Empson’s Intentions

“What is a hesitation, if one removes it altogether from the psychological dimension?”

Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem*

I

There is a moment in William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* when he decides to linger in Macbeth’s mind. The future killer is trying to convince himself that murder might be not so bad a crime (for the criminal) if he could just get it over with. This is about as unreal as a thought could be, coming from a man who seems to have been plotting murder even before he allowed himself consciously to think of it, and whose whole frame of mind is haunted by what he calls consequence, the very effect he imagines it would be so nice to do without. The speech begins

If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and
catch
With his surcease success . . .
Empson takes us through the passage with great spirit, commenting on every line and its spinning, hissing meanings, and then alights on a single word:

And *catch*, the single little flat word among these monsters, names an action; it is a mark of human inadequacy to deal with these matters of statecraft, a child snatching at the moon as she rides thunder-clouds. The meanings cannot all be remembered at once, however often you read them; it remains the incantation of a murderer, dishevelled and fumbling among the powers of darkness. [ST 50]

It is an act of alert critical reading to spot the action word among the proliferating concepts, especially since it names only an imaginary act; and generous to suggest that Macbeth, crazed and ambitious as he is, even as he contemplates the killing of his king, can still represent a more ordinary human disarray among matters that are too large, too consequential for us. Alert too to see that Shakespeare represents this case not only dramatically but also through his character’s choice of an individual word. But then to call the other words monsters, to identify the small verb as a child, and to introduce the moon and the thunderclouds, is to create a whole separate piece of verbal theatre, and to produce something
scarcely recognizable as criticism. And when at the end of the quotation Empson widens his frame, returning to Macbeth's full, anxious meditation, he continues the same double practice. He turns our failure to grasp all the meanings into an achieved Shakespearean effect and not a readerly shortcoming, and he finds a figure of speech for the character and the situation. The word becomes a whole passage, the child becomes a fumbling and disheveled magician, and the moon and thunderclouds become the powers of darkness.

What is happening here? Empson would say, too modestly, that this is descriptive criticism—as distinct from the analytic kind. But he is not describing anything. It is not impressionistic criticism either, an attempt to evoke the feelings the work has aroused in the reader, although this is closer to the mark. Empson is tracing a pattern of thought, and finding metaphors for the behavior of a piece of language. William Righter, thinking of such effects, speaks of “narrative substitution,” and of a critical style “which has the form and manner of paraphrase, but is really a caricature” [Righter 72, 68]. This seems perfect as long as we regard the caricature as both lyrical and inventive, an enhancement of the text rather than a mockery of it, a simplification that also complicates.
Empson’s writing reminds us (we do forget such things) that characters in plays are made of words, they are what they say, or more precisely they are what we make of what they say, and his metaphors bring the life of these words incredibly close to us. The child snatches and Macbeth fumbles, but the child is herself a verb, and Macbeth is a man using words to keep his mind away from a deed.

I thought of this passage on the one occasion when I saw and heard Empson. He was giving the Clark Lectures in Cambridge in 1974. What I mainly remember is his waving about a piece of paper on which he had some notes, not lecturing so much as commenting on what had come up in the office hours he had held the week before in Magdalene College, the place from which he was once expelled. Much of the material was fascinating, if disorderly, but I was struck more than anything else by the energy and the chaos of what he was saying, and the sense that he found the questions that he had been asked or that had occurred to him in his conversations far more interesting than whatever he had prepared as a lecture. Recorded reports of the event come close to my memory, but have a different tone. George Watson says Empson didn’t mention the names of anyone whose work he was objecting to, just said “Oh, I’m sure you know who they are.” Leo
Salingar says Empson “rambled on interminably” [Haffenden II 562]. I did wonder if Empson was entirely sober, but I still felt the passion and the mind in play, and there was something wonderfully tireless about the performance, as if talking avidly about literature and life was the best thing anyone could be doing. He was trying to find his way among a crowd of ideas, and didn’t know which to look at first or for how long. And I suppose I already thought that he might have his own forms of dishevelment.

