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“TWIXT DEVIL AND DEEP SEA”:WILLIAM EMPSON AS POET-CRITIC

Abstract

This paper attempts to offer a fresh examination of the relationship between Empson's early career as a poet and his later erudite, largely influential, critical output. The theme of waste, which dominates his *Collected Poems*, partly accounts for his decision to abandon poetry, and invest his interest in complexity and ambiguity in a modernist/postmodernist procedure, way ahead of contemporary literary theory at the time. The theme of waste is further highlighted through readings of crucial key poems, as several critics of his time, such as Leavis and Alvarez, accurately signaled. The Empson canon is, thus, enriched, inviting the application of twenty-first century schools such as deconstruction and post-structuralism more broadly, to track down an early reference as well as an origin for literary theory.

Keywords

Empson's poetry and criticism; literary criticism; modern poetry; Modernism

The publication of the *Collected Poems* in 1949 marks the end of Empson's career as a poet. For some years thereafter, his major claim to literary longevity, seemed to lie mainly in his brilliant achievements as a literary critic – with *Seven Types of Ambiguity*; with *Some Versions of Pastoral*; with his acute reappraisal of *Paradise Lost*, in *Milton's God*; and the challenging but often richly suggestive study, *The Structure of Complex Words*¹. The concerns these texts exhibit have proved of interest to adherents of New Critical methodology, and later to reader-response critics and deconstructionists². Empson's position as one of the major interpreters of literary texts in the twentieth century remains unchallenged. It is this very prestige, however, that has at times tended to obscure his distinguished, if relatively short-lived, contribution to literature as a poet³.

That Empson embraces ambiguity in both verse and prose is possibly the most obvious thing – a cliché almost – to be said about his *oeuvre* as a whole. Commentators down the decades, as divergent in their approaches as Cleanth Brooks and Michael Wood – have noted the affinity in this regard between Empson the poet, who has long provided readers of his poems with “lively hours of puzzlement”⁴, and the author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. David Hawkes, writing in 2017, is only one commentator among many, to note that for Empson, a preoccupation with verbal nuance, scope for alternative interpretations of language, make of ambiguity both “a habit of reading,” and “a way of seeing the world.”

Yet the affinities between the erudite verse and the dazzlingly creative (and often contentious) analyses in prose, go well beyond the obvious kinship of their shared fascination with ambiguity. There is indeed wit, irony and ambiguity in plenty, both in Empson's poetry, and his critical writings⁵. But other shared elements, I will argue, have generally been overlooked – including the roots of some of his poetic and critical preoccupations in childhood experience. Then there is the adult Empson's interest in science, that informs both the erudite content of his verse, and his interest as a critic in the Metaphysical poets. Some of his later poems are, in common with his prose writings, implicitly or explicitly imbued with expressions of his political convictions – not to mention his notorious ongoing indignant quarrel with orthodox Christianity. There are, too, his ideas on “waste” of human potential in a social context, which are, I believe, often misunderstood. In fact, I will argue, they are not unrelated to Empson's motives in abandoning the practice of poetry in the 1950s, and thereafter.

The intellectual vigor that characterizes much of Empson's verse, and his critical insights, tends to obscure a lurid psychological preoccupation with fear and foreboding – with a constant undertone of uncertainty, that seems to me to underlie his best work. The fear, and the felt need to summon up courage, issues in an exploration of ideas and motifs drawn from psychoanalysis. (While at least one careful reader has remarked on this preoccupation as a constant theme in Empson's poems (Haffenden 9), it is not generally observed how similar concerns manifest themselves in Empson's literary critical analyses.)

We may trace the origins of this fear and uncertainty in biographic terms, in Empson's childhood⁶. “When I was a little boy,” he writes in *Milton's God*, “I was very afraid I might not have the courage which I knew life demanded of me” (89). As we shall see, the childhood anxieties are quite closely connected with the adult Empson's abiding hostility to orthodox Christianity. They also arouse in him a compulsion to understand the workings of the unconscious mind.

William Empson's interest in psychology, and the awareness of the work of Freud which implicitly informs his criticism, are overtly the subject of an early poem, “Song of the Amateur Psychologist.” The poem, written in 1926, was not included in the *Collected Poems* – mainly, I think, because of its “Romantic” manner that owes much to a nineteenth-century poetic tradition from which Empson the mature poet had already distanced himself. However, as a song of quest, the poem offers the reader a key to investigate the attitudes with which Empson, speaking through the persona of the Psychologist, defines his mission as a psychological investigator confronting the unconscious.

The poem's structure is interesting for its attempt to chart the course of the journey into the unconscious in terms of precise spatial imagery. The first stanza employs the organic metaphor of an orchard, described with scientific precision. Its branches, “too small to dream of,” are “myriad, / intercellular.” The second stanza introduces an extended architectural metaphor, of “cathedral caverns” and “high-vaulted arches” of underground chambers. Here, the discovery of a passage deep into the unconscious through narrow stone staircases is first made.

