson's letters:

It is true that [Empson's informality] seems to puncture any pomposity on his own part, but it can, in context, simultaneously have the opposite effect: by staking a claim to see through all forms of cant and to have a securer hold on the fundamentals of life, it puts everyone else in their place. Patrician demotic, one of Empson's favoured registers, can be an attractively deflationary mode, but it can also be condescending or superior in the way it pooh-poohs the earnest pettinesses with which we mostly prop ourselves up. When this was combined with that 'hearty indifference to feelings' which this otherwise warm-hearted man allowed himself once he unsheathed his sword, he became as likely to provoke resistance as agreement. One cannot help wondering whether the critic who exhibited an unparalleled sensitivity to nuances of tone in literature can really have been unaware of the effect of some of his own preferred tones.<sup>117</sup>

The tension between Empson's 'unparalleled sensitivity to nuances of tone in literature', as well as his sensitivity to the nuances of ordinary speech on the one hand, and his preferred style of critical address on the other, will be seen to underlie the fractures beneath his ambivalent sense of audience.

Empson's desire to appeal to the ordinary reader, wedded to his acknowledgement of

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<sup>116</sup> Haffenden, John. 'Introduction', in Haffenden, John (ed.). *Selected Letters of William Empson*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. xiii-xlix, xxxvii.

<sup>117</sup> Collini, Stefan. 'Scraps of Empson', Review of Haffenden, John (ed.). *Selected Letters of William Empson*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, *Times Online*, July 05 2006.

the breakdown of 'general knowledge', is precisely what led him to annotate his poetry:

There is a genuine crux about notes giving information because the notion of general knowledge has changed. In the eighteenth century culture was unified; every educated person knew about Virgil; you could fairly, without causing offence, introduce a reference to Virgil without explaining it, so as to imply 'well, if you don't know that, you had better go and find out at once'. But nowadays there is no (or only a very bare) field of knowledge that an educated person is sure to know about; by an educated person I mean merely a person who would appreciate the poem if he could understand the references....I do not mean simply that anyone may have a gap in his general knowledge; I mean that there is no normal field of general knowledge, no hierarchy even of pieces of knowledge some of which it is less discreditable not to know than others. (ARG 71)

As he wrote in a letter to his publisher Ian Parsons in 1929: 'I should apologize for notes on such a scale, and say it was more of an impertinence to expect people to puzzle out my verses than to explain them at the end, and I should avoid the Eliot air of intellectual snobbery...When I am not actually faced with explaining them I feel notes aren't wanted: but I think people would be more easily tempted to read verse if there was plenty of critical writing thrown in, demanding less concentration of attention, and with more literary-magazine or novel-reading interest – I know *I* should. And there is a rather portentous air about compact verses without notes, like a seduction without conversation' (SL 6-7). He therefore despised 'urbanity', defined as 'being able to assume any form of cultivation in the audience' (ARG 110):

I quite see that no one has yet written notes to his own poems without looking a fool, but as knowledge becomes increasingly various it will eventually have to be done. Nor is this an arrogant act; people tend to be offended if a word is explained in the notes which they happen to know, but this is simply a mistake on their part. They merely happen to know it; nothing that anyone is likely to explain in notes is now a thing that every cultured man ought to know. And on the other hand not to explain a term which competent readers of the poem may have to go and look up is an arrogant act; it assumes that the line of poetry is worth their taking the trouble to go and find a dictionary. Much of the present day distaste for modern poetry arises simply from this change in the relation of the cultured public to general knowledge; no one is to be blamed for it, and it could be got over sensibly enough if the poets were sufficiently sure of themselves to adopt the right tone, and if the public would take a sufficiently historical point of view not to be easily offended. (ARG 71-72)

The process of expansion that Empson's annotations were designed to embody reflect his pastoral principle of 'putting the complex into the simple', of translating into more prosaic ('Basic') language the complex rhetorical manoeuvres of poetic density. But his concession to just how much needs to be expanded – indeed, to how much can be expanded – is itself

deeply ambivalent, as I now hope to show.

## VI. The Art of Reluctance

In a brief note on Edgell Rickword, Empson commented that ‘Edgell was very strong on the French side, and drew attention to that influence, so I feel it is worth pointing out that he could also make great use of the then recently recovered Englishmen’ (ARG 428). Situated between Rimbaud and Baudelaire on the one hand and Donne and the Elizabethans on the other, Rickword refused ‘to elaborate the tacit comparisons’ (ARG 429), as well as ‘the tacit symbolism’ (ARG 429). Yet Empson was still unable to decide ‘why these two things which I have just called “tacit” give such a strong impression of different backgrounds’ (ARG 429). In fact, his distaste for the grand generalizations of theory – and the correlative fostering of a populist style that ostensibly sought to undercut the wordy pomposity of academic theory and rhetoric while still avoiding the charge of snobbishness, of ‘not knowing what had seemed too obvious to say’ – can be understood in terms of this interest in the ‘tacit’ element in language, especially when Empson can be seen celebrating the rich ordinariness of his preferred version of English. In his famous letter to Norris about ‘Nerrida’, Empson wrote: ‘I feel very bad not to have answered you for so long, and not to have read those horrible Frenchmen you posted to me. I did go through the first one, in translation, Jacques Nerrida, and nosed about in several others, but they seem to me so very disgusting, in a simple moral or social way, that I cannot stomach them’ (SL 514). One area where Empson takes issue with Derrida and his like is on the apparently innocuous question of style, complaining that French theorists ‘use enormously fussy language, always pretending to be plumbing the very depths, and never putting your toe into the water’ (SL 515). In his review of *Why Mr Bertrand Russell is not a Christian* by H.G. Wood (1928), by contrast, Empson singled out the qualities of Bertrand Russell’s prose, of his ‘English way of thinking’:

It is an excellent thing that Mr Russell’s statements should be taken up and complained of; he has a great power of producing arguments enough for the immediate effect, and going no further than seems convenient. He knows the latent fallacies as well as anyone, thinks himself capable of reconciling them with his position; often has already done so; but is subtle only where it seems interesting, and is not pained by crudity elsewhere. This is the English way of thinking which seems

so unscrupulous to the Continental; it has great virtues; it gives great resilience to the thinker, never blurs a point by too wide a focus, is itself a confession of how much must always be left undealt with, and is beautifully free from verbiage. To an enemy it looks like sheer cheating. (ARG 526)

This sounds remarkably like Empson's oft-repeated concession that there is much in poetry or criticism that cannot be said, that even the subtlest forms of linguistic articulation must always fall short of a full expression of the sheer wealth and density of experience. Thus, unlike Eliot's or Arnold's faintly Romantic views of the unifying power of poetry, Empson's criticism contains within itself a strong sense of the limitation of poetry. For him, there is much of human experience and human nature that poetry cannot incorporate.

But Empson's qualified praise of Russell's style could also be read as a subtle put-down of the grand generalizations of philosophical theories or systems, ostensibly the most complex forms of linguistic articulation, always anticipated and exceeded by the singularities they are designed to tame, by the local provisionality of our investigations, by the irreducible complexity of even the simplest or most prosaic forms of linguistic articulation. This, indeed, is Empson's chief stylistic bone of contention with theory in the style of Derrida – that its veneer of discursive complexity and sophistication would always fall short of the largely tacit doctrinal richness of normal, even colloquial, usage, which mattered more to Empson than the official doctrines and explicit statements of theory, politics or philosophy. As he put it in his conclusion to the chapter on 'The English Dog' in *Complex Words*:

It is surely a striking reflection that a great deal of the thought of a man like Dr Johnson, and probably the parts of his thought which are by this time most seriously and rightly admired, were not carried on his official verbal machinery but on colloquial phrases...that he would have refused to analyse on grounds of dignity, even if he had been able to...You need to know, as well as the serious opinions of a man...how much weight he would allow, when making a practical decision, to some odd little class of joke phrases...such as carry doctrines more really complex than the whole structure of his official view of the world. (CW 174)

This, indeed, is perhaps why Empson appeared to explain so much in criticism, and still thought that there was so much that must remain unarticulated. His remarks on the problems faced by the translator Arthur Waley apply just as well to Empson himself:

Mr Waley has always been confronted with a problem which is as much one of tact as of literary style. Rare and fascinating delicacies are liable to irritate or cloy, and even the most generous host has to consider how much the stomach of his crude guests will

bear. At many points I have felt in the past that he should tell more, but undoubtedly part of his success has depended upon stopping short and leaving the rest to be imagined at choice. (ARG 440)

Thus it is that 'the translator knows a lot more than he will tell' (ARG 441). This, indeed, is Empson's clearest statement of the limits beyond which the democratic analytical critic cannot go without perverting the effects of the democratic pastoral impulse<sup>118</sup>.

Empson's attitude towards the style of both poetry and prose (whether creative or critical) in the analytical mode of pastoral criticism conceives of style as conveying, however, obliquely, beliefs, convictions or assumptions often beyond the pale of propositional articulation. Such an attitude evidently lays itself open to the charge of elliptical obscurity and snobbishness, but Empson felt duty-bound to write in a style that would bypass the pompous limitations of the written academic word. When asked just how he managed to write in such an offhand prosaic style that resembled the 'slurred sound of unedited talk', he confessed that it had much to do with ignoring tact and with a sense that style could also become, as it were, a statement of principle:

[someone at a party] said, 'How do you manage to get it as loose as that? Do you

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<sup>118</sup> This may also account for his ambivalent views on both the use of foreign languages and philosophy in poetry. See for instance his review of a selection of poetry by Wallace Stevens: 'This selection made by Mr Wallace Stevens from his poetry ought certainly to be welcomed in England; he has been highly admired in America for thirty years, and it is time he was better known here. There is one unfortunate feature of his style which ought to be noticed, what he calls "beau linguist" perhaps (p.106), as in the line "I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo" (p. 128). Walt Whitman also liked throwing in foreign words, to the effect "Comes the dawn, *camerados*; pre-sophisticate your *tief toilettes*", but Henry James, having more actual foreign contacts, said it was rather a pity Whitman knew all those bits of foreign languages. It is not offensive in Whitman once you realise that he is trying to be all-inclusively democratic; a reader is supposed to feel personally welcomed, in the new dawn, when he meets a bit of his quaint old mother-tongue, though it is out of date because American English is somehow taking over the whole world. But other writers, English as well as American of course, have taken a very different attitude to Europe and felt themselves raw by contrast to it; then the suggestion becomes "Just look at our Wallace, bandying the flashing bon mot with the foreign lady of title; doesn't he seem at home?". It was also a fault of Oscar Wilde to be startlingly at home in high society, and Mr Wallace Stevens, very well-to-do it appears, and growing up in the heyday of Oscar Wilde, was perhaps more influenced by him than by Whitman. But then again, though one can pick on examples which seem definitely mistaken, it is obviously a good thing for a poet to be aware of foreign languages; maybe the English-speakers are no longer learning them enough. Actually there isn't much of this foreign-language trick in his poetry, but there is something rather like it; an idea that it is enough entertainment for the reader to see the poet trying on a new fancy dress. There is also a good deal of philosophising, which the reader dare not say he has quite understood, but the main point of it, and indeed the reason why it is hard to follow, seems to be an idea that a person like this doesn't really need to philosophise. One need not object to this attitude in principle, in fact it can make good poetry, but it comes to feel very airless. One can't help wishing he had found more to say, if only because he could evidently say it'. (ARG 426-427)

dictate it?' I explained I used beer, but that when I saw the stuff in print (I had to admit) it shocked my eyes as much as it did his...One thing is, I have to read so much Mandarin Prose now, especially in literary criticism, and am so accustomed to being shocked by its emptiness, that I feel I must do otherwise at all costs. (SL 256)

The style was thus something that Empson cultivated intensely; in one letter he referred to the 'absurd amount of time' spent 'trying to write decent prose, so that the reader can get the point without bother' (SL 167). Or as he noted in a letter to Richards, commenting on the reception of *Some Versions* and *Complex Words*: 'I had been feeling that my prose style in the book was too tense and twitchy to be readable or even sound true, so I was comforted by an adverse review in *Tribune* which said the style was so slack, like a fireside chat. There was a reviewer of *Pastoral* who said it was obviously improvised and printed without second thoughts, but maybe this was better than trying to be accurate; which pleased me as I had spent so many years trying to make the style natural' (SL 243).

There is in fact little agreement about the political implications, the submerged cultural allegiances, of Empson's conversational style. As Fry writes, discussing the implications of Empsonian style as the 'conversation of a Dissenting Gentleman': 'Empson's style has long been seen by admirers and detractors alike as somewhat out of keeping with both his populism and his intellectualism. Everyone has recognized in this style the transcribed talk of the gentry, but there is little consensus about its undoubtedly complex strategic aims'<sup>119</sup>. That there is indeed such disagreement over the 'complex strategic aims' of the style must be the sign of a profound ambivalence. Muriel Bradbrook noted in her review of *Seven Types* 'the facetiousness, the desire to "show off" his varied talents, the effort to undercut the specialists and awe the undergraduate'<sup>120</sup>. There is indeed a sense in which Empson's colloquial, conversational style, while designed to reach out beyond the narrow confines of academia, may not, crucially, have been designed to win the sympathy of anyone in particular. Colloquial and conversational: such, indeed, are the two main traits of the style, one that is at once 'refreshingly "low-brow"', and much more entertaining than Mr. Eliot's

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<sup>119</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 29.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Mason, H.A. 'William Empson's Criticism', *Scrutiny*, 4/4, March 1936, pp. 431-434; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 79-82, 79.



“ex-cathedra” manner<sup>121</sup>, as one reviewer of *Seven Types* opined. The low-brow style may indeed at one level be designed to entertain, but it is also highly conversational. Empson remarked in *Complex Words* that ‘[a] knowledge of the style can sometimes feel so like a knowledge of the spoken voice that we seem to pick up the intonation directly’ (CW 63). The ‘low-brow’ quality of the prose is in fact at the root of Empson’s praise of English, even its trickiest forms:

One chief reason for the specially English and American words ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ is that the language is full of secret tricks, very good tricks that make the fullest use of languages, and so hard that most men get tired of them. But it is now in need of a fixed regular form for special uses, such as was given to French more completely and much earlier, and the reason it still has a chance to do this well is that it has the clearest root forms of any language and has kept on going back to them. (ARG 230)

There is of course a sense in which Empson’s conversational style was designed explicitly to place his writing as the product of a particular sociocultural standpoint at pains, not to transcend his own perspective, but ‘to be alert, both as critic and poet, to the character of his audience, to the way in which they understand things, to what they needed or liked to be told, to what arguments would sway or impress or incite them’, as Haffenden puts in his introduction to the letters (SL, xxvii). In ‘A London Letter’, Empson meditated on the differences between English poetry and American poetry, chiefly explained by social and linguistic differences that reflect the character of the different literary audiences addressed by poets in both countries:

You hear it said that in a real democracy the writer can tap the life of the whole country, whereas in a class-conscious country he is tied to his clique and the stuff is bound to be narrower in range. I doubt whether this applies much to verse, which has narrowed its range anyway because people feel you need special reasons for choosing the verse form at all. No doubt it has some effect on novel-writing, but even there the difficulty is much less in getting to know people than in getting the result across to the public. For instance, the point about dialects in England is that most villagers have a wide range between standard English and the dialect or indeed the several dialects, and put a great deal of weight on varying the talk with the person addressed and the feeling towards him. It is the same kind of thing as the elaborate syntax of polite forms in languages of the Far East. Nobody puts this into dialect novels except for the crude change to standard English. (ARG 416)

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<sup>121</sup> J.D.C. ‘Seven Types of Ambiguity’, *Revolt*, No. 8, 1 December 1930, p.20; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 23-25, 24-25.