For these and other reasons I see the Macbeth passage not as a model—who could follow it?—but as a spectacular instance of what criticism can do, of how personal and imaginative it may be while remaining very close to the text. If it doesn’t look like much of the criticism we know, it is because it isn’t.

The Empson I would like to conjure up in this book is a writer, both as a critic and a poet, and I need to pause over some of the meanings of the term. We use it very broadly to name a person who does writing of any kind—a screenwriter, a ghostwriter, an underwriter, even the kind of painter who is a sign writer. We use it rather obnoxiously to mean someone who makes plays or poems or novels, as distinct from a mere journalist or author of memos and memoirs. But there is another sense, one which involves no particular
genre or form of writing, which signals only a long intimacy with language, a feeling that you have to care for it and can’t go anywhere without it. Roland Barthes offers the clearest definition I know of this meaning of the word when he says that a writer is “someone for whom language is a problem, who experiences its depth, not its usefulness or beauty” (“Est écrivain celui pour qui le langage fait problème, qui en éprouve la profondeur, non l’instrumentalité ou la beauté”). The word “problem” may come across as a little too assertive in English, since I don’t think Barthes means language is a difficulty, an obstacle in the way of meaning, although many authors do indeed think this. Barthes is saying that language for a writer is something to live with or live through (his phrase also has a suggestion of testing about it), rather than to use or admire. Of course we can (must) use it too, and we can admire it if we want to. Yet only writers (and certain kinds of reader) will believe they can never leave language to the side of any question.

Describing La Rochefoucauld’s devastating maxims, Empson says:

The triumph of the style is that he can say a very long list of mean things without your ever feeling that he himself is mean; it would not be good writing unless it was felt to
carry a hint of paradox and therefore self-contradiction. [CW 433]

I’m not sure paradox and self-contradiction are necessary, but the idea of performance is, the creation of a self in words, and certainly writing in the sense I am trying to evoke will appear only when some sort of hinting is going on as well as a more direct saying.

There is a conundrum, though. Not all critics are writers—perhaps most of them are not—and some of them are better when they don’t try to be. We can say what we mean in almost any number of ways, and Empson would still have been a great critic if he had written differently, or worse—if he had not been a writer at all in my last sense. But he would not have been the critic (and poet) that he was. If his Macbeth was not fumbling among the powers of darkness, he would not be Empson’s Macbeth, and we would not have this helpless killer among our repertoire of human possibilities.

II

William Empson was born in Yorkshire in 1906, and died in London in 1984. He studied mathematics, then English, at Cambridge, wrote poems and plays, acted, reviewed films and books. He
left Cambridge in something of a hurry. He was about to take up a postgraduate fellowship at Magdalene College when a bedmaker discovered a pack of condoms in his rooms. The authorities inferred that Empson’s plans were not exclusively academic, and, invoking an ancient local rule that sex and scholarship could not share a space, at least not if anyone knew about their meeting, expelled him.

He worked as a freelance writer in London for two years before going to Japan, in 1931, to teach at Tokyo University, where he stayed until 1934. He spent three years back in England before joining the exiled universities in China. During the war he worked for the BBC Overseas Service in London, returning to China for the years 1947–1952. He published three volumes of verse between 1935 and 1949. The works of criticism printed during his lifetime were *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), and *Milton’s God* (1961).

In both poetry and prose Empson has the attractive ability to make paradoxes sound as if they were not paradoxes at all, just bits of moderately complicated thinking of the sort anyone needs to do now and again. There was a minor vogue in the 1970s and early 1980s for associating him with French theory, with deconstruction specifically, but Empson himself would
have none of it. When Christopher Norris sent him some writings of Derrida and others, Empson said he thought “those horrible Frenchmen” were “so very disgusting, in a social and moral way, that I cannot stomach them” [Haffenden I 301]. He also managed, perhaps unintentionally, to invent a new Frenchman: Jacques Nerrida. What Empson found disgusting was the seeking out, as he saw it, of complexity for complexity’s sake, a project that was “always pretending to be plumbing the depths” but in reality was only congratulating itself on its cleverness. Above all he took it—this was in 1971—as just one more instance of what he saw as happening to the study of language and literature everywhere: the human stakes were being removed, words were let loose in the playground, no agents or intentions were to be seen.