The stanza which follows introduces a moment of silence, where the Amateur Psychologist may rest a moment, feeling the awe of the dark space below the lighted palace, from which he can still hear the “riot in the halls.” It is to this space that others “come often” to pick up the vintage wine that is “called for.” Sometimes, by unbricking an old archway, they may possess themselves of the “secret potions” hidden in a past time and lying “potent” behind the cellar walls. Yet the Amateur Psychologist is not content with the rewards of such a shallow, timid descent, its sole aim the retrieval of booty. With sane assurance and the “yellow courage” of the light from a hand-held candle, he continues the cautious descent into the perilous uncertainty of the lower depths. With this further downward movement, the poem’s two speakers are engulfed in a darkness which they brave together by assuring one another that the light might just illuminate that unknown their descent seeks to explore. The only reassurance they can give one another is the hypothetical possibility of what might be there, were they holding a “lighthouse” in their hands. Like the cold wind which earlier threatened to extinguish their frail candle, the image of the lighthouse, with its associated connotations of shipwreck, suggests the peril of the two explorers, now greatly intensified by their further descent. “Desperate capability” keeps the explorers pressing onward in their quest. The stairs carry on down without end.

In describing the possibility of an endless downward labyrinth, the speaker paradoxically imagines his fellow-explorer contemplating this idea with dread—but also as viewing it not only with an “air of apocalypse” but also “with security almost.” The cautious methods for exploring the unconscious employed by the Amateur Psychologist may be seen as similar to those of the literary critic. Empson’s preoccupation with ambiguity, complexity and paradox have called for the use of what he termed in *The Structure of Complex Words* “elaborate machinery,” by which these problems might be “illuminated.” Empson’s dissatisfaction with the methodology of his mentor I.A. Richards led him to attempt a more subtle mode of analysis, that would carry him simultaneously deeper and more perilously into the philosophical and psychological issues at the basis of the linguistic processes he undertook to study. Those areas of literary achievement that are open to Richards’ scientific mode of exploration can thus be seen represented poetically in “Song of the Amateur Psychologist” by the spaces within the cathedral caverns illuminated by the lanterns the explorers carry. Here they may indeed find “some secret Potions,” that were buried in some “autumn long past.”

Empson’s quest as a literary critic calls for “new tools.” In *The Structure of Complex Words*, he writes, “One needs more elaborate machinery to disentangle the Emotive from the Cognitive part of poetical language. Such at least is my excuse for offering my own bits of machinery.” (7) In other words, the elaborate formulae which have traditionally been criticized as mechanical and whose taxonomic value has been questioned, are seen by Empson himself as no more than the expedient means through which the darker depths of the artistic creative process may be explored.

We cannot, then, evaluate Empson’s critical writing exclusively in terms of his quasi-mathematical formulations in *The Structure of Complex Words*; of the seven categories of ambiguity he isolated in *Seven Types*; or of the various “Versions of Pastoral” he identifies. It is, rather, his critical insight into individual works of literature – sometimes no more than a few lines of verse or even a particular word choice – that the deployment of such broader critical strategies enables; and these insights are in turn informed by his practical explorations as a creative writer of verse⁷. Metaphorically speaking, the young Amateur Psychologist, with nothing more than a candle to explore the dark as he approaches the hidden riches of the unconscious, is a poet-critic.

Empson is so conscious of the adequacy of the candle metaphor that he applies it to his own critical work. The slow process by which the critic explores a text parallels the downward descent of the Amateur Psychologist outlined above.

In his preface to *Seven Types of Ambiguity* he writes:

Indeed, what often happens when a piece of writing is felt to offer hidden riches is that one phrase after another lights up and appears as the heart of it; one part after another catches fire, so that you walk about with the thing for several days. To go through the experience in question is then slower, not quicker, than the less inspiring process of reading an analysis of it, and the fact we can sometimes grasp a complex meaning quickly as a whole does not prove that a radically different mode of thought (an intrusion from the lower depths) is there to be feared. (*Seven Types* xi.)

The “hidden riches” are what lie below the surface and, inaccessible to available modes of analysis, call for Empson’s own “bits of machinery.” The critic then embarks upon a downward journey leading toward the heart illuminating one phase after another of the text as he pursues his downward course. The intrusion of the “lower depths” need not detain the literary critic from the quest, any more than it should scare off the Amateur Psychologist.

Empson’s concern with courage in facing the dark recesses of the unconscious again finds its way into his poem, “The Teasers”:

Not but they die, the teasers and the dreams,
Not but they die, and tell the careful flood
To give them what they clamour for and why.
You could not fancy where they rip to blood
You could not fancy nor that mud
I have heard speak that will not cake or dry ...

The “grammatical stutter” Alvarez notes in his commentary on “The Teasers” reflects the tormented hesitation of the suspension between despair and triumph; until the poet emerges into a confident statement of “What you once wanted to do / And will want to have done when the time came.” The choice of the word “teasers” lends the poem an ambiguous quality, since the latter term is itself susceptible of a variety of interpretations and assigned associations. Its relative neutrality opens up several possibilities, ranging from the literary to unconscious fears, whose origins cannot be traced with any more certainty than can those of dreams.

Wain detects a certain formlessness in the poem’s second version, as “The Teasers” develops. The form, Wain writes, is “typically Empsonian” in its use of a “minor verse form” which “exactly suits his content.” However, “uncertainty” keeps the author “swinging between unresolved possibilities,” with a final disappointing collapse into what Wain terms “random shapelessness” (*Preliminary Essays* 176). I also read this “collapse” as the product of the conflict in the poem’s last stanza. The poet’s call to “build up your love / Leave what you die for and be safe to die,” Wain regards as an attempt to cheat by providing for the escape Empson had warned about, not throughout the entire poem, but only in those specific two lines which precede his conclusion: “Make no escape ... / Make no escape.” Wain’s accusation of cheating is only justified, however, if the repeated phrase is read without irony. The introduction of irony would make the last two lines either deconstruct the entire poem or themselves be deconstructed by it – in which case the “stuttering” movement of the whole poem is stressed. The reader is thus forced by the poem’s structure to take seriously each of the repeated phrases, but to recognize that they could be read either affirmatively or negatively. “You could not fancy” could be read as an invitation *to* fancy. “Our claims to act” are challenged by equally solid claims *not* to act⁸. Alvarez’s appreciation of the poem tends to suggest a similar conclusion. “It seemed,” he writes, “to have transferred to the realm of personal poetry the kind of linguistic interest normally reserved for modern philosophers” (*Stewards of Excellence* 83)⁹.