While it is clear that such writing is designed as a means of fostering a community by approximating the spoken word, and not any mode of specialised discourse, still there remains a sense in which the alternative may not be any more likely to create the sense of belonging that its author hopes to foster. This is especially true of Empson's faith in Basic's paired-down list of verbs, and the correlative abundance of prepositions in both Basic and in his own prose style. In *Seven Types*, Empson remarked that '[t]he English prepositions from being used in so many ways in combination with so many verbs, have acquired not so much a number of meanings as a body of meaning continuous in several dimensions; a tool-like quality, at once thin, easy to the hand, and weighty' (ST 46). Indeed, his reliance on grammatical 'short-cuts' such as prepositions and pronouns, while designed at one level as moves in the direction of simplicity, could also sometimes have the opposite effect. While he may have wanted to simplify the complex, still his own stylistic alternative did not automatically make for more clarity. As Constable notes:

It is obvious...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.<sup>122</sup>

In the chapter on 'Feelings in Words' in *Complex Words*, Empson remarked that 'language is essentially a social product, and much concerned with social relations, but we tend to hide this in our forms of speech so as to appear to utter impersonal truths' (CW 18). But it is usually the casual tricks of language, not the grandstand effects or conscious avowals (or even doctrines), which have the most subtle effects. For instance, one simple type of mood is conveyed when a literary author uses quotation marks as a way of 'picking out the Sense intended by a personal hint...This is done in speech by various tricks, particularly by a slight pause before the word and then an unusually precise intonation of it. Both this and the written quotation marks can mean either of two things according to context: "What they call so-and-

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<sup>122</sup> Constable, John. 'Introduction' in Constable, John. (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp.1-14, 2.

so, but I don't" or "What I call so-and-so, but they don't", and "you" can be made to join either party. Thus there are several possible Moods behind a quotation mark' (CW 18).

Empson's letter to MacColl in 1952-1953 confirms this:

My first conviction is that the reader should throw himself into the verse, and not do it with 'reserved' English 'good taste'; that kind of falsity you will at least agree I avoided. I thought what I did was simply 'ham', like a provincial Shakespeare actor a hundred years ago, not a bad thing. What I chiefly wanted to get rid of, from the first version, was a 'snooty' effect, which the producer called 'proprietary' – 'you talk as if you didn't want them to know what it means'. I am not clear what class issue you raise by 'Fortnum and Mason'; it suggests trying to sound genteel, whereas my wife says she and some other people thought I sounded as if I was trying to sound low class. I wasn't conscious of either, but to make one's voice a bit less classy isn't a bad thing in itself; in Yorkshire, where I come from, to throw in a bit more dialect on suitable occasions is a recognised form of politeness for many people, not at all condescending. What is chiefly needed, for this kind of verse, is a style of speaking which allows you to emphasise a number of words close together, and this can't be done in classy colloquial English, where it is a positive mannerism to suggest that you are in an inner circle by being deliciously unstressed. (SL 188)

That such moves could lead to elliptical obscurity is the greatest criticism of Empson's style, and one that strikingly contradicts his statements of principle on the need for a democratic form of critical and academic debate. As Cleanth Brooks complained: 'Part of the difficulty is simply a matter of style. The prose is often charming or striking but it is often elliptical and involved. As a matter of fact, it reads for the most part like uncommonly good talk, but talk which, having been transcribed to the page, suffers from the lack of gesture, of inflection of the voice, of change in tone, which in the conversation would made all clear and easy'<sup>123</sup>. Thus, while there may be a case for celebrating, with Haffenden and Ricks, the casual precision of the colloquial as both more entertaining and richer in its doctrinal and socio-political implications, still Empson's academic 'dialect' may exclude rather more than it includes – precisely because in any conversation, there is much that remains unsaid. Even 'the delicious social hints and evasive claims-by-mumble of spoken English', which he found 'positive intoxicants' (ARG 156) might have excluded still more than 'the sloven's pomp of

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<sup>123</sup> Brooks, Cleanth. 'Empson's Criticism', *Accent*, date unknown. Reprinted from 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), pp. 496-508; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.), *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scholar Press, 1993, pp. 123-135, 126.

evasive jargon'<sup>124</sup>.

The style is in fact the corollary of Empson's unwillingness to tell people what to do, his anti-propagandistic state of mind. But the trouble with this attitude is precisely the one noted by Roger Sale in his elegant conclusion to a survey of Empson's work:

From his knowledge of history, which led so completely to an awareness that we cannot fly, Empson did not retreat. He led no movement to the Church or the simplifying arenas of politics or the academic study of literature, and I dare say he has written as he has because he is not sure if there is anyone to hear him. He had to find his strength in the idea that a limited audience could only be, like virtue and good manners, another reflection of the inadequacy of human conditions and of the isolation even of a life rich in intimacy. But in confessing such limits Empson discovered not only the heart of where he himself stands but the heart of the whole idea of literary stance. So, for many of the 'some things' that matter most, he is the first critic in the world.<sup>125</sup>

Thus, Paul Alpers may be right to observe that Empson's 'critical manner...can itself be seen as a version of pastoral. For it is of the essence of traditional pastoral to find styles of speech that express the possibilities of freedom and community within deeply acknowledged, sometimes deeply felt, limitations'<sup>126</sup>. Before Alpers (and Eagleton), Kenneth Burke had already noted, in the first of two reviews of *Some Versions*, the subtly deconstructive potential of Empsonian pastoral, designating as it does 'that subtle reversal of values whereby the last becomes first. They do this, not by assuming the qualities of the first, but by suggesting the firstness implicit in their lastness'<sup>127</sup>. Still there remains a sense in which Arthur Mizener's complaint in 1938 still holds true:

The critic who undertakes to use this method is in the awkward position of a man faced with the necessity of explaining a joke. If he explains too little, his tacit assumption that his knowledge is commonplace has the effect of making him appear

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<sup>124</sup> Empson's reply to Martin Amis, 'Guilty Rimer', *Times Literary Supplement*, 71/3693, 15 December 1972, 1524; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 461-464, 463.

<sup>125</sup> Sale, Roger. 'The Achievement of William Empson', *The Hudson Review*, 19/3, Autumn 1966, Excerpts, pp. 369-390. Appended are Empson's reply, Sale's rejoinder, and a comment from Robert Martin Adams, 'Letters to the Editor', *The Hudson Review*, 20/4, Winter 1967-8, pp. 534, 536, 538; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 445-456, 456.

<sup>126</sup> Alpers, Paul. 'Empson on Pastoral', *New Literary History*, 10/1, Autumn 1978, pp. 101-123; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 489-511, 490.

<sup>127</sup> Burke, Kenneth. 'Exceptional Improvisation', *Poetry*, 49/6, March 1937, pp.347-350; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 83-84.

in the end, not humble, but supercilious. Mr Empson has, how consciously it is difficult to say, taken the latter course by adopting a sophisticated version of the very device he is analyzing: he presents himself to his readers by a pastoral device; he is the revolutionary critic in the guise of a correspondent of the *Times Literary Supplement*. And while this device appears in the beginning to flatter the reader, it ends by flattering Mr. Empson and annoying the reader. Perhaps this effect was unavoidable; certainly it is not easy to see how Mr Empson could have avoided it without appearing fatuous. But it has the unfortunate consequence of forcing him constantly to belittle by implication the significance of his own work, first by omitting almost everywhere in the book a larger part of the argument than he has the right to expect the reader to supply, and secondly by giving the subject of his book a name which, for all its quasi-ironic aptness as a depreciatory gesture, is thoroughly misleading.<sup>128</sup>

In this respect, Eagleton may be right to note that '[t]he racy, underplayed speech of the patrician, in a familiar English paradox, makes implicit alliance with the tongue of the "people" over the heads of a linguistically pretentious bourgeoisie'<sup>129</sup>, since Empson clearly admires the broad appeal of plain language when used where a jargon might be expected, as when 'Eddington could carry on a profound discussion in...apparently popularising language' (CW 365). But such popularising gestures, as Fry has rightly noted, do not necessarily imply an appeal to the *vox populi*: 'there is a sense in which Empson's reflections on his own style refute Eagleton's Marxist contention about the stylistic alliance of aristocracy and proletariat, simply because Empson thinks, more realistically, of the public for reading and writing not as a three-class but as a two-class system broadly unchanged since the emergence of what we call the white-collar professions'<sup>130</sup>. As Empson himself wrote: 'Inherent in the delightful of [Rochester's] style there is also a puzzle about class. The reason he could talk in this absolutely plain-man way was that he was a great lord and a favourite of the king; a person of lower class, such as a university professor or a Puritan preacher, would obviously have to talk in a more affected manner' (ARG 275). Or as he put it elsewhere:

much more than French or German, maybe because it has accepted so many foreign influences, [the English language] positively likes to purge itself and act simple. If you heard Charles II talking to a Bishop, you felt not merely that he showed the man up to be a pedant, but that this was the right man to be King, because he spoke in such

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<sup>128</sup> Mizener, Arthur. 'The Truest Poetrie', *Partisan Review*, 5/1, June 1938, pp. 57-60; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 88-90, 88-89.

<sup>129</sup> Eagleton, Terry. 'The Critic as Clown', in *Against the Grain: Selected Essays*, New Left Books, 1986; third impression, London and New York: Verso, 1991, 150.

<sup>130</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice*, London: Routledge, 1991, 62.

an absolutely plain-man way. If you felt so you were deluded, and I do not say that the effects were good, only that the effects on the language were. Very few of our recent writers, in either country, seem to me to appreciate the need for this plain-man basis under an English style, readily left without losing the power to return. Practice in turning their own stuff into Basic really would be the kindest education in style you could give them, even if it made them realise how often they are talking nonsense. To pretend that it could possibly make them use the language worse than they do already sounds to me farce. (ARG 221)

The same class simplicity emerges whenever Empson reflects on the ambivalence of the English aristocracy: 'Whatever the French may have thought up about the English milord the real English class feelings have the merit of being peculiarly un-dandy; unlike most of Europe the English aristocracy was putting the younger sons into trade in the Middle Ages, and the practice was only partially and delusively interrupted by the increase of money available for corruption in the eighteenth century' (ARG 469). Praise becomes blame, however, with the 'dandy' tricks of the nineties:

The body of doctrines about dandies deriving from Baudelaire really has some truth I should say about artists, one which an artist may often have to face with heroism. But the trick of the nineties (particularly of Oscar Wilde) was to tie this on to politics and claim that the dandy ruled the world; he was the unacknowledged legislator of Shelley's epigram, though not yet 'outcast' because he had not yet been found out. Dorset in *Zuleika Dobson* has got the Garter robes to die in because he played with politics carelessly at a crucial moment. Dear me, of course it would be nonsense to say that artists ought to be cut off from the work of government, but I think there is some real delusion about the political role of the dandy which makes the book petty. (ARG 469)

Even the self-deprecating humility (so praised, as we have seen, not only by Eagleton, but also, more recently, by Dodsworth) that accompanies the 'delightful ease' of Empson's plain-man style is still open to the criticism that 'there is', as Mizener noted, 'a kind of inverted vanity at work in Mr. Empson's book which leads him to write as if his subject were much less important than it really is and as he must very well know it to be'<sup>131</sup>. And as A. Alvarez noted in his review of *Complex Words*: 'The irresponsibility intrudes from time to time into the writing; I realize that his compressed metaphorical style is probably cultivated to frighten off fools [...] and so any remarks here are two-edged; nevertheless, a style that can be very suggestive in literary criticism becomes obscuring and even a little irritating in the theoretical

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<sup>131</sup> Mizener, Arthur. 'The Truest Poetrie', *Partisan Review*, 5/1, June 1938, pp. 57-60; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 88-90, 88.

parts of the book'<sup>132</sup>. The style is, indeed, as Mark Thompson writes, highly elliptical:

Empson's elliptical style, his intuitive bolts that flood new lights on scenes and characters, forging unsuspected connections...More than any other Anglophone critic of his age, the gusto and airy trenchancy of his style, colloquial, nimble and condensed, has the quality of *sprezzatura*, the rehearsed spontaneity admired by Renaissance humanists. His focal statements – the load-bearing statements of principle – are usually buried in the texture of his analyses; he prefers not to launch them with a bang or build them up slowly. The effect is heady and baffling, often in the same moment.<sup>133</sup>

The greatest charge against Empson's style is precisely this: because of its ambivalent political allegiances, because of its role in downplaying the pomposity of academic prose and in hesitating over 'what needs to be said', because of its self-deprecating tendency to 'compress', it is obscure, elliptical. Once 'transcribed to the page', the conversational remainder – the unarticulated non-verbal signs or gestures that signify just as much as the words themselves – necessarily disappears without trace.

For John Wain, '[t]he difficulty seems less a matter of conscious mystification than of the elliptical conversation of equals'<sup>134</sup>. But there may even be a sense in which there are just no equals to talk *to*; or if they are, it is not even sure that they are listening. It was a style, indeed, that was not always even meant to reach out to Empson's equals, whoever they may be – since, as we have seen, it is not clear who Empson wishes to address himself *to*. The style is often simply designed to protect him from the fear that professionalism would deaden the pleasure of the text: 'It is the chief penalty of becoming a professional literary man that one can no longer read anything with pleasure' (ARG 362). This indeed, is one reason why despite his lively sense of addressing an audience in both public and private forms of writing, Empson's manner could be counter-productive, especially in his later years, as he himself realized: 'Some of the recent reviews of my work have wondered why I am so facetious, making it impossible to take what I say "seriously"' (SL 647), he lamented to Roma Gill in

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<sup>132</sup> Alvarez, A. 'Selected Notices', *Mandrake*, 2/8, Spring-Summer, 1952, pp. 174-176; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 259-260, 260.

<sup>133</sup> Thompson, Mark. 'Versions of Pluralism: William Empson, Isaiah Berlin, and the Cold War', *Literary Imagination* 8.1 (2006): 65-87, 72.

<sup>134</sup> Wain, John. 'The Poetry of William Empson', *Professing Poetry* (MacMillan: London, 1977), [284-330], pp. 284-293; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 479-488, 480.

1979. He defended himself by claiming that 'I can't bear to print a thing till I can read it over without feeling bored; if it feels boring, that proves it wrong' (SL 647).