And yet Empson’s work, for all his denials, connects him strongly to all the major modern movements of criticism and theory in English and other languages—not because of his influence on them or their influence on him, but because his preoccupations are central to any sort of ongoing thought about literature. We can’t tie him securely to any style or approach, but we can’t get around him either: he will always be there when we try to understand the kinds of adventure that reading can afford.
Empson is often considered to be one of the founders of the New Criticism, as it came to be called in the United States, and he is certainly the most brilliant close reader the movement ever produced. But as close reading, a fabulous classroom device, became more and more of an established method, it turned less historical and less speculative, until finally it seemed unable to refer to anything other than the words on the page, or to allow the belief that those words referred to anything beyond the page. Empson conducted a lifetime quarrel with the New Criticism’s idea of intention, and intensely disliked its promotion of the work of literature as a static object, a verbal icon or a well-wrought urn, to cite two cherished images.

In 1946 W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley wrote an important essay called “The Intentional Fallacy,” advancing the proposition that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.” The piece was and remains enormously useful for the ways in which it helps us to resist lazy critical confusions of life and art, and reductive notions of causality. It also reminds us of an easily buried fact: the road to terrible work in literature or any other art is paved with excellent intentions. Intention may be where things begin—although accident too is
a promising start—but the result includes quite a few other ingredients. However, the phrase “neither available nor desirable,” dogmatic as good polemical announcements need to be, doesn’t stand up to any sort of nuanced consideration. An author’s design or intention is sometimes completely known and quite enlightening, sometimes far too blunt and entirely distracting. In some cases we shall never know it but desperately wish we could. In others we are delighted that we don’t. Many authors are articulate yet distinctly evasive about intention, and unconscious intentions lurk all over the place. There is no general rule here, one simply has to do the work of reading and thinking.

For Empson, though, the doctrine of the intentional fallacy, which he liked to call the Wimsatt Law, was a rule. It said we were not to think of authors at all, literature was to be cleanly separated from the messy world of appetite and argument and intended meaning. He thought the rule was the bane of literary studies in the second half of the twentieth century, and he was almost as obsessed with its noxious effects as he was with what he saw as the invasion of English and American universities by hordes of Christian critics.

The Wimsatt Law, according to Empson, “lays down that no reader can grasp the intention of any author,” or with a slight variation, “says that
no reader can ever grasp the intention of an author” [UB 225, vii]. Since he thinks this proposition is both nonsensical and harmful, Empson is inclined to parody it as well as simplify it, as in “a reader must never understand the intention of an author” [ES 158] or his sarcastic suggestion that a seventeenth-century audience “could not foresee that Mr Wimsatt was going to make a law forbidding them to grasp the intention of an author” [UB 104].

“We must consider the experiences and convictions of the poet,” Empson insists, follow out “the main line of interest of the author”; and to tell students of literature that they “cannot even partially succeed” in doing this “is about the most harmful thing you could do” [UB 4, 115, viii]. Going out on a rather strange limb, Empson is willing to say that faking biographical evidence is “more humane than the refusal to admit help from biography, or any intention in the author” [UB 42]. He is quite sure that Andrew Marvell “would feel ashamed of what he had done.” W. B. Yeats “must have loved such a toy when he was about ten years old.” “It seems clear that [T. S. Eliot’s] mother had refused to sleep under the same roof as the wife” [UB 7, 176, 194]. But the passion that tilts these arguments is interesting, and we need to look at a wider range of Empson’s views to understand its force.
The most blatant example of Empson's breaking the Wimsatt Law is also the funniest. To understand *Hamlet*, he thinks, we must go back to “the moment of discovery by Shakespeare” [ES 79]. This would have happened when Shakespeare's company took on a Hamlet play by Thomas Kyd (or someone else), and didn’t know what to do with it because they were aware that this croaking old revenge stuff was desperately out of fashion. Shakespeare would have thought of the rewrite as “a pretty specialised assignment, a matter, indeed, of trying to satisfy audiences who demanded a Revenge Play and then laughed when it was provided” [ES 84]. Still, he carried on.