The borderline space that “The Teasers” seems to occupy between philosophy and linguistics, on the one hand, and the traditional personal lyric on the other, is in many ways similar to that no-man’s land that Empson consciously occupies as a literary critic. Grappling with the problematic of “feelings in words,” caught up in a mesh of philosophical, psychological and linguistic issues, he writes that, “A man writing on the borderland of linguistics and literary criticism” cannot expect to solve such a problem, but that “he must try to clear an area where it will not Domain harm.” If asked hypothetically whether he should keep away from “intellectual buzz-saws”, his retort was, “I could answer that I am trying to but that I cannot Domain it unless I know where they are” (*Complex Words* 1).

In an early review of Empson’s verse, F.R. Leavis accurately detected some of the main sources of Empson’s creative strengths:

He is an original poet who has studied the right poets (the right ones for him) in the right way. His poems have a tough intellectual content (his interest in the ideas and the sciences, and his way of using his erudition remind us of Donne – safely) and they evince an intense preoccupation with technique. (Quoted in *Royal Beasts* 8.)

The affinities with the Metaphysical poets, and the tough intellectual content that Leavis detected in the earliest published poems, would continue to characterize Empson's best output, both as a poet and as a critic¹⁰. Empson's reading of Donne's "A Valediction: of Weeping" – brilliant, original if somewhat hyper-ingenious – tells us, perhaps, as much about Empson as about Donne – about his preoccupation, as both critic and poet, with the complexities attendant upon the experience of the loss of love. Donne's poem gives us a man addressing his beloved before departure, pleading that their mutual love not be allowed to die. A straightforward, naive, reading would almost automatically take the sincerity of the poetic persona as "genuine." Further analysis might refer to Donne's use of metaphysical conceits, to the complex imagery alluding to astronomy, geography and the coining of money. Empson's reading, however, prefers to locate a source of ambiguity – seeing in the lovers' separation a partial triumph only: "Their love was bound to lead to unhappiness" (*Seven Types* 143). Empson's "machinery" of interpretation penetrates Donne's intricate metaphorical complexes to identify an attitude of which, he supposes, Donne was only partially conscious. His final assessment is characteristic of an attitude to love relations, parting and loss that Empson himself returns to repeatedly in his own practice as a poet. Donne's poem, Empson writes, is "ambiguous" because the poet's feelings were "painfully mixed." The poet, he claims, "felt that at such a time it would be ungenerous to spread them out clearly." Therefore:

to express sorrow at the obvious fact of parting gave an adequate relief to his disturbance, and the variety of irrelevant, incompatible ways of feeling about the affair that were lying about in his mind were able so to modify, enrich, leave their mark upon this plain lyrical relief as to make something more memorable. (145.)

Part of the challenging pleasure of reading Empson's verse lies, not only in his experimentation with form, but in his ingenious metaphors, often drawn, like those of Donne from the science of his day. Empson's interest in science is largely a preoccupation with modern physics and modern mathematics. It is an interest in a physics of relativity that celebrates principles of "uncertainty". Unlike Newtonian physics in its concern with the dynamics of atomic nuclear bodies, modern physics finds itself forced to deal with chances, with accident and instability and the pragmatic will to believe – all central themes of Empson's which recur both in his verse and in his criticism¹¹. The former student of mathematics who as a young man at Cambridge had felt confident to co-edit a journal alongside the eminent mathematician and historian of science, Jacob Bronowski, was well qualified to invoke examples drawn from nuclear physics in his critical writings, as early as *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. As "in recent atomic physics," he writes, in support of his exploration of multiple meanings, "there is a shift in progress, which tends to attach the notion of probability to the actual object rather than to the fallibility of the human mind" (81). His erudition appears again in his later essay on Francis Godwin's work of proto-science fiction, *The Man in the Moone* (1638), where he discourses on the theories of Kepler, Galileo, Copernicus and Giordano Bruno, and speculates about Godwin's understanding of the nature of gravity. "Voracious as a lobster," one reviewer remarked, of Empson's seemingly insatiable appetite for recondite knowledge¹².

As Leavis observed so early in Empson's career, an interest in the ingenious technical conceits of the Metaphysical poets, particularly those of Donne, bore fruit Empson's own poetry. "The World's End," "Arachne" and "Camping Out," exemplify a variety of such devices¹³.

As with Donne's verse, the love poems of Empson apply the strategies of the conceit and of playful allusion to the most advanced sciences of the day to analogize human relationships. "The World's End," for instance, follows the Metaphysical tradition of calling upon a "coy mistress" to fly with the speaker to the far ends of the earth. The poem's final two lines make use of "Metaphysical" paradox by demonstrating that the world's so-called end is forever present: "The place's curvature precludes its end." The poem's ending paradoxically denies the hoped-for freedom that the poem's persona has called for.