The isolation caused by this need for intellectual self-stimulation was not enough to deter him, and yet he knew that it would not help him to gain the argumentative sympathy of his readers and fellow critics. It is to a great extent this perceived difficulty in Empson's critical manner that has helped to foster the various images of Empson as the licensed fool, the unindentured amateur and the vagrant Romantic genius. He wrote in a letter to Alvarez in 1956: 'You hinted in the pub after I read my poems that I was playing to the gallery; which rather amused me, because I suspected you were disillusioned at not finding them esoteric enough. They weren't meant to be at all esoteric. They came from more isolation and suffering than is suited to public performance, but that is well known to be true of most performance, including clowns' (SL 255). But the point is not that all the suffering and isolation condemns the 'critic as clown' to dwell irrevocably in a realm of private joking, even madness. As Empson himself put it in the letter to Madge quoted at the beginning of this chapter:

I smack this out in a state of moderate beer assuming that you are not appallingly sensitive. The difficult thing would be to say it tactfully, but I don't believe you are as neurotic as your piece of writing suggests. As to a public, of course there is a real muddle; the recent events have kept on showing a public opinion which I find I agree with, its muddle is my own, and I feel I can write decent (of course unselling) books with a notion that it is part of the country that provides the language. A man who doesn't feel that at all has of course a different situation, and I should have thought the straight way out was to bring in the politics firm and clear. Surely you haven't Magdelene [College] on your mind as a source of isolation? When I meet any of those old parties I am eagerly friendly out of gratitude to them for sending me away. Anyway, just as a point of theory, literary symbolism demands a public for symbolism; by all means imagine a public, and as a matter of fact you will imagine a real one; but those who write for no public are even unconscious of their asylum. (SL 98)

The point for Empson was to find a means of expressing, in a more sociable form, the forces that limited what he could say, the pressures that put a strain on his desire and capacity for sharing a sense of common humanity, to protect himself against the temptation of writing 'for no public'.

## **VII. Conclusion**



The charge against Empson's elliptical style is thus an important one, and needs to be both answered and partially acknowledged. Empson knew that if he was to foster a democratic sense of audience and thereby contribute to the 'taste of his period', he would need to commit himself to a critical 'constitution' that settled the terms of his relationship with his implied audience. For only then would he be in a position to develop a style that suited the demands, as well as the knowledge, of his desired audience. He always wondered how much needed to be said or articulated, and how much needed to be left out; indeed, it could be said that his own style was the conscious product of a profound awareness of just what style implied. His stylistic double-bind was the product of a combined effort to avoid both pomposity and snobbishness. Although pomposity could appear to have the virtue of spelling out doctrines rather than letting the complex words of casual or colloquial usage do the job of carrying an unarticulated and largely implicit doctrinal content, still such language also meant telling people what to do or think, and left little room for the non-specialist to engage dialogically with such terms. Pomposity was showing off, but it could also be the sign, paradoxically, of a refusal to commit oneself. In a letter to the *Spectator* in 1940, Empson wrote:

The trouble with 'ist' words in general is exactly the problem of your correspondents. 'Ist' words ought to mean men who hold definite doctrines, but they sag, first to mean men who take a side in a particular case, and then to men with a 'tendency' to take such a side. An *optimist* was at first a man holding a special (and as it worked out rather gloomy) doctrine, but the fatuous use of it to mean a hopeful man is now normal. The new '-ist' word *pacifist* only gives a fresh start to this process, and the start is not really fresh, because the suggestions of the word go the other way. A *pacifist* has commonly been a fanatic, and is now required to be such by the Conscription Boards; he has at least a definite opinion. The more refined *pacifist* sounds like a man in favour of being 'pacific', wherever possible presumably, so he is not a man with a fixed doctrine. (SL 130)

Empson also felt the need to combat snobbishness, feeling that '[t]he cosy chortle of the snob is out of place [in criticism]...because it assumes more knowledge than we have got' (ARG 266). The combined effort to avoid both pomposity and snobbishness through the medium of ordinary or colloquial usage could, however, create a tension, and it certainly did for Empson. The irony is that such colloquialism could also justify the charge of snobbishness, of 'not knowing what had seemed too obvious to say', since it is unlikely that a compressed colloquial or metaphorical style could articulate all that needed to be said.

It may just be that this difficulty reflects a tension between Empson's English taste for the clipped talk of the upper gentry and a more sociable, democratic resistance to the tacit or the implicit in language. But it is not merely an acknowledgement of what *should* be articulated; it is also the sign of a deep awareness of what *could* be articulated. For Empson's complex expressivism attempts to articulate the difficult synthesis of historical pressure and individual expression, a middle way awkwardly arrived at in *Complex Words*, after the more imaginative allegorical efforts of *Pastoral*. The tensions involved in the synthesising gestures of Empsonian expressivism are reflected and manifested in his complex dealings with the style and tone of criticism. Style in this sense is not just mindful of the tension between the irreducible singularity of each individual act of writing and its opposite, the pressures that shape the expressive possibilities open to us. For it also represents a means of defining the moral attitude that shapes our engagement with the conflict itself. Style might thus be seen as the politico-ethical practice that informs our willingness to dwell inconclusively between autonomy and necessity, between the rival claims of freewill and determinism. Thinking of style in this way involves recognizing the potentialities and limits of language, the forces of determinism, and the importance of recognizing these in our relationship with the readers addressed in poetry and criticism.

For Empsonian criticism needs to see poetry and criticism as essentially outward-looking – as expressive media that may dwell on internal conflict or irresolution, but that nonetheless seek to externalise these conflicts in a more sociable, and sociably harmonising, form. Empson once advised a Japanese friend to write 'verse with a variety of sorts of feelings in it...it might be a good thing to try to show the clash of different philosophies, and social comedy, and quote lines of poetry by people quite different from you that you have thought especially good' (SL 74). This was because he thought that the point 'about life is to keep a wide variety of interests so that you can keep moving from one to another before they get stale...Most of the poetry you have shown me is very introspective – more than you are in your own life, I should say' (SL 74). Poetry thus conceived is a distinctly intellectual medium that articulates contradictory values and hopes for (though it may not always achieve)

complete resolution. Just as poetry could combine and perhaps even reconcile conflicting viewpoints, so criticism could use multiple viewpoints to become the valuable collaborative activity that Empson wanted it to be.

## Chapter 5

### Divided Empson

'The contradictions cover such a range.  
The talk would talk and go so far aslant.  
You don't want madhouse and the whole thing there'. (CP 81)

#### I. Introduction

Empson's important draft essay 'Death and its Desires' (1933) contains this reflection on the centrality of contradiction as an aesthetic value and founding concept of theoretical generalisations:

I should say that in classifying any kind of heroic or exalted aesthetic formula the simplest thing is to give its root contradictions. This is not of course to say that a contradiction is valuable in itself or that an artist can safely repose on a statement of blank contradiction, but it needs to claim that given a contradiction the artist will be led to a certain class of notions and feelings. (ARG 547)

The dual object of previous chapters has precisely been to examine the underlying conflicts, the 'root contradictions', at the heart of Empson's own critical 'formulae'. In doing so, one consideration may appear to have been altogether overlooked, namely that Empson himself was deeply aware of the rival or contradictory claims that typically underlie or structure any system of thought – including his own. Indeed, not only was he always careful to outline such conflicts in his reflections on any poem, system or philosophy; he also showed a deep awareness of the dialectics of conflict and reconciliation, of contradiction and resolution, as a general philosophical and ethical problem *per se*. The more fundamental tension between conflict and reconciliation in Empson's work thus remains to be considered. This chapter will ask if Empson preferred reconciliation over conflict, resolution over irresolution, balance over deadlock, or if he ultimately allowed his early insight that 'life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis' to dominate his attitude to the conflicts and tensions that his reluctant critical theorising had thrown up. It will ultimately seek to shed light on the quasi-existentialist strains that emerge from Empson's dealings with contradiction and with his pastoral negotiation of the waste and limitations necessarily involved in any decision made in the face of irreconcilable conflicts.

Empson once concluded a brief article on Virginia Woolf with the following complaint:

‘How far that little candle sheds its beams’; but still it is the business of art to provide candelabra, to aggregate its matches into a lighthouse of many candlepower. If only (one finds oneself feeling in re-reading these novels), if only these dissolved units of understanding had been coordinated into a system; if only, perhaps, there was an index, showing what had been compared with what; if only these materials for the metaphysical conceit, poured out so lavishly, had been concentrated into crystals of poetry that could be remembered, how much safer one would feel. (ARG 449)

It is precisely the extent to which Empson himself was not only able, but also keen, to aggregate the ‘dissolved units of understanding’ into a coherent, coordinated ‘system’ or ‘unit’ that constitutes the subject of this final chapter. With Empson, the apparent tension between conflict and reconciliation is, as we shall see, equally important in his dealings with both poetry and criticism. Indeed, there is a sense in which the conflicts that Empson discovers in criticism derive from the conflicts that he sees at the heart of poetry more generally and that literature is designed either to reflect and, perhaps, to resolve.

Empson’s views on the role of poetry usually downplay the significance of the lofty pronouncements made by the high priests of Romanticism and that were still prevalent in the minds of some of the main representatives of the Modernist critical paradigm. A few decades before Empson, Matthew Arnold had erected poetry into a kind of criticism of life and surrogate for religion. This view was later refined by Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Science and Poetry*, claiming, with the support of his psychological theory of value, that ‘poetry...is capable of saving us’<sup>135</sup>. Richards thought that the poet, as a prophet and saviour, could act as an adequate substitute for religion in the age of science. As Empson put it in *Complex Words*, ‘the main theme of *Science and Poetry*, a moving and impressive pamphlet, is that the arts, especially poetry, can save the world from the disasters which will otherwise follow the general loss of religious and semi-religious belief; they can do this by making us experience what the higher kinds of attitude feel like, so that we adopt them of our own accord without needing to believe that we are repaid for them in Heaven or that they bring good luck on earth’ (CW 10). Finding it ‘absurd that the arts should be viewed as a

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<sup>135</sup> Richards, I.A. *Science and Poetry*, London: Kegan Paul, 1926, 86.

socially-important alternative to religion' (CW 8), Empson remarked that 'Richards's faith in the poets was a beautiful but rather unrealistic trait' (CW 8). Empson never subscribed to such theories of the role of poetry, adopting a far more moderate and less exacting view of what literature is and can do for us. The same, indeed, applies to the humility of his criticism, but it is a humility that was not blind to the commitments that it implied. Madge once offered an intriguing perspective on the kind of poetic attitudes that Empson and Richards allegedly shared:

Any positivist formulation of a 'function' for poetry is likely to fall short, and, on the whole, Empson and Richards avoid having to make one. Richards, for example, seeks aid in some 'untranslatable' terms from Confucius. This is to define poetry in terms of more poetry and this is, in fact, probably as far as one can go. The implied statement in the early Empson poems is therefore, to put it baldly, that the relation between the human and the non-human, the poetic and the scientific, the spiritual and the material, the personal and the impersonal, is so subtle that it evaporates in prose but can, in a sense, be expressed in poetry. Yet it is only metaphorically that poetry can be considered as performing so cognitive a function as expressing a relation. What it really does is to express an attitude towards exploring the relation. The function of poetry, therefore, is to express, and perhaps promote, the attitudes and motives of the explorers.<sup>136</sup>

This is why Empson's poetry might be seen as an attempt to offer a medium designed, if not to solve, then at least to give meaningful expression to possibly insoluble problems and, more importantly, to our relation to such problems. Furthermore, while poetry for Empson plays a far more humble or modest role than the Richardsian vision of poetry as salvation, it still needs to defend the ethical and psychological value of poetry if it is to justify the importance of the critic's ethical and educational role in society. For just as the Empsonian critic is chiefly interested in fostering a sense of community by showing how criticism itself functions as a collaborative activity, so the Empsonian poet might be expected to hold a similar, outward-looking perspective that justifies the continuity of the poetic and critical enterprises. In fact, Empson's vision of poetry contains an implicit tension between this outward-looking perspective and a more inward-looking, almost solipsistic, perspective. In order for the Empsonian poet to foster a similar social role to the one exercised by the Empsonian critic, he needs to demonstrate a commitment that has worked through the various conflicts or

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<sup>136</sup> Madge, Charles. 'Empson Agonistes', *Listen*, 2/1, 1956, pp. 19-22; reprinted in Constable, John (ed.). *Critical Essays on William Empson*, Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar Press, 1993, pp. 344-347, 344-345.

antinomies that could limit the articulate expression of poetic meaning. Such appears to be, at any rate, the final, more self-reflexive tension at the heart of Empsonian poetics. Such is also the paradoxical justification for the tone of this final chapter, which contains some of the most unreservedly positive pages of this thesis.

## II. Unity, Conflict and Critical Method

Empson's was a mind passionately longing for unity yet profoundly aware of, and responsive to, plurality and difference. Both his critical theory and his poetry are shot through with the consequences of this productive but often very taxing tension. His desire for unity was deep and pervasive, not only in art and criticism but also in broader ethical and socio-political matters. And he often took pains to emphasize the essential unity of his thought by citing in confirmation his earlier assertions and by playing down apparently sharp changes of view by asserting their underlying continuity or coherence – witness, for example, the revision of his reading of Herbert in *Seven Types* examined in chapter three. But where his desire for unity and reconciliation is most in evidence is at the level of critical methodology. This longing for methodological unity is manifested in his frequent attempts to find the right balance between different or rival methods or approaches. In fact, the balanced mean between two undesirable extremes was not only a rational ideal but a recurrent practical strategy in Empson's reluctant methodology. For it often happens that his theoretical chapters in particular are structured around a contrast between two opposing principles or approaches, either of which, when taken to an extreme, can prove damaging or pernicious. There are many examples of this process in the Empson corpus generally, but I shall mention only a handful to illustrate this point.

In the final chapter of *Seven Types*, the contrast is drawn between the extreme elitist impressionism of the appreciative critical mode and the more rational, democratic analytical mode. Empson began his critical career in an environment of literary appreciation generally imbalanced toward the personal and the subjective, in the wake of the anti-scientistic, anti-moralistic wave of turn-of-the-century aestheticism. Against the perceived excess of self-

centred impressionistic criticism, the young Empson vigorously and successfully rebelled (with the aid of Richards's systematic dissolution of bogus concepts in aesthetics and philosophy of language). However, as I argued in chapter two, despite Empson's apparent preference for the analytical mode from *Seven Types* onwards, we are ultimately offered a superior middle way, a combination of methodological features derived from both modes: careful critical reasoning (rather than merely personal impressions or unreflective paraphrasing), coupled with a due sensitiveness to the rhetorical and stylistic resources of critical writing and a recognition that analysis cannot but reiterate, albeit in a more 'transferable' medium, the language of poetry.