I think he did not see how to resolve this problem at the committee meeting, when the agile Bard was voted to carry the weight, but already did see how when walking home. . . . He thought: “The only way to shut this hole is to make it big. I shall make Hamlet walk up to the audience and tell them, again and again, ‘I don’t know why I’m delaying any more than you do; the motivation of this play is just as blank to me as it is to you; but I can’t help it.’ What is more, I shall make it impossible for them to blame him. And then they daren’t laugh.” It turned out, of course, that this method, instead
of reducing the old play to farce, made it thrillingly life-like and profound.

Empson’s idea of Shakespeare’s “method” makes the film *Shakespeare in Love* look like a documentary, and the touch about walking home is marvelous. Is he serious? Yes and no, but I find it impossible to measure the respective doses. He is serious about considering the “moment of discovery,” and about the very fine interpretation he is proposing. Hamlet does talk as if he knew he was caught up in a terrible old play. The rest, the committee meeting, the ventriloquized author’s soliloquy, is bravura filling in of comic detail: critical theatre. The question is—we are talking about intentionality after all—how comic Empson meant the detail to be.

Not very, I’m afraid, or not at all. My friend and colleague Larry Danson recalls a talk Empson gave at Princeton in the early 1970s, on Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*. Empson thought this mysterious play could be cleared up by the assumption that an explanatory passage had been cut by the censor. This would be where the conspirators were seen conspiring. Empson had obligingly written a version of the scene himself—“I have to invent the words,” he said—and supplied it to his audience as a handout. The invention appears in the talk as published in 1994. “The back curtain
opens,” it begins. A character says, “All is in train, my dear Ambassador.” The ambassador says, “Be sure my master will show gratitude” [RL2 58–59]. After the talk, Larry, then a newly appointed assistant professor, complimented the visitor on his “clever parody” of old school critical method. Empson seemed distinctly annoyed—no parody of any sort had been intended.

In other moods, Empson was willing to admit that Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s argument had “a kind of flat good sense about it, because it is hard to know how we do learn each other’s intentions.” But then he was adamant that this difficulty was no excuse for not trying to get into an author’s head. On the contrary, it means we have to try harder. “There is no metaphysical reason . . . for treating the intentions of an author as inherently unknowable” [CV 14].

The most important thing in these arguments is an element that is present everywhere in Empson but only occasionally stressed. Understanding literature is not different from understanding anything else. Norris puts this very well when he says that “Empson’s books all seek, in different ways, to make terms between poetry and the normal conditions of language and commonsense discourse,” and that ambiguity, for example, “belongs to a normal, not uniquely poetic order of thought and language” [Norris 9].
Making terms sometimes means making equations, as in the passage above; elsewhere it means making distinctions, and one of Empson’s rather tangled claims engages the Wimsatt Law in a truly intriguing way.

Any speaker, when a baby, wanted to understand what people meant, why mum was cross for example, and had enough partial success to go on trying; the effort is usually carried on into adult life, though not always into old age. Success, it may be argued, is never complete. But it is nearer completeness in a successful piece of literature than in any other use of language. [UB vii]

“Partial” and “usually” make clear the practice is common but not universal, and the remark about old age is a mildly mischievous joke. But the conclusion is startling. In the very region where we might think, from our own experience, from the long, conflictive history of literary criticism, and indeed from Empson’s own work, that it has always been hardest to “understand what people meant,” success is less partial than anywhere else.

The reason for literature’s success in this respect is everywhere in Empson’s work, often lost in the noise he is making about what he doesn’t like in current literary study, but finally not at all far from Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s claim,
or that of most good criticism, new or old. The completed work is the test of intention, or, as Empson says, “you must rely on each particular poem to show you the way in which it is trying to be good” [ST 7]. If we combine this statement with his remark that “the judgment of the author may be wrong” [ST xiv], it is hard to see what the quarrel is about. Hard, but not impossible. For the same reason that he would rather have a faked biography than no biography, Empson would rather guess at the contents of an author’s mind than leave the author out of the story. This is what he says in his quieter moments: “I would not mind agreeing, as a verbal formula, that the intention of an author can always only be guessed at, so long as it is also agreed that the guess . . . should always be made” [CV 15]. And rather more loudly, “if critics are not to put up some pretence of understanding the feelings of the author in hand they must condemn themselves to contempt” [ST xiii–xiv]. Empson wants us to see literature as a kind of continuum, a viaduct from mind to mind, and we might summarize the secret complexity of his view by saying that authors’ judgments can be wrong but their feelings can’t be irrelevant, because they are what the work is made of. Empson, like a good disciple of John Donne as Eliot saw him (“thought to Donne was an experience”), would include ideas and
arguments among the feelings—distinguishing them perhaps from opinions.