"Arachne," which John Wain accurately described as a "tragically sardonic love poem," reflects the ambivalence of the poem's speaker toward the beloved. The first stanza stresses the isolated predicament of the individual before the possibility of love is even introduced:

Twixt devil and deep sea, man hacks his caves;
Birth, death; one, many;
What is true, and seems;
Earth's vast hot iron, cold spaces, empty waves.

The tragically isolated “king spider” in the poem is made to stand in for the traditional figure of the lover in the English courtly tradition. The hope of the union of the lovers presented in a scientific metaphor as that of the fusion of two molecules into one, disbanding the film isolating the one from the other, is qualified by images of insecurity that almost unbalance the feelings of longing expressed by the poem's persona:

We two suffice. But oh beware, whose vain
Hydroptic soap my meagre water saves.
Male spiders must not be too early slain.

“Arachne,” as Empson informs us in a note to the poem, “Was a queen spider and disastrously proud.” Human society in “Arachne” is seen as the atoms that make up the bubble composing the surface film on which the water-spider walks. The king spider's movement accordingly must be very delicate. Water is indispensable for the creation of the bubble, and hence for the spider's survival. If the antagonistic relationship between the male and female spiders brings in a further dimension to the extended metaphor, the speaker's “meagre water” may thus represent the lover's sperm. The male lover's encounter with his Arachne is potentially a deadly one – yet the lover asks not to be spared the final, fatal embrace; only that the act of destruction not occur “too early.”¹⁴

The poem engages with ideas of mutually interdependent opposites – male and female, birth and death, one and many, truth and seeming – held in a tension whose destruction would entail the deconstruction of both terms simultaneously: “Two molecules, one, and the film disbands.” In so doing “Arachne” indicates its kinship with the themes and preoccupations of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. The theme is pursued into the second stanza, where the male spider, sliding warily over the fragile membrane between air and water of the stream's surface, must avoid predators of both elements – both “bird and fish” – and also, at a metaphoric level, the extremes of “god” and “beast.” The theme is further elaborated as the poet writes of the water-spun cave the spider has constructed to house himself – a “gleaming bubble between void and void” – that “by mutual tension stands.” Stands not so differently, one might contend, from the conceptual construct of the Empsonian critic who identifies, in an interpretation of a textual metaphor, two or more possible connotations that s/he strives to hold in fruitful conjunction simultaneously.

The forces of surface tension central to the metaphoric structure of “Arachne” perform a similar function in the sonnet “Camping Out.” The mistress in the poem, cleaning her teeth into a lake, is seen as bestowing on the lake a pattern of reflected stars – ironically provided with their reflective background not by the conventionally “romantic” means of the night sky, or by daytime mist or cloud, but by the white film spread upon the lake by the floating clouds of liquid toothpaste she has spat into the water.

In contrast to this anti-romantic image, an ambiguous tension is brought into play by the poem's simultaneous invocation and undercutting of Christian imagery. In a hyperbolic allusion to the worshipped mistress of the Courtly Love tradition, the speaker in the poem claims that, in freely spreading “God's grace” for “her own bounty's sake” – the white clouds of liquid toothpaste in the lake – and enabling the mirroring of the otherwise hidden stars from the sky above, the beloved has given to the lake “Its glass of the divine.” She restores the image of the lake that, in a possible reference to the disobedience and Fall in Eden, we are told “Will could break.” In a further allusion to the Redemption of mankind – one that to a Christian believer might be considered to border on blasphemy – the beloved's action is said to redeem Creation – to restore the vision of the lake, with the overhead stars and the image of the beloved herself glassily mirrored in it, “beyond Nature.” The conceit is further developed in the second seven-line section of the poem, where, in a typical Courtly Love image, the beloved is depicted as the Virgin Mary ascending into heaven: “Smoothly Madonna through-assumes the skies / Whose vaults are opened to achieve the Lord.”

In a new type of ambiguous yoking together of heterogeneous ideas, the Courtly Love and religious imagery is then abruptly exchanged for that of modern physics: "No, it is we soaring explore galaxies; / Our bullet boat light's speed by thousands flies." In a further paradoxical shift, however, this image of the soaring lovers exploring in a boat travelling at the speed of light is deflated. Travelling at the speed of light, as Empson himself observes in his note on the poem, the boat "Would have infinite mass and might be supposed to crumple up round itself the whole of space-time." The lovers' final discovery would be one of destruction: "Who moves so among the stars their frame unties; / See where they blur and die and are outsoared."

"Camping Out" offers a powerful example of the Empsonian love of ambiguity, contradiction, paradox, and of reference to the traditions of metaphysical poetry; to both scientific and religious imagery (ironically deployed), and to the conventions of Courtly love. The poem also re-enacts that peculiar Empsonian oscillation between a yearning for intimacy, and an anxious dread of its possible consequences.

These poems are imbued with emotional uncertainty. Dwelling on compulsive attraction to the Other, yet at the same time haunted by ideas of destruction, rejection, loss, they express a complex of opposed feelings. Empson defines ambiguity of this type as occurring when "two or more meanings of a statement Domain do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author" (*Seven Types* 133).¹⁵

The agony of emotional uncertainty can only be transcended by Empson's poetic persona when it is not only safely distanced as past experience, but disciplined by the formal structures of traditional verse. "Villanelle" is one poem in which the tone of nostalgia and pain expressly replaces that of uncertainty. In the words of Perkins (85), "the required formal repetitions of a villanelle become expressive, enacting the almost frozen emotion, the pain going on and on." The poem's success depends partly upon the concrete grounding of intellectual concept in sensuous metaphor, in keeping with the tradition of Metaphysical verse. The adjective "chemic", for example, describes the beloved's beauty and then is seen to "burn through" the poet's body as an acid would. The second and third stanzas depict the love as a "deep toxin" and as an "infection." The metaphors vividly capture Empson's attitude toward emotional entanglement. Vulnerability of feeling is translated in biological terms, into vulnerability to poisoning or infection. Yet, as the entire poem demonstrates, in diagnosing his case, the poem's speaker looks back upon memory of the now-poisoned relationship with a nostalgia that almost amounts to yearning. In the obsessive repetition of the poem's formal structure, one cannot but detect an undertone of wallowing, of indulgence in the pain, as the speaker explores his sufferings.