The shift from *Seven Types* to *Complex Words* concerns Empson's desire to fit the components of polysemic structures into unified structures of logico-semantic entailment. Where the attempt fails, it is not because of some flaw or shortcoming in the method, but a doctrinal failure of the complex word itself. Thus for instance 'sense' in 'The Prelude', the object of chapter fourteen in *Complex Words*, is an exceptional case of a flawed philosophical doctrine unable to gather its own components into a harmonious, coherent philosophical whole. Rather than a full-blown case of aporetic thought, the Wordsworthian 'sense' is undercut by a fundamental gap that the two elements of the equation are unable to bridge; the analyst can identify the two elements, articulate the philosophical arguments they contain, and yet find no way of arriving at a genuine synthesis of their differences. Empson's type IV equation is thus an example not of paradox or aporia, but of a gap between two doctrines that remains a gap because of a flaw that is nonetheless amenable to rational discussion. The gap reveals no paradox suggestive of a higher truth beyond the powers of analytic grasp; on the contrary, the logico-semantic scrutiny of 'sense' is conclusive, since it shows up just what the term fails to achieve: a bridge between two incompatible epistemological positions – pantheistic idealism and empiricism. It is legitimate to dub such irresolution an aporia not because 'sense' results in a disappearance of sense-making down the linguistic chain, but because the compacted doctrine the word is made to carry conceals a conceptual dead-end, a cul-de-sac. The equation provides no intermediate term, no third element that would bring



coherence to an otherwise philosophically-flawed poem. So it is that Wordsworth's attempt to induce 'people to believe he had expounded a consistent philosophy through the firmness and assurance with which he used equations of Type IV' (CW 305) fails because the equation in 'sense' 'did not really erect a third concept' (CW 305). The analyst must admit to a serious perplexity by coming to terms with the failed encounter and synthesis of two concepts standing for two incompatible epistemologies. No insoluble conflict can occur, because there has been no encounter in the first place. The 'impassable path' of the aporetic 'sense' is no impasse between rhetoric and thought; Wordsworth's text contains no gap or lacunae between what it means and what it is constrained to say since what it means cannot be divorced from the expressive rhetorical instrument of its doctrinal content, a rhetorical trick that is eminently analysable and not in conflict with what the poem means. In short, the whole point of Empson's analysis is that the 'meaning' of the poem is what it is constrained to say.

Even when Empson is forced to concede that in some cases reconciliation or harmonious unification may not be possible, he still attempts to see how the human mind deals with such conflicts rather than letting them paralyse our capacity for further understanding and self-reflection. This is true for example when Empson reflects on unity in prose narrative. One of his most unreservedly positive reviews – Arthur Waley's translation of Lady Murasaki's *Blue Trousers* – is full of praise for the unity of the work's structure: 'the architectural qualities of the novel, the way in which the larger units have been fitted together, can be appreciated in its full grandeur' (ARG 438). In fact, in his encounters with Waley's translations, Empson can often be found thinking about how we deal with conflict and irresolution, rather than expressing merely an interest in stating a conflict or tension. For example, in the first chapter of *Seven Types*, Empson reflects on the 'two main scales on to which to measure time' in this gloss of two lines of Chinese verse translated by Waley ('Swiftly the years beyond recall/Slowly the stillness of this spring morning'):

The large [scale] one takes the length of a human life as its unit, so that there is nothing to be done about life, it is of animal dignity and simplicity, and must be regarded from a peaceable and fatalistic point of view. The small one takes as its unit the conscious moment, and it is from this that you consider the neighbouring space, an activity of the will, delicacies of social tone, and your personality. The scales are

so far apart as almost to give the effect of defining two dimensions...The repose and self-command given by the use of the first are contrasted with the speed at which it shows the years to be passing from you, and therefore with the fear of death; the fever and multiplicity of life, as shown by the use of the second, are contrasted with the calm of the external space of which it gives consciousness, with the absolute or extra-temporal value attached to the brief moments of self-knowledge with which it is concerned, and with a sense of security in that it makes death so far off. Both these time scales and their contrasts are included by these lines in a single act of apprehension; because of the words *swift* and *still*. Being contradictory as they stand, they demand to be conceived in different ways; we are enabled, therefore, to meet the open skies with an answering stability of self-knowledge. (ST 43-44)

The suggestion of waste, of a 'peaceable and fatalistic point of view', looks forward, as I shall argue in due course, to the existentialist dimension of Empson's critical and poetic ethos.

In his 1928 review of Rose Macaulay's *Keeping up Appearances*, Empson disclosed a complex view of the dialectics of unity and multiplicity in narrative in surprisingly Aristotelian terms. He begins by praising the novel's 'unity of structure': 'every character is not merely essential, but used to the full; almost every detail of the story is brought back into your mind, and adds its factor to the intolerable climax' (ARG 437). While he is led to qualify this view on the grounds that such unity is not particularly conducive to the representation of multiple viewpoints, the criticism stems from the complaint that everything in the story is seen through the narrow, morbid and inward-looking prism of its main character, not from any *a priori* complaint against unity as such. Thus:

Antic Hay, to which this is comparable, both in wit and in the painful state of nervous tension disclosed, was less painful reading (and, in fact, a better novel) because there was more variety; the climax gave a bird's-eye view of the gay and variegated terrors of the people, but it did not narrow and tighten as if the ceiling was closing down on you. It was a public work; *Appearances* (I will say it) is morbid because it fulfils the condition of madness; before the end the heroine is more than cutoff from the world within her own private suffering, the whole world seems subservient to her private suffering. Miss Macaulay continually says that most of the characters are practically as badly off; if she had made this part of the plot it would have been less distressing. (ARG 437)

Thus, the madness of the heroine marginalizes her, and the inclusiveness of the narrative is severely limited if she is then made to act as the main viewpoint. In a sense, then, the narrative fails to live up to the preferred Richardsian standard of inclusion. Because she subsists in her private universe of neurosis, the heroine lacks the resources for identifying herself with the community. In short, Macaulay's story falls short of the Empsonian criterion

of public ambiguity that equates, however problematically or ambivalently, the single hero with a community by making the hero a microcosm of the broader social macrocosm. Empson's conclusion suggests an affinity between this criterion and the standard criterion of Aristotelian unity: 'unity is very Aristotelian, but Aristotle said the tragic hero must have greatness of soul, and it is depressing to be locked up in Daisy's soul because it is impossible not to despise Daisy, whether we are all like her or not; after she has pretended her mother is the charwoman, anyway' (ARG 437). As we shall see, this is not to concede that unity and identification are impossible.

### III. Critical Contradictions

Haffenden's most recent work on Empson, especially volume one of the biography, insists on the centrality of conflict and opposition in Empson's thought: 'above all else, there is an absolute and passionate emphasis in Empson's work on terms of opposition. Among the key terms throughout his critical writings are clash, conflict, contradiction, subplot, outsider, scapegoat, resistance, hidden, secret, dissent, isolation. For Empson, it is axiomatic that the writer is at odds with his society, and with official doctrine: the writer is at root the critic'<sup>137</sup>. There is a sense in which the presence of such terms in the Empson's writings is not merely the consequence of his desire to remain at the margins of critical fashion and to avoid the manifold vexations of institutional pressure; they point to something deeper, a sense of the importance of preserving one's integrity while acknowledging the truth of Empson's own belief that 'life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis'. The problem of conflict and reconciliation is dealt with in great detail in a chapter of Haffenden's biography devoted to Empson's intellectual relationship with Richards. Richards was probably as much influenced by Empson as Empson was by Richards. Haffenden responds at great length to John Paul Russo, Richards's biographer, and defends Empson's critique of his mentor's theory of value against Russo's claim that the pupil essentially misrepresented his teacher's views. Empson's interest in conflict and

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<sup>137</sup> Haffenden, John. *William Empson: Vol. 1: Among the Mandarins*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 5.

reconciliation to some extent reflects Richards's preference for poetry of inclusion rather than exclusion; such inclusion does not attempt to bypass conflict, and Empson may have learnt the value of such inclusiveness from his mentor. Still, it would appear that Empson was always more interested in clarification and the possibility – if not the actual realization – of reconciliation, rather than the abstract celebration of conflicting values and forces. Empson once wrote of the variety of expressions to be found in the faces of the Buddha: 'It will be agreed that a good deal of the startling and compelling quality of these faces comes from their combining things that seem incompatible' (CP 246). He discovered that such combinations of incompatible things were achieved largely by the asymmetry of the Buddha's face. However, Empson's real interest is to find a way of dealing with the conflicting values that seemed to crop everywhere. Empson once complained about a study of Hardy's fiction which had failed precisely in this respect:

[Young] does not bring out the flat contradictions which are the most irritating feature of Hardy's philosophy; but then, some monism like Hardy's seems to me probably true, so what irritates me must be in the treatment not in the belief. Probably it is the complacency of the man, which saw no need to try to reconcile the contradictions; the same complacency which could be satisfied with a clumsy piece of padding to make a lyric out of a twaddling reflection. No doubt he needed this quality to win through as he did. Most people who are admired for 'unpretentious integrity' have it. (ARG 421)

Haffenden may be right that the difference between *Seven Types* and *Some Versions* is that 'clash' has more significant practical implications than the more abstract term 'conflict' (which Empson only really fully appropriates in the seventh type), and thus helped Empson to keep his attention focused outward towards social division rather than inward into linguistic signification. And so I would argue that to exaggerate the stress on clash in *Some Versions* is a more serious fault than placing conflict at the heart of *Seven Types*. The quote that Haffenden takes as Empson's motto is in this respect highly misleading: 'To become morally independent of one's formative society...is the grandest theme of all literature, because it is the only means of moral progress, the establishment of some higher ethical concept'<sup>138</sup>. It is misleading because although it draws attention to one key aspect of the Empsonian pastoral, it simplifies the sense of ironic inclusiveness that characterizes the mode. After all, the mode

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

needs to justify the claim that ‘literature is a social process, and also an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored’ (P 19). I will return to this problem towards the end of this chapter by means of a discussion of Empson’s ambivalent existentialism, but first I would like to see just how misleading this exaggerated stress on clash, conflict and radically marginality can become. In his review of the first volume of Haffenden’s biography, Ronald Shusterman writes:

[t]he heart of the volume is [...] intellectual history, and Haffenden is not only up to the task but well placed to give us the essence of Empson. We learn early on that it is axiomatic, for Empson, that a writer should be at odds with his society (p.5). This sounds a lot like Deleuze on *écriture mineure*, and there is much else that can – or could – be connected to current concerns. One might indeed regret slightly that, in this volume at least (though not in some of his other studies), Haffenden doesn’t spend much time drawing out the wider connections and echoes between Empson and more recent luminaries of critical fashion.<sup>139</sup>

There is a perhaps a paradox built into the suggestion that Empson is both marginal and relevant to current concerns, simultaneously eccentric and central, rebellious yet still belonging to an on-going tradition of critical thought. Perhaps one response to this objection would be to say that the very concept of marginality is central to contemporary theory, and that to defend Empson’s marginality is, indeed, to proclaim his centrality as a theorist. Quite apart from this, one wonders if there is any plausible connection between Empson’s idea of the writer as someone ‘at odds with his society’ and the Deleuzian concept of *écriture mineure*. After all, the only thing that Empson meant by this was that the writer was always in the business of argufying, and that one of the chief focuses of argufying was usually prevailing political and religious discourses or social conventions. In other words, the best writers, for Empson, are also critics. Jean-Jacques Lecercle is both an established Empson commentator and a renowned Deleuze scholar, so perhaps his definition of Deleuzian *écriture mineure* as ‘the literature a minority imposes on a major language’ – a form that has ‘three characteristics’ – is perhaps a good point of departure for suggesting some significant differences between Empson and Deleuze:

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<sup>139</sup> Shusterman, Ronald. Review of Haffenden, John. *William Empson, Volume I: Among the Mandarins*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. *E-REA*, e-journal published by the University of Provence, France, 2.

A minor literature is (a) deterritorialised (in its texts, the major language is deterritorialised); (b) directly and entirely political; and (c) collective (all the values that inform it are collective values)...the concept, it seems to me, has extraordinary progressive, even revolutionary, potential: it firmly places great literature outside the field of identity and identity claims (literature that is worth the name is about de-, not deterritorialisation); and it firmly places it outside the realm of ethics and the eternity of human nature (the problems discovered and negotiated in literature are political, not ethical-individual problems – not the ‘dirty little story’ of the author’s own problems); it equally firmly ascribes a minor role, if any role at all, to concepts of author, originality or genius: collective assemblage is speaking through the ‘author’s’ voice. As Deleuze and Guattari bluntly say: ‘there isn’t a subject: *there are only collective assemblages of enunciation*’.<sup>140</sup>

Quite apart from the remoteness of the language from Empson’s own style, it is likely that Empson would have been offended by the suggestion that literature might be placed ‘outside the realm of ethics’, and he would have questioned the possibility of a literature with ‘progressive...potential’ that is so radically isolated from this realm. For Empson thought that writing involved a constant process of negotiation between the individual and the community, between the individual and history, so that the critical function of literature lies somewhere between the individual ‘ethnicity’ of the writer and the political potential of a collectivity. The writer for Empson is involved in a dialectical process of negotiation in which expressive agency is made possible by history, but also where history is given something in return – typically a voice straining to reconcile its own ethical standards with the ideological pressures of social, religious or political conformity, and which may thus change something in that history or increase the dialogical potential of the tradition that it shapes. This is why Empson was always so interested in writers such as Herbert or Milton, writers struggling to contain the voice of rational dissent within them; it also explains why he was so interested in exploring (especially in *Complex Words*) the dialectical interplay between the cultural constraints of a language and the creative possibilities that a language offers to each individual user. Language for Empson opens a space with vaguely demarcated limits that create a resource or background for individual creativity. The space thus defined has rules, rather like a game, but these rules define the game; they are, as it were, its condition of possibility. A game exists because it has rules that define its existence, its identity and its purpose. But rules are not

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<sup>140</sup> Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. *Deleuze and Language*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002, 195.

restrictive or proscriptive; rather, they pose the terms of exchange that structure the activity. Likewise, a literary space exists because there is a cultural, literary and linguistic tradition to which the writer contributes and responds. It is important to note in this respect that despite his taste for independence and eccentricity – in both critical and creative writing – Empson always gave due importance to the determining weight of tradition. Indeed, as he noted in ‘The Verbal Analysis’: ‘there is no question of the critic providing a Last Judgement about the works of the past; Mr T.S. Eliot once remarked that a critic could only hope to illuminate the work of a past period from the point of view of his own. The metaphor deserves pondering, because it is not denied that he gives real light such as may clarify the work for a still later generation, but only that he can claim to look from all possible historical or cultural points of view at once’ (ARG 106-107). In fact, a similar middle way position emerges in his run-in with Rosamund Tuve over his reading of Herbert in *Seven Types*. Richard Strier has recently argued that the critical disputation between William Empson and Rosemond Tuve exemplifies the confrontation of ‘formalism’ with ‘history’<sup>141</sup>. According to Strier, prevailing opinion has it that Tuve’s ‘old’ historicism (which he describes as a form of argumentation based upon an appeal to ‘tradition’) prevailed on this particular occasion. However, Strier asserts that Empson’s advocacy of reading with a ‘clean palate’ reveals Empson as the more rigorous historicist since, freed from the burden of preconception that tradition imposes, he is able to respond to the text, rather than to any assumed notion of what the text *must* be saying. Still, there is a sense in which the ‘clean palate’ that Strier attributes to the ideal Empsonian reader is itself a myth, as I argued in chapter three. After all, Empson himself admitted that Tuve’s ‘main complaint was against my ignorance, which had made me treat all this traditional material as a new “metaphysical” style. The book was full of interesting news, at any rate for most of us; and, certainly, to know that much of a poem is traditional affects your judgement of the author’s intention....It does seem likely that...various readers all made the same mistake, and Miss Tuve tacitly admitted that Herbert in this line made his own

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<sup>141</sup> See Strier, Richard. *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

combination of the stock ideas' (ARG 257).