If we borrow the trope of the death of the author, we could imagine Barthes and Empson staring at each other in a mirror, without either of them knowing who the mirrored figure is. Barthes thought the author had to be seen as dead so that writing could be rescued from the tyranny of gossip and academic pedantry, and be properly read for its own sake. But then Barthes later came to see he couldn’t do without the author, that he “desired” this figure, as he said, that he had to construct or imagine an author in order to trace out certain meanings, ironies for example. This was a way of discreetly letting intention back into criticism—as an invited guest rather than a police presence.

Conversely, Empson never thought of intention as a police presence, only as the fallible but indispensable human source of any writing that matters. However, the more strenuously he asserted the need for thinking about the author’s mind, the more prodigiously varied and optional that place turned out to be. There are times when Empson appears to be on the way to inventing a Monty Python school of literary criticism: “we are printing what Coleridge is not known to have written, but what he at least would have written if he had decided to keep the verse which he had
long before designed for this place” [CV 54]. “I would never have gone beyond the intention of an author,” he says, “either in his consciousness or in his unconsciousness” [UB 40]. This is almost delusional, if not theological, like believing two or three impossible things before breakfast. Empson seems to say that he will ascribe to intention whatever interpretation he arrives at, and we see that all along he has been doing what good critics do: trusting his own sense of the words and the writer’s gift.

It is his loyalty to language as a subject that connects Empson to so many consecutive schools of criticism, including the ones he detested. He would have thought Heidegger’s claim that language itself speaks (“die Sprache spricht”) was worse than the Wimsatt Law, but of course Empson wasn’t saying that it didn’t speak, only that we need to pay attention to the speaker behind the speaking, the one Heidegger has eliminated.

The centrality of language, what some would think of as its unavoidability, is what connects most of the critical approaches that came to be called theoretical in the twentieth century. Russian Formalism haunted French Structuralism, and not only because Roman Jacobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss worked together; Walter Benjamin’s thinking was often, perhaps always, inseparable from the turns his language took.
Even the austere Adorno said that one could “hardly speak of aesthetic matters unaesthetically, devoid of resemblance to the subject matter, without falling into philistinism and losing touch with the object.” I don’t think Adorno meant criticism had to imitate art, only that it needed to find a form that remembers what it is.

With Structuralism, language became the paradigm for a method. We could understand the grammar of social relations, literary genres, historical periods and much else as we understood the grammar of our own speech. We could begin to think about its omnipresence and its curious regulatory force, and how it works so effectively without our knowing much about it or even recognizing that we are taking its orders. Lacan’s “the unconscious is structured like a language” was an invitation to think of psychoanalysis in these terms, and Barthes wrote a whole book about the linguistic structure of what he called the fashion system.

Poststructuralism was equally centered on language, but devoted to the cracks and slippages of order, the imbalance and variety of usage, let’s say, rather than the seemingly infinite discipline of grammar. This shift had many faces, of which deconstruction, at first a rather technical term in Derrida’s lexicon, and then an alternately glamorous and reviled academic enterprise, was
perhaps the best known. In the persuasive practice of Derrida, Paul de Man and other subtle thinkers, it took language not as a reminder of secret structure but as the home of a recurring crisis of meaning, a place where interpretation learned that it was theoretically endless. Of course, this claim itself needs interpretation. Endless is not the same as pointless, and what is endless in theory is often stopped easily enough in practice. We may think—I do think—that the reasons for stopping are usually more interesting than the possibility of going on forever, although then it would be worth asking whether those reasons are practical or theoretical.