The New Critics who in the 1930s enthusiastically hailed Empson as one of their own, ignored his free-wheeling critical approach, with its often bold speculations on authorial motives¹⁶. They also conveniently overlooked the historical and sociopolitical preoccupations that surface, from time to time, in his poetry and prose. No one who has read the account in *Seven Types*, of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, with its brilliant analysis, image by image, of the poem's covert allusions to Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, is likely to forget it; or his patient, meticulous analysis in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, to expose the social complacency at the heart of Gray's *Elegy*.

For Empson, there is always a world "out there," to which the most cloistered poet-critic is inevitably in some sense accountable. From the late 1930s onwards, as he moved from Japan to Britain to China, in a world overshadowed by the encroaching war, the principle came to apply to his verse, quite as much as to his critical prose.

"Aubade" as a love poem, while continuing to dwell dramatically on a moment of parting, embraces a wider socio-political vision that takes into account the brewing of war, as experienced by an isolated individual in a foreign land. That the poem opens with the rude awakening of lovers in the small hours of the morning by an earthquake, is in itself an ironic departure from the established tradition of the aubade or dawn song; a tradition in which "The Good Morrow" and "Busy Old Fool, Unruly Sun" come to mind. It might be regarded as an implicit ironic commentary on idyll in general, of which the aubade may be considered a sub-genre. In the typical aubade the lovers lie peacefully in bed, while the rest of the world wakes up around them. In Empson's "Aubade", on the other hand, the poem's first stanza dramatically introduces an atmosphere of chaos that takes the two lovers by surprise and forces the persona in the poem to face the taking of a decision: "It seemed the best thing to be up and go."

The poem shows Empson's mastery of understatement as a poetic vehicle to explore complex states of mind and feeling. The first two lines of the third stanza show that mastery at its best: "It seemed quite safe till she got up and dressed. / The guarded tourist makes the guide the test." One cannot be quite sure whether the safety spoken of here is the speaker's emotional safety when struggling to communicate with his Japanese lover, or his physical safety endangered by the earthquake, or both. Or indeed, whether the earthquake performs the role of representing underlying political tensions, in a Japan gearing up to launch an imperialist war, and where a Western European may not be welcome for much longer.

The precariousness of the relationship between the poet and his lover, which is one of "dependence" – of the tourist upon the guide – is to be seriously, possibly finally, tested. "The language problem but you have to try." The speaker's skepticism about the motivation and thought processes of his mistress almost reflects the critical procedures of Empson the critic, teasing out the meaning from a "bit" of language: "Some solid ground for lying could she show?"

"I hope that various buildings were brought low," the speaker remarks without specifying which buildings, or why he wishes to see them demolished. The headquarters of state security, perhaps? Some military barracks? The destructiveness and hostility in this ambiguous line perhaps betray the stranger's deeper feelings of anxiety within a culture experienced as increasingly hostile. Again, in contrast to the genre of pastoral, where the inhabitants of the world of pastoral are represented as content with, or at least resigned to, their environment, the speaker's emotional response to the earthquake seems infused with his destructive attitude toward the relationship in which he is involved.

In a further ironic undercutting both of aubade, and of the pastoral genre in general, the first two stanzas make no mention of the Other. Thus, the isolation of the speaker in a world not only metaphorically but literally falling apart is accentuated. The potential for discord is increased by the introduction of mention of a third, absent party, whose potential knowledge of the affair threatens the relationship even in his absence, through the two speakers' awareness of the possibility of his coming to know about it: "The thing was that being woken he would bawl / And finding her not in earshot he would know." Both intimacy and community are negated.

The line, "The heart of standing is you cannot fly," resonates throughout the poem, punctuating the long pauses between earth tremors. The attitude of defiance and perseverance, balanced by the speaker's frustration and helplessness at this moment of catastrophe and chaos, is expressed by the repeated line. At least one critic has related this observation on what constitutes "the heart of standing" to two interrelated themes in the pastoral genre: those of rootedness, and of resignation¹⁷.

A love in the midst of a political and elemental "gathering storm" cannot thrive. News of war, floods, and droughts contaminates the second half of the poem. It seems that the only possibility for "two aliens" to develop any kind of intimacy in this shaky and troubled universe, would be to exchange one more fleeting kiss.

The poem's last stanza seems to provide the closest revelation about human intimacy: "But as to risings I can tell you why. / It is on contradiction that they grow." In Empson's verse conflict is often central, not only as a source of social and political unrest, but as underlying whatever human intimacy may be possible.