While a dialectical assumption of this kind might still commit Empson to a humanist conception of subjectivity that Deleuze would presumably repudiate, Empson was quite willing to admit that the language of a writer is to a certain extent shaped by 'collective assemblages of enunciation', but he would have rejected the comprehensive ban on any assumption of agency implied by Deleuze. In other words, Empson would have asked just how anyone could know that there was no middle way between expressive autonomy – the condition of an author's 'dirty little story' – and enunciative determinism. As I have argued throughout this dissertation (especially in chapter three), the process of communication is, for Empson, a far more complex and multi-layered activity than either of these positions appear to suggest, simply because both positions are working on the assumption of a radically oversimplified conception of the range of psychological processes and human practices that the term 'intention' can be made to cover; and while there is a case for complaining, as I did in chapter three, that Empsonian poetics lacks any substantial acknowledgement of both an individual and a social unconscious, this is not enough to refute the claim that Empson was not, and never figured himself as, either the kind of independent eccentric that Haffenden wants him to be, or the kind of Deleuzean 'minor' writer that Shusterman briefly likens him to.

It will be clear from these reservations that the tension in Empson's work between conflict and reconciliation is a peculiarly self-reflexive one, since the problematic status of tension itself, as well as the machinery that supports the analysis of tension (whether psychological, semantic, logical, social or whatever), lies at the heart of Empsonian poetics.

As Shusterman puts it in his review of Haffenden's biography:

Empson learnt about the concept of tension from his mentor Richards, and if Haffenden perhaps exaggerates the Richardsian emphasis on reconciliation, it may also be the case that the emphasis on conflict that Haffenden sees at the heart of Empson's thought needs to be put into perspective. After all, Richards argued for poetry of *inclusion*, rather than exclusion, and this kind of inclusion *does* imply conflict. On the other hand, one doubts that the Empsonian ideals of ambiguity and conflict go as far as claiming that the best poetry would be pure schizophrenic delirium. Haffenden himself mentions Empson's 'earnest desire to reconcile the disciplines' (p.105) so perhaps Empson as well needs to be seen as a master of



*inclusion* in the Richardsian sense.<sup>142</sup>

Or as Dodsworth puts it in his own review:

Since the rational prose of Empson's criticism is usually directed towards 'balance', it expresses a more catholic taste than is to be found in Leavis, for example. The concern for 'balance' also distinguishes Empson from Eliot. Empson is happy to see the scales level, but for Eliot they have to tip one way or the other. Empson's characteristic stance is to find reasons for reading an author; this is not because he does not know when to come to a conclusion, but because he sees all readings as provisional: 'in so far as people are always reading an author, he is always being read differently'. What counts is finding a point of balance between meanings, or in one's reading of meanings, because 'life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis'. 'Maintaining oneself': the emphasis here is on identity in the midst of contradiction.<sup>143</sup>

It is precisely to Empson's interest in maintaining an *active* identity in the midst of chaos and contradiction that I would now like to turn my attention.

#### IV. Reasoning with conflicts

In my conclusion to chapter four, I briefly suggested that Empson's preferred poetic mode was one that sought to externalise the private conflicts and contradictions of the mind into a more sociable, and sociably harmonising, form, such that poetry functions both as a therapeutic aid to the individual and as a reconciliatory process that helps the community to re-model, and perhaps resolve, its own internal conflicts. This is true both of ambiguity and of pastoral. It is clear that Empson was from the outset keen to preserve a quality or faculty of equilibrium central to a satisfactory life and decent society. He famously maintained in *Seven Types* that '[t]he object of life, after all, is not to understand things, but to maintain one's defences and equilibrium and live as well as one can' (ST 247). After all, 'human life is so much a matter of juggling with contradictory impulses, that one is accustomed to thinking people are probably sensible if they follow first one, then the other, of two such courses' (ST 197). Empson's poetry worked on the basis of expressing an unresolved conflict, and he thought Robert Graves one of the finest practitioners of a critical method inferred from this principle:

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<sup>142</sup> Shusterman Ronald. Review of Haffenden John. *William Empson, Volume I: Among the Mandarins*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. *E-REA*, e-journal published by the University of Provence, France, 3.

<sup>143</sup> Dodsworth Martin. 'Among Contradictions', *Essays in Criticism*, 56 (2), 2006, 209.

[H]e thought the poem ought to be about a conflict which is raging in the mind of the writer but hasn't been solved. He should write about the things that really worry him, in fact worry him to the point of madness. The poem is a clinical object, done to prevent him from going mad. It is therefore not addressed to any public, but it is useless to him unless it is in fact clear and readable, because he has to – as it were – address it to the audience within himself. It isn't expressed unless it's a thing which somebody else can read, so if it's obscure it actually fails in this therapeutic function, it isn't saving his sanity.<sup>144</sup>

As I argued in chapter four, Empson the critic also wrote in fear of not writing for any public, of addressing, as it were, merely 'the audience within himself'. Despite his insistence on poetry as something that 'is usually written from a background of conflict' (ST xiii), still he thought that good therapeutic poetry helped to resolve these conflicts. Empson admired Milton because Milton was aware of, or at least honest enough to reflect, the contradictions which pastoral imposed upon a complex urban and intellectual society. But when Empson argues, for instance, that '[t]he object of [Donne's metaphysical] style, in my mind and I believe in Donne's mind, is to convey a mental state of great tension, in which conflicting impulses have no longer any barriers between them and therefore the strangeness of the world is felt very acutely' (ER1 35), he is more interested in the way we confront, and perhaps resolve, such 'conflicting impulses' than in simply acknowledging and contemplating their existence. What Empson admired in Donne, and what he himself was attempting in his own poetry, was the insistence on the difficulty of practical decision-making and the subtle but nonetheless very real divergence of interests and values that inform such preludes to action: '[Donne] was very accustomed to negotiating fine points of conscience, weighing up the opposing claims of immensely diverse influences' (ER1 36).

Furthermore, because life is an inherently messy, contradictory affair, the only means of preserving our integrity is to accept and confront the messiness, and not conceal it behind a pseudo-mystical rhetoric of paradox, irony, or aporia. Thus: 'What the allegory meant to Shakespeare was probably something rather different from the Christian interpretation; I think it was that you ought to accept the actualities of life courageously even if rather unscrupulously, and not try to gloss over its contradictions and the depths that lie under your

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<sup>144</sup> 'William Empson in Conversation with Christopher Ricks', *The Review*, nos. 6 & 7, June 1963, 34.

feet' (ER2 56). Empson's subject is thus not the solid, unified, homogeneous 'straw man' subject which the postmodernist jeers at, but somebody, in life and in literature, fraught with contradictions and conflicts: 'Indeed the way in which a person lives by these vaguely conceived opposites is the most important thing about his make-up; the way in which opposites can be stated so as to satisfy a wide variety of people, for a great number of degrees of interpretation, is the most important thing about the communication of the arts' (ST 221).

Empson wanted poetry to have a therapeutic role that went beyond mere aporetic paralysis or neurosis since '[t]he first or only reason for writing verse is to clear your own mind or fix your own feelings'. Or as he put it elsewhere:

poetry is insincere unless it is clinical, resolving conflicts in the author and thus preventing him from going mad; to do this it must satisfy himself as completely unconfused and indeed bare; and if the effects of doing so were trying for the reader, that was nothing to worry about – he could have the pleasure of doing a puzzle. (CP 213)

Thus it is that there are positive, invigorating conflicts which express the diversity of human intentions; but there are also those that threaten to drive a person mad and so must be resolved. Despite these two seemingly diverging varieties of conflict, still 'the effort of writing a good bit of verse has almost in every case been carried through almost as a clinical thing; it was done only to save the man's sanity' (CP 214). Indeed, from the outset of his poetic and critical career Empson emphasized the social and psychological challenges posed by contradiction, the internal conflicts of our moral, emotional and social lives. In the social realm such conflicts can become the levers of revolution: 'But as to risings, I can tell you why./ It is on contradiction that they grow' (CP 70). In the personal sphere, conflicts can be either positively productive or paralysing. The note to one of his poems, 'High Dive', disclosed 'the idea that one must go from the godlike state of contemplation even when attained either into action which cannot wholly foresee its consequences or into a fixed condition, due to fear, which does not give real knowledge and leads to neurosis' (CP 188).

In *Some Versions*, Empson wrote that '[t]he poetic statements of human life and limitation, whose function is to give strength to see life clearly and so adopt a fuller attitude to it, usually bring in, or leave room for the reader to bring in, the whole set of pastoral ideas.

For such crucial literary achievements are likely to attempt to reconcile some conflict between the parts of a society; literature is a social process, and also an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored' (P 19). This means that 'the conflicts within the individual, which his writing by definition seeks to reconcile, reproduce the conflicts of society [...]' (P 20). Thus '[i]t is this (in some sense conscious) clash between different modes of feeling which is the normal source of pleasure in pastoral; or at any rate, insofar as pastoral fails to produce them, one may agree with Johnson and call them a bore' (ST 57). Social division underlies the very function of pastoral, but Empson's focus is the way pastoral reconciles contradiction in society. He may say that '[i]t is this clash and identification of the refined, the universal, and the low that is the whole point of pastoral', but he is more interested in stressing the significance, as well as the possibility, of identification, rather than of clash or conflict. For instance, he emphasises not the clash of worlds in *The Beggar's Opera*, but their harmonisation: 'the essential process behind the *Opera* was a resolution of heroic and pastoral into a cult of independence' (P 167).

Taken together, the conflict of Ambiguity and the clash of Pastoral embody a more general pluralism that was itself just as much concerned with finding a way of dealing with apparent conflicts of irreconcilable or incommensurable values. After all, 'whether or not the values open to us are measurable, we cannot measure them, and it is of much value merely to stand up between the forces to which we are exposed' (ARG 572). As I argued in chapters two and four, Empson's statements on the ethical rewards to be gained from reading imaginative literature imply a hovering between the two poles of relativism and non-relativism. In 1973, he wrote that the 'main purpose of reading literature is to grasp a wide variety of experience, imagining people with codes and customs very unlike our own; and it cannot be done except in a Benthamite manner, that is, by thinking, "How would such a code or custom work out?"' (ARG 49-50). While other, similar statements might appear to waver between relativism and non-relativism, this particular statement hints at the possibility that a true, trans-ideological evaluation can be worked out.

That the world could set up resistance to our own values was for Empson an

important part of this process since we 'need to feel that, whatever we do with our own small lives, the rest of the world is still going on and exercising the variety of its forces' (ARG 372). This, indeed, is the basis of his view that 'the central function of imaginative literature is to make you realise that other people act on moral convictions different from your own' (MG 261). Hence also the pluralist humanism that informed his critique of Christian monism: 'in the recorded trial at Venice he is clearly connecting his belief in the infinity of worlds with his doubt of the divinity of Christ...If there are many worlds, either Christianity is intolerably unjust or Christ went to all of them; if there are many Christs there may be a bit of Christ in everybody, and you can write as Donne did about Elizabeth Drury'<sup>145</sup>. The assumption here was that 'world-mindedness' (SSS 212) helped to appreciate the intrinsic value of apprehending the variety of the world and the variety of systems, values and modes of feeling, a process which helps to foster equilibrium in the individual. The notion of this sympathetic interest presupposes a humanist outlook, 'recommending happiness on earth and so forth' (UB 134).

The basic logic of Empson's defence of a realist form of enlightened mutual self-interest can be easily gauged by the following passage in *Complex Words*:

The creature must think 'It is good, in general, to act so as to produce good effects. Good effects are the same when I am there as when I am not, like the rest of the external world, hence they are good in you as well as in me. Hence, it is good for me to produce good effects in you'. Surely this simply follows from the intellectuality of the creature; it does not depend on exciting emotions of fraternal love or what not, though no doubt they are needed if he is to act on the belief when under strain. It is part of the process of believing that there is a real world outside you, an idea which is built up by generalization and analogy. (CW 427)

This is why mankind likes

affection and good humour on a basis of adequate mutual respect. Of course you do not want people too soft, but toughness is not an end in itself, only the basis for securing affection. We tend to under-rate the craving for company because we are seldom short of it; but after a few weeks of complete solitude most people will 'do anything' (as they say) for company; it is a much more imperious craving than sex. Our whole mental life is based on being social animals. Of course the man may quarrel with his company when he gets it and feel pleased about that; but what he chiefly needed was the company. The test of Pascal, in short, is I think the decisive one, though he chose to draw exactly the wrong conclusion from it. (ARG 560)

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<sup>145</sup> Empson, William. Review of Frances Yates, *A Study of Love's Labour's Lost. Life and Letters* 15 (1936), 204.

Empson was thus deeply committed to a belief in ethical pluralism: ‘the practical ethics of the human race are fantastically varied’ (ARG 571), and so ‘the chief function of imaginative literature is to make you realise that other people are very varied, that many of them quite different from you, with different “systems of value” as well’ (ARG 13). And again: ‘different people act on different ethical beliefs’ (ER2 97). But crucially Empson wanted to resist the trappings of a wholesale relativist position that saw all beliefs as on a par: ‘the impulse to inflict pain’ is ‘an elementary evil...the only inherent or metaphysical evil in the world’ (MG 260). Thus, when Empson praises books that ‘gratify our strong and critical curiosity about alien modes of feeling, our need for the flying buttress of sympathy with systems other than our own’ (ARG 436), he needs to assume that such modes of feeling are not incommensurable with his own, since acts of imaginative sympathy presuppose, as we saw in chapter four, at least a modicum of shared interests and values.

## **V. Contradiction and the Resilience of Reason**

‘[Y]earn[ing] always to be sure what to do’ (CP 234), but never quite knowing with absolute certainty, Empson happily conceded that our decisions are provisional. But he also thought that we still need to make decisions since an ethical theory can be valuable without being altogether true – which it never will be. We are thus led to rely more heavily on intuitive judgement: ‘the knowledge at every stage is finite, and beyond that one must rely on the man who claims to feel his way’ (ARG 546). As I argued in chapters two, three and four, Empson conceded that taste and intuition necessarily made important and inevitable contributions to our critical and aesthetic articulations, and so it should not surprise us that the same concession also applies to ethical theorizing and judgement. More generally, Empson’s interest in the role of taste, intuition and feeling at crucial moments of decision-making needs to be seen as the natural corollary of his vision of the breakdown of the whole man of Renaissance honesty, a breakdown that culminates with the dissolution of any firm foundation for belief. Thus ‘[p]eople, often, cannot have done both of two things, but they must have

been in some way prepared to have done either; whichever they did, they will have still lingering in their minds the way they would have preserved their self-respect if they had acted differently; they are only to be understood by bearing both possibilities in mind' (ARG 209). It also accounts for a central paradox that Empson sees at the heart of human experience, namely that '[e]xtremely often, in dealing with the world, one arrives at two ideas or ways of dealing with things which both work and are needed, but which entirely contradict one another...Miss Sturge is expounding this very important process with reference to Hegel; but she is not much concerned with him; she could get it out of the practice of scientists, recent mathematical logic, primitive language, the doctrine of the Trinity, the corresponding Eastern ideas, and, in fact, out of anything of any importance' (RB 46-47).

Empson's emphasis on the 'crucial and solvent moment of decision' (ARG 370) needs to be understood alongside his correlative interest in story-telling, his interest in the existentialist possibilities of narrative, for the virtues of a story that privileges inclusion over exclusion, in the Richardsian sense of these terms. 'High Dive' knows that '[o]ne would be ashamed to walk down; the proper thing is to take a decisive action whose results are incalculable' (CP 188). The note to the poem underlines 'the idea that one must go from the godlike state of contemplation even when attained either into action which cannot wholly foresee its consequences or into a fixed condition, due to fear, which does not give real knowledge and leads to neurosis' (CP 188). This reflects his critical interest in the 'shifts and blurred aggregates of thought by which men come to a practical decision' (ST 68). Yet such aggregates were best conveyed in prose narrative:

Mrs Woolf's later style is very beautifully adapted to the requirements of this subject; so much so as to attack very directly the problem of motivation. Indeed I think it is for this that she will be chiefly remembered...By the very structure of the sentences, we are made to know what it felt like for the heroine to make up her mind. Of course in itself this is not new; it is the main business of a novelist to show his reader, by slow accumulations, all the elements and proportions of a decision, so that the reader knows how the character felt about it; but Mrs Woolf, so as to be much more immediately illuminating, can show how they are at the back of a decision at the moment it is taken. (ARG 514)

Empson's criticism of literary prose partially accounts for his practice of reading poetry by offering examples of just what is gained when a novelist or prose writer tries to encompass, or

at any rate include, as many viewpoints as possible. It is a technique that is more clearly in view in prose narrative; indeed for Empson the value of story-telling lies to a great extent in its ability to represent the complexity of decision-making, the practical difficulties that give substance to a more abstract interest in indecision. There will be for Empson fewer obvious irrelevancies in prose narrative largely because the multiple ambiguities discovered therein are reflective of the multiple viewpoints that structure the story. Such diversity is also likely to be reflected in the reception of the story, different readers preferring or singling out certain viewpoints at the expense of others, but (so Empson trusts) maintaining a healthy interest in balance and variety. This is precisely why he took issue with the impressionist style of modernist fiction exemplified by Woolf:

the impressionist method, the attempt to convey directly your own attitude to things, how you connect one thing with another, is in a sense fallacious; it tries to substitute for telling a story, as the main centre of interest, what is in fact one of the by-products of telling a story; it tries to correlate sensations rather than the impulses that make the sensations interesting; even tries to define the impulse by an accumulation of the sensations it suggested to the author. Even those delicate interconnections on which the impressionist method depends...need a story to make them intelligible, and even if Shakespeare...could afford to abandon himself to these delicious correspondences he had first to get a strong and obvious story which would be effective on the stage. I think myself, at any rate, that Mrs Woolf's most remarkable successes comes when she is sticking most closely to the plot. (ARG 448)

This connects with the case made in *Complex Words* for the greater role of ordinary language in shaping and informing our decisions – the way we ‘make up our minds’ – than the explicit statements of official dogma.

In his readings of drama, Empson's interest likewise often lay with the embodiment of decision-making. In his 1931 review of Auden's *Paid on Both Sides*, Empson praised the play for being ‘a sensible and properly motivated tragedy’ (ARG 369):

The reason for plunging below the rational world at this point is precisely that the decision to end the feud is a fundamental one; it involves much foreknowledge of what he will feel under circumstances not yet realisable that it has to be carried through on motives (or by choosing to give himself strength from apparent motives) which do not belong to what is then the sensible world he lives in. For the point of the tragedy is that he could not know his own mind till too late, because it was just that process of making contact with reality, necessary to him before he could know his own mind, which in the event destroyed him. So that the play is ‘about’ the antinomies of the will, about the problems involved in the attempt to change radically a working system. (ARG 370)



Auden's surrealist technique to convey the main character's motives at the crisis of the play, his decision to have the spy shot, is thus for Empson entirely justified:

He has the spy shot partly to tie his own hands, since he will evade the decision if he can make peace impossible, partly (the other way round) because it will make peace difficult, so that the attempt, if he chooses to make it, will expose him to more risk (for this seems to make it more generous), partly from a self-contempt which, in search of relief, turns outwards, and lights on the man who seems likeliest to himself, for he too is half a spy in his own camp; partly because he must kill part of himself in coming to either decision about the marriage, so that it seems a first step, or a revenge, to kill by an irrelevant decision the man likeliest to himself (for whom he must at the moment, from a point of view which still excites horror in him, feel most sympathy), partly because only by making a decision on some associated matter can he string himself up to know his own mind on the matter in question, partly because what is in his mind makes him feel ashamed and guilty among his supporters, so that he mistakenly thinks it necessary for his own safety to prove to them he is wholeheartedly on their side. (ARG 370)

Crucially for Empson, the various contemporary forms of irrationalism that he identifies with the worst kind of modernist *angst* are made to fit in with a more familiar (because older) framework or tradition of rational, self-conscious thought. Thus:

One reason why the scheme is so impressive is that it puts psychoanalysis and surrealism and all that, all the irrationalist tendencies which are so essential a part of the machinery of present-day thought, into their proper place; they are made part of the normal and rational tragic form, and indeed what constitutes the tragic situation. One feels as if at the crisis of many, perhaps better, tragedies, it is just this machinery which has been covertly employed. Within its scale (twenty-seven pages) there is the gamut of all the ways we have of thinking about the matter; it has the sort of completeness that makes a work seem to define the attitude of a generation. (ARG 371)

This partially explains why Empson was so keen to defend theories that valued consciousness, and self-conscious understanding, as the pivotal features in any account of human intellectual activity – rather than the unconscious, the subconscious, irrational drives or instincts and other unarticulated determining forces. Hence his resistance to Richards's notions of 'balance' and 'deadlock', which, for all their apparent scientism, their 'ingenious claim to be unemotional and scientific', fail to provide a rational ground for positive satisfaction. Empson's complex view of this problem (here expressed in a letter to Richards in 1933) is worth quoting at some length:

the suggestion that a balance is a fertilising sort of flat conflict because it allows the energy to flow into other channels, (thus at once giving a store of energy, a sort of battery, a storm that shakes things to a more reliable level – and a process that brings

more of the whole organism into a single reaction) – which obviously goes a long way – still doesn't face the issue that this may be done badly: it is just this process that sends energy into perverse desires that give pain when unsatisfied and no pleasure when satisfied....What *balance* and *deadlock* suggest is respectively a man able to walk on a tightrope and two men fighting where both are unsatisfied and neither able to get further or escape. There is a subtle introduction of the Will here. The balance is between falling to left or right: there is no balance between walking forward or backward, or between falling or not falling. (The conception of the will itself is such a balance, between random and fixed. (SL 62)

Still, Empson was not blind to the difficulties raised by his rationalist commitments, admitting elsewhere that

[c]onsciousness of course...is an alarming business because (supposing it be conscious of something) you must be conscious of that and of its alternative, of two things, of the number two – 'dimly' – of the rest of mathematics. (ARG 567)

And again:

I am not sure that the 'consciousness' issue does not cover the 'will' one; the real puzzle about choosing is that you must be able to choose to choose to choose, as to know that you know that you know. Both regresses are only the reflections from two mirrors got by turning the mirror of consciousness back on itself. (ARG 568)

Indeed, the problem of the conscious will is precisely what motivates Empson's interest in the process of decision-making and motivation in poetry, drama and especially fiction. Witness, for instance, his reading of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Here Empson can be seen reflecting on the paradoxical intimacy of two of the central characters – Miss Kilman and Warren Smith. It is an intimacy, however, that is put under considerable strain by Miss Kilman's ability (or conscious choice) to hold madness and marginality at bay. Thus:

[T]he most effective satire is usually made out of...mixed feelings. There are two main characters, Miss Kilman and Warren Smith, presented as tragic and insane because outside the safe world of the people at the party; Mrs Dalloway, safely inside it and delighted by it, but afraid of thinking herself a snob, is always conscious, so that it is one of the refrains of the book, that you might get outside her world, that that would be madness, that if you did the guardians of sanity would sweep down on you in all their brutality, that in all profound calm, since you are then free from the forces holding you to society, something terrible seems about to happen. There is a tone of girlish petulance about her claims to safety which Mrs Woolf seems not so much to satirise in the worldly as to view with distaste in herself. (ARG 450)

And '[a]t the end':

at the triumph of her party, her assertion of the same order of her tribe, she hears of the suicide of the man who thought of himself as Christ and scapegoat and feels that her sense that she might have done the same is a sort of proof that she is genuine; she feels outside her snobbery because she can understand him; he becomes indeed to her for a moment what it was his madness to think he was to everybody; he is the

sacrificial hero and his tragedy reconciles her to the world. The effect is to make Mrs Dalloway seem more and deeply rooted, because less dependent on shelter, to show the gulfs across which she can reach her understanding, the uselessness of her power, even to herself, and its dignity, the falsity and the truth of Smith's belief that he is an outcast, the intimacy of the most distant human relationship, the dissolution of one of the most far-reaching of human beliefs into one of the flickering and random illuminations which go out immediately in her mind. (ARG 451)

This why Empson sought to see all round the contradictions and conflicts, both of the story and of Miss Kilman's strangely pastoral perspective: 'The point is not that she loves her aristocrats too much but that the book, like most post-war good writing, makes a blank statement of conflict; she shows that she can feel on both sides, knows both how to love and to hate her aristocrats, and takes that for an achievement, which indeed it is, but not a fertile one' (ARG 452).

The limits of the tragic spirit are further underlined in Empson's pastoral principle that for 'real goodness to survive in an imperfect world, its acts must be imperfect' (P 194). From this there emerges Empson's pastoral existentialism: 'And yet what is said is one of the permanent truths; it is only in degree that any improvement of society could prevent wastage of human powers; the waste even in a fortunate life, the isolation even of a life rich in intimacy, cannot but be felt deeply, and is the central feeling of tragedy. And anything of value must accept this because it must not prostitute itself; its strength is to be prepared to waste itself, if it does not get its opportunity' (P 3).

## **VI. The Virtues of Liberal Existentialism**

Empson ironic's cheerfulness in the face of value pluralism thus acquired a quasi-existentialist edge both in his criticism and in his creative writings. The principle beneath Empson's version of pastoral existentialism remains to be clarified. Empson's most overtly existentialist poem – 'Doctrinal Point' – affirms that 'the duality of choice becomes the singularity of existence' (CP 74). While certain facts may constrain us, yet we can make choices that are not entirely dependent upon such constraints. For Empson, life is that which involves a constantly shifting set of pressures and opportunities which invite us to act in some ways at some times, and prevent other actions in doing so. Such a condition is the endlessly

changing common ground of human action and thought, and though action does indeed necessarily involve an exclusion of other possibilities, we still need to make a decision while simultaneously expressing and exerting a paradoxically exclusionary freedom. For whichever course of action we decide upon, we surrender an immense range of other possibilities, many of which might well have been better, better for oneself and for others. To act may thus represent a loss of freedom, since any action binds us to a certain situation in a certain way. Yet we have no way of not acting, since the world puts us into a situation that makes everything into an action. Freedom may be pointless if we never act, but all action loses the agent far more than it gains, in terms of possibilities. Decisions may involve loss or wastage: and yet man is 'defined by the necessity and power to choose'. We are not offered the possibility of abstaining indefinitely from action, even it means curtailing our initial freedom to choose. Even indecision may eventually become an act, or even a whole life. Christopher Ricks has interpreted this as meaning that although we may well have to stand up between 'incommensurable values' yet 'we must move, act, do something': 'the refusal to act or to decide, however rich its contemplation of complexity, is an act of indecision; prolonged, it can have no end but paralysis and neurosis. So among our other contradictions not the least is the tug between a reflective duty and a practical one'<sup>146</sup>. The world offers itself to us as a choice of actions. There is no existential salvation in simply standing apart from life, being passive, contemplating things from as far away as possible. We assert our freedom in selecting a course of action, but we also deny ourselves the possibility of pursuing other courses or routes. In doing so we may not be fully aware of the complex of motives that underlie our acts of practical decision-making, but we must know what the inevitable consequence of any act must be – a simultaneous expression and curtailment of our basic freedom to choose. The complexity of the practical business of decision-making was thus a central theme of Empson's writings, guiding his approach to literary representations of the dilemmas of conscience and to how ordinary language directs and informs our capacity for

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<sup>146</sup> Ricks, Christopher. 'Empson's Poetry', in Gill, Roma (ed.). *William Empson: the Man and his Work*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, 151.

choosing and acting. For Empson, to articulate the murky complexity of all that contributes to a decision is indeed, as we have seen, the 'main business of a novelist'. But it may well have been the main business of writing more generally.

This interest in decision-making is precisely what sustains *Complex Words*, where Empson's confidence in ordinary language over and against the strictures of officialdom is largely based on the assumption that the process of decision-making is usually conducted in, and driven by, the submerged verbal complexities of ordinary language: 'A man tends finally to make up his mind, in practical questions of human relations, much more in terms of these vague rich intimate words than in the clear words of his official language' (CW 158). Likewise Empson construes irony as revealing those elements that contribute to the complex, unarticulated process that precedes the moment of practical decision. As he put it in *Seven Types*: 'I might say, putting this more strongly, that in the present state of indecision of the cultured world people do, in fact, hold all the beliefs, however contradictory, that turn up in poetry, in the sense that they are liable to use them all in coming to decisions' (ST 283). As Michael Wood puts it, Empsonian irony thus involves a sense of projection, or understanding, of 'the always possible other case [...], a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible. Empson's formulation, characteristically, evokes a hesitation which is absorbed rather than simply overcome'<sup>147</sup>. As Empson himself put it:

people, often, cannot have done both of two things, but they must have been in some way prepared to have done either; whichever they did, they will have still lingering in their minds the way they would have preserved their self-respect if they acted differently; they are only to be understood by bearing both possibilities in mind. (ST 264)

We can thus see just why Empson placed such a premium on the courageous activity of analysis, a condition for achieving a better sense of self and others through understanding. In one of his most eloquent pleas for his case against the anti-analysts – 'Obscurity and

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<sup>147</sup> Wood, Michael. 'William Empson', in Walton, Litz A., Menand, Louis, and Rainey, Lawrence. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism – Volume 7: Modernism and the New Criticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 219-234, 224.