Throughout his work, as poet and as critic, Empson subjects intellectual systems and ideologies to an unyielding skepticism. With a sharp emotional impatience, he exposes whatever he considers cant and complacency. He was hostile to what he regarded as naively misguided in the thinking and sensibilities of the Marxist-inspired "Thirties poets" – Auden, Spender, MacNeice and Day Lewis. The parodic verse, "Just a Smack at Auden" represents not so much an attack on the fellow-poet's politics *per se* – Empson, a lifelong social democrat, was broadly sympathetic to political movements on the Left – but on a certain naive immaturity in Auden's work of the 1930s. The poet who could write, in "Spain, 1937," of approval for, or at least acquiescence in, "necessary murder" for political ends, deserved, in Empson's eyes, to be mercilessly satirized.

Empson was at least as technically accomplished a versifier as Auden. "Just a Smack at Auden" mischievously caricatures the expression of his contemporary's immature idealism in the poem's very form – in the swinging barrack-room meter (broadly that of the First World War song "Lili Marlene") – and in the crudely end-stopped one-note rhymes of "penned / end / ascend / end," throughout:

Shall I build a tower, boys, knowing it will rend
Crack upon the hour, boys, waiting for the end?
Shall I pluck a flower, boys, shall I save or spend?
All turns sour, boys, waiting for the end.

The parody captures the schoolboy-like excitement of the Auden verse of the Thirties, with its images of revolutionary adventure and derring-do: “Shall I send a send a wire, boys?” ... “All are under fire ...”. In the constantly repeated use of “boys”, the slang usage – “no good being sparks, boys,” – and the occasional cliché (“The fat is in the fire”), he catches, too, Auden’s sometimes less than successful attempts at representing working-class speech. (This command of poetic idiom is seen by Alvarez as Empson’s gesture to show his mastery of the medium.) Alvarez compares it humorously to Lutz’s kicking a piano to show he was “in control” (78).

Despite the devastating satire, Empson could still – with characteristic ambivalence – declare Auden the one poet who knew how to advocate left-wing ideas in verse without sounding “phony.”²¹ And in the end, as Empson writes in *Some Versions* (4-5), we should not “accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death.”

Inevitably, we come to Empson’s implacable hostility to Christian orthodoxy, as it informs both his poetry and his later critical writings. It dominates not only Empson’s best work but his earliest recorded verse, written at age thirteen – a poem that appeared in a schoolfriend’s autograph book. The poem explores in dramatic form that psychological state of fear and anxiety that is later developed by Empson as partly definitive of human existence itself. It suggests that his conflicted relationship with orthodox Christianity reaches back into his past, long pre-dating the sophisticated rhetoric of the mature poetry, or the equally sophisticated arguments of his critical prose.

The juvenile piece depicts a little girl’s fear of the dark as her mother bids her goodnight. The mother reassures the child that no harm can befall her, since four angels guard the bed. Far from being reassured, the child starts to throw pillows at the imaginary hovering spirits of light. She exclaims, in young-Empsonian diction: “Ooh! But angels make me vexed!!” The mother, exasperated by the child’s action, which accidentally upsets the water-jug, is unable to allay the fears of the defiant little skeptic. The poem’s ending gives the rebellious child the final word: “Said Anne, ‘I won’t have things in white / chant prayers about my bed all night.’” It is not difficult to see in the willful child, with her maddening refusal to accept the false reassurances offered by the complacent faith of others, something of the later author of *Milton’s God*.

Empson’s implacable opposition to “neo-Christian” doctrines stem from his horror of the concept of the Atonement – of a God who would sacrifice his own son to be tortured to death; as did the idea of a righteous and supposedly loving Creator who could doom any of his creatures to suffer agony in Hell for eternity. “The Christian God,” he writes, “is the wickedest thing yet invented by the black heart of man” (*MG* 251). His poem “The Last Pain,” while it does not directly engage with theological issues of faith and doubt, appropriates orthodox Christian beliefs in a manner that suggests the issue of Christianity was never far from his thoughts. The Fathers of the Church had concluded that the last pain suffered by the damned lay in their knowledge of a state of bliss forever denied them. Empson’s poetic move is to reassert this selfsame state of damnation as the condition of human existence on earth – one which, paradoxically, is also defined as the condition of poetic creativity. The fourth stanza is an act of defiance, a challenge to the folly of blind faith in dogma:

Those thorns are crowns which, woven into knots
Crackle under and soon boil fool’s pots;
And no man’s watching, wise and long,
Would ever stare them into song.

Along with the sub-textual reference to Ecclesiastes, where the laughter of fools is likened to “the crackling of thorns under a pot,”¹⁸ the stanza is also at once paradoxical and representative of Empson’s complexity in dealing with Christian imagery. It is as though he appropriates the Christian symbol of Christ’s thorny crown, making of it not one of salvation but of damnation and despair. In doing so, however, Empson ironically is able to tap into the literary resonances of the thorny crown symbol; and his assertion that “no

man” by mere staring can transform the crown’s thorny knots into song, is undercut by the existence of the poem – itself a kind of song.

Stanza Six offers the speaker’s belief in artistic reality as the only reality there is:

All those large dreams by which men long live well
Are magic-lanterned on the smoke of hell;
This then is real, I have implied,
A painted, small, transparent slide.

The smoke of hell alluded to here has its source in the individual artist, who projects it as the image thrown by a painted slide upon the screen thus formed within. The mastery of the formal elements that go into execution of those “hand-painted” images obscures the skill and craftsmanship of the painter. Admiring the productions of the “inventive” artists, “We forget how they were made.” Empson here comes uncharacteristically close to Coleridge’s doctrine of suspension of disbelief:

Feign then what’s by a decent tact believed
And act that state is only so conceived,
And build an edifice of form
For house where phantoms may keep warm.