Annotation' (1930) – Empson wrote:

Arguments against analysis tend to broaden to an unreasonable degree of generalization, and become arguments against understanding anything. 'It is not safe to get to understand anything, because at any moment you may find that true beliefs are making it impossible to act rightly'. And certainly this is quite true; you may never know that a new piece of knowledge may not suddenly make you very unhappy. It is an act of faith which experience, on the whole, makes plausible, that when you are interested you can say 'it will do no harm to examine this; this is point where I may use reason'. Certainly all new acts are dangerous, but it is not necessarily less dangerous to avoid them. I may be run over if I go into the street, but the roof may fall on me if I stay indoors. (ARG 86-7)

So it is that 'where nothing is known beforehand there is nothing for it but to be hopeful, and where there is no means of deciding between two courses of action it is more cheerful to choose the more active one' (ARG 87). In short: 'It seems unpleasantly refined/To put things off till someone knows' (CP 102). This indeed explains the following passage in a letter to Qien Xuexi on science, pragmatism and theory:

My remarks about science, I am afraid, sounded too excited; but the reason for it, it seems to me, is merely that I do not know how to discuss the matter in abstract terms, only in terms of the social consequences of the different opinions. The same thing happens when I try to talk to scientists who believe that literary language is meaningless. Pragmatism is a harmful false doctrine, but in cases like this where one cannot see one's way through a question the social consequences are the line of argument which forces one to see the question as a whole. Of course one can define terms as one likes, and it is possible to define meaning, significance, and thought as all only occurring when there is a reference to human wishes or ideals as well as to facts. The listener is also allowed to wonder what the purpose of an unusual definition may be, and it is commonly to make some ingenious persuasive use of the words afterwards. However even accepting the definitions I should deny that they make science meaningless or insignificant or unthinking. One of our major desires about the universe is that it should be orderly and capable of being understood; this is partly for our own safety and partly from a metaphysical feeling that we want to be at home in it or not alien to it. What you describe as a 'guess' about the universe has to be based on something, and one of the things it always has to be based upon is the pious faith that the universe is intelligible. Copernicus for instance has been accused of believing his theory because of its great elegance and simplicity in spite of the facts appearing to be against it; not because he was indifferent to truth but because he trusted his wish that the true answer should be elegant and simple. I do not mean that this is the whole story; we want a good deal more of the universe besides intelligibility, and a certain amount more I think is provided by science though not much; and on the other hand the desire to recognise the truth however disgusting it may be is itself an 'ideal'. So the dichotomy, it seems to me, breaks down both ways round; and for that matter the 'social consequences' of it are bad for science as well as for the humanities. (SL 152-153)

This is why he also thought that however true scientific determinism or materialism might be, still there was a need to consider the values, ethical and social, that they were likely to foster

if their teachings were extended beyond the strict confines of scientific inquiry. Ethical decisions are thus matters of choice, and are not to be restricted by any empirical impositions.

Thus on Darwin:

Darwin did not lay down survival as the only good, or claim any ethical theory as such. But the effect of his way of putting the theory was to suggest that a stock could only survive by harsh methods of struggle. One man can die for what he believes to be good; many men have done so; it is psychologically possible to carry the thing through. But a statesman has no business to be heroic; it is not his function to destroy the whole group he leads. Whatever may be said in absolute ethics, if a moral theory can be shown to cause the annihilation of any group that carries it out, then that theory will not survive long. (ARG 558-559)

In a similar vein, Empson opposes Freud on three political grounds:

The theoretical structure raised by Freud was of course a deservedly great influence on the mental climate, but it is hard to see that it implies a new ideal of the good. Politically it is negative, because the difficulty of becoming sane is so great for the individual that he has little basis for saying he knows his rulers are wrong. The theoretical grounds for altruistic action are made even more dubious; a man is obviously likely to be deluded by his unconscious when he claims to have an ethical theory and the actual aim of the healing work on which the Freudian world picture was based is simply release from torment. The Freudian disciple Money-Kyrle carried this to its logical conclusion when he argued...that after a completely satisfactory psychoanalysis a man would be free to kill himself in peace. (ARG 559)

And this applies just as much in ethics as it does in aesthetics: 'It seems clear...that no advance of science, for example of psychoanalysis, in aesthetics can conceivably replace the necessity for mere judgement; the knowledge at every stage is finite, and beyond that one must rely on the man who claims to feel his way' (ARG 546).

Furthermore, in encountering the limits of analysis through unpredictables that defy understanding, it is preferable to opt for the more cheerfully active course; there is only one course of action which is less cheerful than digging further, and that is not digging at all. And just as our ethical theories need to be supplemented by sensitivity and supported by deeper, more instinctive feelings of right and wrong, so we cannot separate 'the good in action' from 'the absolute good in peace' – for both are inextricably linked in the final analysis. Thus:

The reader may feel that there is a contradiction here between the ideas of the good in action and of the absolute good in peace. Pascal and the mystics in general were waved aside, he may say, in favour of Aristotle's view that value is in activity (see the Politics, VII. Iii). But then a triviality about how people go to sleep was brought forward as a test of value in activity, though it could only buttress itself on the analogy of the absolute good in peace. This is so; but the two pictures of the good are

both necessary; we cannot finally choose one and not the other. It seems to me that they have more practical connection than they appear to do, and that the ideal which stands up to both criteria is the humble but not irreligious absolute good of affection and good humour on a basis of adequate mutual respect. (ARG 562)

It is only now that Empson's ethics of cheerful ambiguity can be fully appreciated against the backdrop of his objections to the crude analytical/appreciative dichotomy, as well as the pastoral vision of the waste and limitation of any existence. Humankind, for Empson, is defined by the necessity and power to choose, although there is much 'wastage of human powers' in any social arrangement (P 5). The necessity of choosing, which may involve sacrifice, is nonetheless required for the realization of a choice. Choice may be equally absolute, but the important thing is to avoid paralysis.

Our understanding of Empson's quasi-existentialism has recently benefited from a new addition to the Empson corpus – the discovery of an unpublished review he once wrote on two plays by Sartre, *No Exit* and *The Flies*. 'Sartre Resartus' – the title of the review – offers an interesting insight into Empson's perception of the limits of existentialism, and connects with his interest in Auden and in myths of sacrifice. For Empson, existentialism

is a philosophy or a psychological method for keeping your self-respect when impotent and surrounded by evil. But so far as I can see it would not deserve respect under any other circumstances; because where there is any prospect of making things better by combined action existentialism would not encourage people to do it. The intellectual claims of the theory need not I think be worried about; it seems to be deeply confused. But the way it has been used by recent French writers to express a general way of feeling produced by the disasters of the country is certainly of great interest; it should be interesting too to see how the thing can be developed, or how they can get out of it.<sup>148</sup>

For Empson the plays' 'strength clearly lies in [their] uncertainties, in the fact that [they give] no final answer, no decisive reason to prefer either hope or despair...At the end the playgoer leaves the theatre puzzled, disturbed, forced to worry about the uncertainty of the human situation, but what choice he makes or whether he makes a choice at all is up to him' – for Empson, clearly we must make a choice, and it must be a choice to act – against paralysis. Yet the trouble with the existentialist hero is that he 'is much too prone to walk away from a situation, free in spite of having been betrayed. The idea that he has no public responsibilities

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<sup>148</sup> Empson, William. 'Sartre Resartus', unpublished double review of Sartre Jean-Paul, *No Exit* and *The Flies*, 1947, Marshall's Nation Files, Yale's Beinecke Library, 1.



is not an attractive thing in itself<sup>149</sup>. And again: 'the free existentialist hero is really alone in the universe, with Nature and morality against him as well as the State; he is Byronic'<sup>150</sup>. His chief complaint against the critical marginality of the existentialist hero is that it involves no ultimate and genuine sacrifice, no judgement that might alleviate the crime or reconcile the conflicts of the society to which he appeals for his own marginality. Thus:

One might think that the trouble with the existentialist view of life is that it is too mean, too convinced that betrayal is to be expected. The objection here is against its rosy trustfulness toward its own type of a hero. He has only to commit his private crime and this will in some magical way release his neighbours, who are also of course potential criminals, so he can very easily claim he did it for their sakes. The scapegoat idea is a very important one; maybe it goes to the roots of human thought; but you can't simply trot it out as a happy ending. And for that matter it would justify Hitler as easily as anyone else.<sup>151</sup>

Empson's responses to the plays are thus motivated to a great extent by his own, idiosyncratic dealing with the new lack of foundations for choices or decisions. The conclusion to the review is one of Empson's greatest statements against the paralysing effects of modernism's cultural pessimism:

A review of M. Sartre ought to try to distinguish his position from that of existentialism in general... The central phrase of Orestes in this play, 'Human life begins on the far side of despair', is very much in the mood of T.S. Eliot and his disciples twenty years ago. I remember I wrote a poem on this topic, with much seriousness, and then was disconcerted to find that it seemed Ninety-ish rather than in the prevailing mode. And I suppose, looking back, that the really wonderful effect of originality with which W.H. Auden burst on the English-speaking scene, around 1930, was partly due to his having read Kafka and so forth in German. Existentialism, in short (it is usually dated back to Kierkegaard in the middle of the last century), has been seeping into English literature steadily though deviously. The Kierkegaard theology of crisis, which I understand says that you are most likely to be in mortal sin when you feel most sure that you are in the right, is a good thing to have a little of; it is the regal solvent against complacency. The trouble if you take it seriously, I think, is that it amounts to erecting your neuroses into a religion; and this tends only to be done by people who have got enough neuroses already. Perhaps the main interest of the recent French development is that it has taken this very apolitical doctrine and tried to apply it to politics. But I think W.H. Auden, without claiming for himself the label of existentialism, was doing that before.<sup>152</sup>

Such, indeed, is Empson's clearest ethical and political stand against the cultural and socio-political frailty of modernist pessimism.

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<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

## VII. Conclusion

In claiming for Empson the kind of independence that he found so appealing in the variations on the theme of pastoral as cultural critique, expressive of his 'radical populist iconoclasm' (to use Eagleton's apt phrase), we need to recognize that the Empsonian pastoral critic is always in the ambiguous position of having to play out such claims to independence against the pressures of his own (historical, ideological, institutional, psychological) circumstances, as well as those that determine and are reflected upon by his textual objects of study. Fry writes that 'Empson's stubborn individuality was not so much a buffer against as a foil for all the influences that made him...a creature of his times – not only in politics but in those influences that filter through fashionable reading, such as Freud, Frazer, Marx'<sup>153</sup>. This dissertation has argued that Empson accommodated these influences within his own more creative negotiations with the rival claims of freewill and necessity. Empson's Englishness, of which the tone and style of his critical writings are the most obvious manifestations, is just this; a willingness to dwell within the idiosyncrasies of the socio-political fabric of his particular circumstances without erecting the sense of his own limiting determinacies into an enclosed doctrine of self-confirming validity. The pastoral critic thus needs to recognise that in many respects the claim to complete independence is an utterly specious one; the critic is always an ambivalent member of the community against which he reacts or to which he appeals for evidence of his own marginality as a figure of critical reflection involved in a dialectical relationship of attraction and repulsion (the One and the Many is never a dialectics of univocity or perfect reflective mirroring), and so must recognise that the critical reflection that he is able to project is both an expression of his own powers of unimpeded self-expression and a manifestation of the pressures that he must paradoxically resist and accept. For there are forces that the critic must resist – the inhibiting blanket-like sweep of orthodoxy, the blinding lure of sectarianism, the gradual creep of monological fascism inherent in any overzealously proselytising impulse – but there is also instilled in him a desire

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<sup>153</sup> Fry, Paul H. *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 1991, 35.

to foster a sense of belonging, a feeling that marginality does not preclude the possibility of relating, if not fully belonging to, a community; hence the need for an adequate sense of audience. The critic is thus naturally led to some form of compromise, offsetting his own intellectual sophistication and moral integrity against the demands of his desired audience, for only thus can he acquire the sense of community that is the only possible justification, the condition of possibility, of his strained marginality. His condition thus involves the dialectical play of collective desire and the remorselessly independent integrity of his own individual selfhood; the pastoral critic is both cognisant of, and blind to, his own independence and necessary limitations, but it is only thus that a genuinely efficacious critical perspective can emerge from his enforced marginality.

In the falsely passive smile of the Buddha, whose wisdom and understanding is more than just tolerant of irreducible conflicts and contradictions, Empson found an attractively physical embodiment of this blend of irony and sympathy, the hearty yet ironic cheerfulness implied by the 'humour of mutuality' discovered in his favourite 'characterological' complex words, as well as in the device of double irony and its pastoral avatars. What so appealed to Empson was the peculiarly complex ironic pose of the Buddha, and yet the misunderstanding by many Westerners of the physical manifestation of its special ethical character had in his view obscured these observers to what is in fact the expression of a fundamentally benevolent and altruistic impulse; the Buddha's ironic desire to offer a reflection of and upon a community is thus lost to us, and the Buddha faces the perils of isolation that the avatars of the pastoral critic progressively found themselves compelled to accept, despite their ambiguous role in creating a sense of community through sacrifice. In 'The Faces of the Buddha' (1936), Empson thus aimed to dispel two misunderstandings of the faces of the Buddha, 'that the Buddhas have no expression at all [...] or else that they all sneer':

The drooping eyelids of the great creatures are heavy with patience and suffering, and the subtle irony which offends us in their raised eyebrows (it is quite a common expression in Europeans, though curiously avoided in our portraits) is in effect an appeal to us to feel, as they do, that it is odd that we let our desires subject us to so much torment in the world. The first thing to say about the Buddha face, granted that many later ones are complacent, is that smile of superiority can mean and be felt to mean simply the power to help. (ARG 574)

For Empson the Buddha positively embraces the contradictions of life and mankind, and the physical representation of his basic altruistic impulse is discernible within the subtly crafted and infinitely complex expression of his smile:

The point about the archaic fixed smile is that it would be made by a pull on the main zygomatic, the muscle most under conscious control, leaving the others at rest; it is an easy way to make a statue look socially serious, wilful, alert...But you have only to sink the ends into the cheeks to give it an ironical or complacent character, and my example from Yun-Kang, almost winking as it is, gets, I think, with those simple means, an extraordinary effect both of secure hold on strength and peace and of the humorous goodwill of complete understanding. (ARG 575)

Empson's cheerfully ironic ethos amounts to an attitude by means of which he could negotiate the fundamental contradictions that the honest man, exercising something akin to the ironic pseudo-complacency of the Buddha, must accept and negotiate. For him, this meant resisting the pressures of those overwhelming determining forces that threaten to undermine our common rationality. His ironic ethos was thus the sign of a very real effort not to be parochial and yet to acknowledge our own idiosyncrasies so that we may take them into full account, thus dwelling fully within our own finitude and limitations, and yet to striving as well as we can to see one culture or intellect from the perspective of another. Empson's attempts to negotiate his way round these intractable problems without short-circuiting or denying them are to a great extent successful, though they may be tempered by an even more permanent bias – the tragic sense of the rational, detached observer who must act as if he were free in a deterministic world which he knows to be determined. This attitude is shown both in Empson's poetry and his criticism; it is the centre of his vision of Christianity, of pastoral, of the importance of ambiguity and complexity, and of the twentieth century. It makes Empson a healthily suspicious man, and this attitude, coupled with the serious desire to communicate with a due regard for his audience, make him what he is: a mediator aware of the tenuousness of the wisdom that the artist, critic, or teacher must foster, and of the responsibilities incumbent upon the man so positioned.