This celebration of artistic form is the closest Empson ever comes to the creation of a kind of compact between poet and reader to concentrate their attention on the concrete artistic product that mediates the relationship between them. What the final stanza paradoxically calls for once more, through the deployment of religious terms and metaphors, is a faith in the possibility of learning a “poetics” from despair:

Imagine, then, by miracle, with me,
(Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be)
What could not possibly be there
And learn a style from a despair.

The idea of waste is a key concept in Empson’s critical writing. Waste underlies tragedy. It also constitutes “the trick” of pastoral. In his critique of utopian Marxism in *Some Versions*, Empson makes a key statement about waste which throws light on his entire critical program:

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 a central feeling of
tragedy. (*Some Versions of Pastoral* 5.)

In his poem “Missing Dates,” the poet broods on the slow process by which poison pervades the life cycle, leading eventually to death. Two lines echo throughout, defining the poet-speaker’s attitude toward his craft: “Slowly the poison the whole bloodstream fills. / The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.” The “waste”, as applied to poetry, refers to the poems lost, possibly those left uncompleted or unwritten: “It is the poems you have lost ... at which the heart expires.” Empson, who was to give up the writing of verse, had nonetheless to come to terms with the idea. To ‘Domain’ otherwise, would have meant to him the prostitution of his talent. In *Some Versions of Pastoral* (19), he writes:

The poetic statements of human waste and limitation, whose function is to
give strength to see life clearly ... adopt a fuller attitude to it, usually bring in, or
leave room for the reader to bring in, the whole set of pastoral ideas.

Yet making room for pastoral ideas was not to be an operative for Empson as a poet. He saw strength in accepting the tragic status of human waste, and consequently decided to “let it go,” by being prepared to let his talent as a poet “waste itself.” His statement in *Some Versions of Pastoral* goes on to assert, “Anything of value must ... not prostitute itself; its strength is to be prepared to waste itself if it does not get its opportunity.”

The poem "Let it go," is Empson's final dramatization of this act of renunciation. The speaker in the poem experiences a "blankness," that Empson the poet cannot renounce without renouncing poetry itself. The strangeness of which the speaker complains, the blankness, is what occupies the poet as the one real element in his current experience, obsessing him to the point of displacing the apparently "moral real" events in his life: "The more things happen to you the more you can't / Tell or remember even what they were." One is reminded of Empson's young Amateur Psychologist as he descended into the labyrinth of the unconscious, faced with the prospect of unending subterranean pathways to the exclusion of awareness of the very existence of the lighted terrain above. At the heart of the metaphysical ambiguities preoccupying Empson the poet are so many contradictions that the speaker in "Let it go" hardly knows where to begin: "The contradictions cover such a range." The danger here lies in the nature of language itself. Discourse is presented as having an autonomy independent even of the poem's persona: "The talk would talk and go so far aslant ..."

Some have read "Let it Go" as an admission of the waning of Empson's creative energies. For one reader, he gave up on poetry because he was "too good a critic to go on producing poems by acts of will" (Dean 29). This is wholly to underestimate the crisis point at which the poet found himself.¹⁹ "Let it go" represents, as do all Empson's mature poems, a commitment to the practice of verse as personally therapeutic, even as it signals for him an ending to the usefulness of this mode of therapy. The poem's final line expresses the wish to cap the flood of discourse before it wells completely out of the speaker's conscious control: "You don't want madhouse and the whole thing there."

Though he abandoned the writing of verse in later years, the discipline of composition within formal structures, and the insights it afforded him into the creative process, remained with Empson the critic to the end of his days. Even his seemingly most abstract critical observations are rooted both in deep unconscious personal conflict, and in an intensely practical experience of what a fellow poet-critic once termed "a raid on the inarticulate."²⁰ The poetry may be appreciated not only for its wit and technical accomplishment, but for the critical insights it offers into the nature of language, and all the challenging complexities of the Empsonian mind.

Empson is rightly termed a poet-critic. The fruitful interaction in the mature work, between the poetry and the prose, stems from shared origins, rooted in sources of personal conflict and anxiety, and from deeply held intellectual convictions. The one practice illuminates the other, to the enrichment of both.

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Footnotes:

- ¹ Empson’s last work, *Using Biography*, appeared posthumously, in the year of his death.
- ² Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransome, writing in the 1930s, hailed Empson as a fellow-member of the New Critical movement. Both critics conveniently overlooked, or possibly failed to notice, the British writer’s decidedly left-wing leanings. He was, as Constable (9) puts it, “elected” into the New Critical academy “in his absence.” Dean (25) writes of deconstructionists’ efforts to appropriate – or in his words, to “hijack” – the Empsonian project for their own ends, through reference to *The Structure of Complex Words*. The Marxist Christopher Norris has found it useful to invoke Emerson’s approaches to the study of textuality, in challenging the critical assumptions of the deconstructionists. See, for example, Norris’ early essay, “Reason, Rhetoric, Theory: Empson and de Man” (*Raritan* 89-106).
- ³ A refreshing exception to this neglect of the creative *oeuvre* as a source of critical insight is Gardner, *The God Approached* (1978).
- ⁴ Richard Eberhart, quoted in Haffenden, *Among the Mandarins* (171).
- ⁵ Hawkes: “If our means of communication is inevitably ambiguous, Empson suggests, then ambiguity becomes the essence of human experience.”
- ⁶ As Kermode, in his review of the first volume of John Haffenden’s own compendious biography of Empson reminds us, Empson was “a pugnacious believer in the relevance of biography to the study of literature.” It was the American New Critics who chose to ignore this aspect of his critical work, in favour of the Empsonian emphasis on close reading. See “The Savage Life” (12-14).
- ⁷ For an article that focuses chiefly on Empson’s work as a creative writer, see Lucas, “William Empson: An Appreciation” (21-22). An early essay by Gardner goes beyond celebration of the creative achievement to examine the implications of Empson’s interest in ambiguity in language,

and in the workings of the unconscious. "Meaning in the Poetry of William Empson" (75-86).