## Conclusion

In a letter to Christopher Ricks in 1981, Empson recounted his failed encounter with Stanley Fish at Princeton:

The monstrous Fish I have heard in action; I happened to visit Princeton when he was holding a kind of discussion group there, and was kindly invited to join it. He really does deny that one should admit an author to have existed: or at least give any consideration to his probable intentions. His besotted admirers (all young male dons) carried out the principle with sickening rigour, rejoicing to deny that any historical character had ever existed, or for that matter that anything existed outside their campus. I kept my mouth tight shut, and then Hetta and I discovered that a little train would take us at once to New York, where she was wanting to meet some left-wing high-minded friends. Of course it was rude to our hosts to skip their lunch without warning, but to answer their questions at all truthfully would have been much ruder. (SL 666)

In one respect, Empson's refusal to engage with Fish exemplifies his attitude towards theory: detesting the anti-intentionalist premise of Princeton's bother-headed theoretical critics and feeling that 'to answer their questions at all truthfully would have been much ruder' than skipping lunch, Empson recoils from conversing with Fish and his like out of a sense of ironic politeness. Politeness was a value that Empson understood, even if his defence of its worth in academia was indeed highly ambivalent. As he put it in 'Jane Austen: a letter' (1940): 'It is wrong to assume...that Jane Austen must *either* have had "an ambition of entertaining a posterity of urbane gentlemen" or some dark psychological need to write something that would let her complexes creep out and yet pass off as normal...In any tolerable society, whatever its political arrangements, you will have a variety of people meeting each other, and therefore Politeness will be necessary, and to maintain Politeness is liable to involve serious sacrifices. Yet they are worth it; if only because Politeness is the outward sign of more serious values less often called on' (ARG 458). Politeness thus construed captures Empson's ambivalent poetic and critical manner, caught between the inward-looking impulse of poetry as conflict and a more sociable, gentlemanly reserve. Ultimately, it is a form of politeness that desires a healthy rapport with a diverse, pluralistic community of readers which admits a variety of 'probable intentions' in its members, whether they belong on campus or not, and encourages contact with 'besotted admirers' and staunch opponents alike.

Indeed, a major purpose of this dissertation has been to outline the methodological faith cultivated by Empson the pedagogical critic, the democratic mediator or translator keen to defend a critical community held together by a pluralist ethos that is designed to foster a sense of common belonging – if not of common purpose. The object, however, was not to argue that Empson harboured the same didactic intention often attributed to Richards, the theorist of literary-critical pedagogy. Empson's object was not to tell people what to do; rather, his purpose was the more inward-looking one of finding an appropriate mode of existence and expression for his own idiosyncratic critical attitudes. There is in fact a very real sense in which Empson's critical writings also need to be read as highly personal creative writings. As we have seen, the personalisation of his criticism created tensions for the democratic rationalism that he wished to uphold in theory, and yet it was only by personalising his criticism that he was able to defend those values that mattered most to him and that were at stake even in the seemingly impersonal arena of academic debate. This meant that he always sought to articulate his own values in the very personal terms that simultaneously shaped and embodied them; but it also meant resisting those values that would deny the virtues of such personalised criticism – including the value cultivated by Empson's hosts at Princeton, a value that denied any interest in other minds, in other styles or values.

This resistance to Fish's very academic solipsism can be seen both as the natural correlative of Empson's intentionalist criticism and as the consequence of his faith in genuine critical dialogue and exchange, which includes the possibility of dialogue between the interpretive communities that Fish sees as the discrete, isolated and self-enclosed conditions of meaningful academic debate. I have argued, especially in chapters two, three and four, that one central purpose of Empson's pragmatic defence of rational debate was to uphold the possibility of a democratic critical forum. One implication of Empson's resistance to Fish would be that these discrete, isolated and self-enclosed interpretive communities could presumably communicate in spite of the different values and standards that constitute the meaningfulness of their critical conversation – a conversation that sustains their self-interest as the practitioners of professional criticism. Indeed, one great virtue of Haffenden's recent

biography is to have demonstrated the critical function of Empson's ideological and institutional marginality, his critical pose of eccentric amateurism. But in one key respect, this insistence on marginality obscures the sociable, inclusive intent of Empson's partial isolation, as I tried to show in chapter five. For Empson's partial isolation is indeed just that – partial – because it wants to retain the singular personality of the critical writings that it produces, and yet it still wants to see itself as sufficiently inclusive and 'common' to allow for the greatest possible number of readers, both within and beyond academia, to participate in the critical conversation that it wants to foster.

Such readers would naturally include the 'bother-headed theoretical critics' that Empson often found himself writing against. But that is just the point: whatever else he might have been doing, and whatever he might have been saying, Empson was at the very least talking to the theorists, even if it was to disagree. He may not have been a full-time member of their interpretive community, but neither did he retreat from an occasional visit. Indeed, though Empson always struggled with theory, still he accepted its inevitable hold on criticism: theory is something we cannot do without, but, as Ricks puts it in discussing the ambivalent role of terms such as 'theory or principle' in Empson's writings, readers and critics must protect themselves 'against the danger which cannot but attend upon both theory and principle [...]: that of becoming ideate merely, of hurrying us continually from life'<sup>154</sup>. Ricks rightly notes that Empson articulated his troubled relationship with theory through metaphors of life – 'sense', 'the senses', 'sensible' and 'sensibility' – defined in contrast with metaphors of inertness – especially 'machine' and 'machinery', and yet his critical practice was always careful to find a middle way between these two metaphorical extremes. This is one reason, indeed, why Empson's position in contemporary theory is so ambivalent. In his review of the first volume of Haffenden's biography of Empson, Ronald Shusterman regrets 'that [...] Haffenden doesn't spend much time drawing out the wider connections and echoes between Empson and more recent luminaries of critical fashion'<sup>155</sup>. This work has already

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<sup>154</sup> Ricks, Christopher. 'Criticism untrammelled', *The Kenyon Review*; Spring 1997; 19, 2. 172.

<sup>155</sup> Shusterman, Ronald. Review of Haffenden, John. *William Empson, Volume I: Among the*

been done, as I have argued, by Norris, Eagleton, Fry and Wihl (among others), critical theorists who have done much to account for Empson's curious relation with, and double-edged relevance to, contemporary theory.

As I have tried to show throughout this dissertation, recent critical, biographical and editorial work on Empson has already done much to illuminate some of the tensions that should underlie any attempt to understand his relevance to current debates. One of the great virtues of Haffenden's selection of Empson's letters is that it reveals so much about the causal factors beneath Empson's unwillingness to become a fully-fledged public intellectual and theorist. This is why I have quoted quite liberally from Empson's letters, which have now become, thanks to Haffenden, the publicly-available material that Empson never intended them to be. While many of his letters address concerns that eventually found their way into his published critical prose – the personalisation of his criticism thus originating in the more appropriate private forum of epistolary exchange – still there is a very real need today to address the paradoxes of Empson's ambivalently public mind, in a way that will seek to situate his work within the context of a more general study of the relationship between Empson the intellectual (as opposed to just the critic or poet) and his various intended and real audiences. The ambiguities of Empson's critical manner – a central theme of this dissertation (especially chapter four) – reflect a more fundamental hesitation over the nature of his desired audiences, a difficulty often associated with the elitism of the modernist ethos (both literary and critical) but one that is further complicated by Empson's very 'anti-modernist' populism and its connection with later (perhaps postmodernist) sociocultural contexts of debate. The critical interest of reconsidering Empson's ambivalent sense of audience today is that it would provide a unique framework for an inquiry into the allegedly deepening divide that separates academia from a broader, non-specialised or non-academic public, and an increasingly diverse and inclusive public at that.

A study of this kind would obviously owe much to the resources of modern and



contemporary intellectual history and cultural criticism. But it would also involve more strictly theoretical or philosophical considerations. Future work on Empson would thus also benefit from articulating the implicit philosophy underlying the principle of pragmatic critical mediation defended in this dissertation, perhaps along the lines suggested by Jean-Jacques Lecercle in his brief remarks on Empsonian Pastoral in *Interpretation as Pragmatics* which I outlined in chapter two. The critical space thus opened might be one where the difficult coexistence of systems and singularities, of traditionally opposed critical discourses, follows the movement of pastoral compromise, of ironic glossing, of the dialectical interplay of the simple and the complex, of hybridisation and syncretisation described in this dissertation. Furthermore, such work will not only need to deal with how Empson, the most English of English critics, presented and implicitly problematized the ‘Englishness’ of English studies in the rhetoric of his critical practice and theory. It will also need to examine how Empson inadvertently offers new ways of thinking about how Theory in the Anglo-Saxon world fosters an elective bias toward the continent – especially France – through caricatures of the rhetoric of Theory’s opponents. Thus, while acknowledging that Empson may perhaps have cultivated the image of the English gentleman for whom ‘sensibility needs to act ahead of theory’, still we will need to explore how Theory constructs its ‘other’ by deploying a rhetoric that depends on submerged notions of national stereotypes and identities – starting with the stereotype of English sensibility, the very English taste for the particular and local, coupled with a disregard for theory, scheme, and overarching structure, for century-hopping generalization, let alone models. Theory will therefore be seen paradoxically as a discourse that depends for its institutional and philosophical existence on rhetorical strategies and stereotypes that it is ostensibly keen to deconstruct. Sensibility will thus be seen as the supplement of Theory.

Empson was notoriously rude about the French, and especially French theory and its American deconstructionist avatars, as his famous letter to Norris clearly testifies. To invoke Empsonian principles as a means of instituting a ceasefire in the Theory Wars might therefore appear somewhat perverse, for it could be argued that Empson himself was guilty of a *faux*

*bond*, a missed interlocution that would make his own critical vision and French theory in the style of 'Nerrida' seem incommensurably different. One is reminded of more recent stabs against Theory, such as Valentine Cunningham's polemical *Reading After Theory* (2002), which enlists Empson as a noble founding father of the kind of tactful close reading so dear to Cunningham<sup>156</sup>, a kind of reading unfettered by the tactless handlings or doctrinal adhesions of all those 'bother-headed theoretical critics'. But Empson has also been taken up by theorists who would presumably fall within the class of tactless readers that Cunningham associates with the epigones of Derrida and de Man, and sometimes even with the masters themselves. Kermode, Culler, and Norris are all devoted Empson enthusiasts, as well as considerable structuralist or deconstructionist theorists in their own right, though perhaps Cunningham would see them as archetypal Anglo-Saxon epigones of their French masters. To reconcile their interest in Empson with their pursuit of French theory is no mean task. Perhaps there is little point in such reconciliation. After all, one of Empson's post-Coleridgean principles states that 'life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis'. Still it has been a central thesis of this dissertation that Empson would tacitly endorse, if not positively encourage, such cross-cultural and cross-ideological encounters. This is not to say that the reconciliation of opposite or discordant theoretical discourses is possible, but it does amount to a defence of the possibility of dialogue across the entrenched divisions of recent Theory.

Future work on Empson will not only be required to address the question of the relevance of his work to recent developments; it will also need to address how, within their own dialectical engagement with literature, Empson's key critical figurations reveal the necessary shifts and changes that affect not merely the conduct of criticism, but the mixed results of criticism in its institutionalized academic form. Empson's favourite figures – the fool, the clown, the wit, the pastoral ironist, and last but not least the teacher – all share a sense that criticism implies an ironic posture of inclusion and marginality. Such figures are all vehicles for Empson's implicit commensurability thesis, a principle that extends to

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<sup>156</sup> Cunningham, Valentine. *Reading After Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

differences of methodological approach and literary-theoretical assumptions. One is reminded that for Empson, while distinctions of life-forms and cultural beliefs do indeed exist, still they are a poor thing in comparison with our 'common humanity'. This would perhaps help to undercut some of the received images of Empson (such as those I outlined in chapter one) and reconstitute some of Empson's own preferred figures of criticism. One feature they all seem to share is again this paradoxical position of inclusion and marginality, a position that helps to maintain their favoured critical practice of 'argufying'. As I argued in chapter five, Haffenden slightly exaggerates the emphasis on 'clash' and 'conflict' in Empson's writings, but it is perhaps easy to see why. One is made to feel, especially in volume one of the biography, that the presence of such terms in Empson's writings is not merely the consequence of his desire to remain at the margins of critical fashion and to avoid the manifold vexations of institutional pressure; they point to something deeper, a sense of the importance of preserving one's integrity while acknowledging the truth of Empson's own belief that 'life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis'.

Still, it is important to see the critical value of Empson's oppositional marginality, which, because it also sought to maintain a partial independence, was often in the business of disagreeing. In this respect, the strongest criticism of Haffenden's biography is precisely that it doesn't *disagree* enough. There is a sense in which Empson's stylish and combative eccentricity ultimately resists the expansive and ecumenical embrace of Haffenden's detailed, comprehensive narrative. Perhaps one way of mirroring Empson's combativeness would have been for Haffenden to oppose or challenge his subject, as Empson might have done. Since Haffenden clearly admires Empson, the greatest tribute to the man would have been to dissent, however marginally, either from his subject's philosophy or from the conventions of academic biography. Empson never showered his most revered authors with lavish praise nor was he ever unduly concerned to stand up for the norms of academic propriety. Still, this is not to say that the definitive biography is not an extraordinary achievement; only that it might have benefited from venturing a little further off the beaten track of biographical reverence.

For even if we argue sometimes with, sometimes against him, still we are pursuing

the critical conversation in Empson's preferred mode of argufying. Argufying in this sense partly means extending and refining the common ground we already share. Theory in the Empsonian mode of argufying engages the reader in a communal and intersubjective effort that desires communal understanding and comprehension, despite the unavoidable disagreement inherent in all discourse. But while the Davidsonian principle of charity presupposes a main body of shared beliefs which we all know to be true, still it is not this body that interests us when belief is being discussed. Rather than focusing on the main body of agreement, the actual object of our exchanges is the more uncertain remainder that resists our communal efforts and threatens to undercut the desired sense of common humanity upon which such efforts rest. The main lesson of Empson's commonsensical principle of literary-theoretical mediation is that theory and criticism need to go beyond the main body of agreement, not because of some unavoidable need for silence or conflict, but because talking about our disagreements is the most dignified way of articulating our common humanity.

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