- ⁸ One of that select group of critics who have chosen to examine Empson's creative work as throwing light upon his critical approaches, and vice versa, is Paul Dean. In "The Critic as Poet: Empson's Contradictions" (23-30), Dean examines the tensions set up by verbal ambiguities in Empson's own verse.
- ⁹ Another useful appropriation by Christopher Norris of Empson's critical work in this respect, is to be found in Norris' "Complex Words, Natural Kinds and Interpretation Theory: An Essay in Empsonian Semantics" (219-56). Norris discovered in Empson's approaches to critical discourse in *The Structure of Complex Words* a weapon to wield against those 'post-analytic' thinkers who, like Stephen Schiffer and Donald Davidson, argue for "the near-impossibility of communication" beyond mere approximations to shared meaning. Ironically, it is in the work of the master of ambiguity that Norris finds evidence -- in the form of what he terms Emerson's "resourceful and inventive" approaches to interpretation -- in favour of a "truth-based, propositional and realist theory of meaning."
- ¹⁰ For a study that traces some of the seventeenth-century influences both on Empson's prose work and on his verse, see Adam Rounce, "'With Love and Wonder': Empson, Donne, and Milton" (145-70).
- ¹¹ In her perceptive essay "Irrationality and Artifice," Veronica Forrest-Thomson illuminates for the reader the ways in which Empson in his creative writing appropriated the findings and theories of contemporary science to examine the shifting relationships between mental processes, and 'artifice' in language.
- ¹² The essay on Godwin is reproduced in Haffenden's collection of Empson's essays, on *Donne and the New Philosophy*. Richard Hughes, in a 1935 review of Empson's *Poems*, in *The Spectator*: "The mind of Mr Empson is interesting, vigorous, and voracious as a lobster. The whole ocean of his reading, from Mandeville to Eddington, is filtered through his whiskers: the most heterogeneous minute particles of knowledge are caught and cohere in his poetic images." Quoted in Constable's introduction to *Critical Essays on William Empson*.
- ¹³ Richard Chamberlain has identified those qualities in Shakespeare's sonnets -- among others, their "ingrained ambiguity" and the "dense and involuted patterning" of their figurative imagery -- that "made them so central to the development of William Empson's critical theory of the 1930s." Chamberlain's words might equally well be applicable, one feels, to Empson's verse. Shakespeare, with the ambivalent attitudes expressed to the sonnets' addressees, is as much a mentor and influence as are the Metaphysicals.
- ¹⁴ For further perceptive analysis of Empson's poem see Denis Donoghue, "Reading a Poem: Empson's 'Arachne'" (219-226).
- ¹⁵ Lisa Rodensky has written a lucid analysis of the concept of Domain, in her essay on "Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*."
- ¹⁶ In his remarks on Empson in "The Close Reader," Stefan Collini makes the important point, where these undoubtedly powerful influences are concerned, that Empson retained an independent distance from his mentor I.A. Richards. Empson never regarded himself as a purely formalist critic, with the renunciation of interest in biographic or socio-historical context that term implies:

Indeed, Empson spent much of his later career vigorously polemicizing against the New Critics, who, he believed, were attempting artificially to constrain criticism by declaring illegitimate any inferences from our knowledge of the author and his intentions, or our knowledge of the intellectual assumptions of the period, or of its generic conventions, and so on.

- ¹⁷ Collini perceptively identifies what he terms a "subterranean affinity" between this line in "Aubade" and one of the central themes of *Some Versions of Pastoral*: "'In pastoral,' Empson wrote, 'you take a limited life and pretend it is the full and normal one, and a suggestion that one must do this with all life because the normal is itself limited, is easily put into the trick ...'"
- ¹⁸ "For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools. This also is vanity." *Ecclesiastes*, 7.6.

¹⁹ Wood shows a firmer grasp of Empson's state of mind when he refers to "madhouse". To speak or write compulsively and without control, "without any sense of what contradictions one was throwing up and throwing around," would be "a disaster. It would be the equivalent of insanity" (139).

²⁰ T.S. Eliot, "East Coker."

²¹ As Haffenden has pointed out, Empson's attitude to the literary Left, and indeed to the Left in general, was far from unsympathetic. Kenneth Burke, likewise, pointed to the Marxist approach underlying Empson's reading of Gray's *Elegy*, in *Some Versions of Pastoral*. While teaching in China in the late 1940s and early 1950s Empson broadly sympathized with the Communist revolution that brought the Communists to power in 1949 – at least until he found the new régime interfering with his freedom in the teaching of the Humanities. In 1950, he found himself simultaneously receiving payment from the social-democrat Labour government in England (via the British Council); from the Chinese Communists (having recently left the employ of the Marxist Chinese government), and from American capitalism, thanks to his employment by an American university. Needless to say, he appears to have relished the irony of the situation. The question of Empson's politics is explored in some detail in the second volume of Haffenden's biography, *Against the Christians*.