In his first two books Empson anticipates Structuralism by drawing our attention to language, in and out of literature, and specifically to patterns of meaning in places where we hadn’t seen them—although those patterns are always threatening to get out of hand. In *The Structure of Complex Words* Empson offers an array of theories that finally turns his title into a sort of oxymoron. The complexity of certain words as Empson explores them, the accumulation of their many meanings and uses, defies the very notion of anything as stable as a structure.

Literary critics do not currently live, as many have supposed, in a post-theory world. There is too much theory for us to catch up on. But we
do feel, I think, as once fashionable names fade and mere practice continues, that what is interesting in theory will be even more interesting in the particular case. This feeling seems especially relevant at a time when the old close reading is being challenged by Franco Moretti’s intriguing proposal of “distant reading,” and when models of hermeneutic suspicion, of digging into the depths, are countered by eloquent pleas, made by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus and others, for attention to the surfaces of texts. The continuing conversation is important. We would not call for distance if we didn’t feel closeness had turned narrow. And if we had not got lost in the depths, no one would need to remind us of the surface.

Empson’s work seems everywhere and nowhere in this crossfire. It certainly suggests, as a sort of airlift from the battlefield, that really good close reading may be just too close, not only for comfort but also for any acceptable articulation. It will see more than it can critically take account of, pick up more trails than it can follow. This is precisely what David Miller suggests with his conception of a mode of reading that “must seem . . . a tiny bit mad,” and involves us in “a never-ending embarras du choix.” Empson, we might say, whatever he thought he was doing, was occupied with nothing else.
A month or so ago, I was trying to work out the tone and implications of a famous phrase in Rimbaud, the last line of a prose poem called “Parade,” ingeniously translated by John Ashbery as “Sideshow.” The poem describes a set of frightening “robust rascals,” young and old, who appear to be street performers.

They act out ballads, tragedies of thieves and demi-gods . . . and resort to magnetic comedy. Their eyes flame, the blood sings, the bones swell, tears and trickles of red descend. Their raillery or their terror lasts a minute, or entire months.

I don’t know what magnetic comedy is, but it doesn’t sound good. And then a single sentence, itself a whole paragraph, ends the poem by saying “J’ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage” (“I alone know the plan of this savage sideshow”).

I was interested in the claim to power that lies in this assertion of knowledge, but I also wondered what kind of key this might be, and whether Rimbaud was mocking his speaker’s vanity rather than celebrating his privilege. I was not, as far as I knew, thinking of Empson at all, and if I had been, I would have remembered only one two-word reference (“like Rimbaud”) in a late short piece celebrating the work of Edgell Rickword, an English poet and critic who
published a book on the French writer. There is no mention of Rimbaud in any of Empson’s major works, in his letters, or in John Haffenden’s biography. Then I read the draft of an article that was part of Empson’s long quarrel with the literary scholar Rosamond Tuve about the liturgical (or not) background to George Herbert’s poem “The Sacrifice.” Empson is refuting what he takes to be Tuve’s assertion that he, Empson, “can taste a poem better with no knowledge.” He says he has all kinds of knowledge.

I claim to know not only the traditional background of Herbert’s poem (roughly but well enough) but also what was going on in Herbert’s mind when he wrote it, without his knowledge and against his intention; and if she says that I cannot know such things, I answer that that is what critics do, and that she too ought to have “la clef de cette parade sauvage.”

This key is not the only key, of course. Empson doesn’t quote Rimbaud’s full sentence suggesting sole, perhaps crazed possession. Tuve should have her own key because she is not a critic if she hasn’t. And the swiftness of Empson’s mind turns the savage parade into a display of traditional Christian horrors, a long way from the secular circus of Rimbaud. It does this because
the sacrifice in the Herbert poem is that of Jesus Christ, whose refrain keeps asking, “Was ever grief like mine?” Still, I treasure this passage not only for what I learned again about the liveliness of Empson’s arguing mind but also for the glimpse it offered of the range and ease of his references, the quick evocation of the cosmopolitan writer sharing rooms with the bluff Briton. The man who couldn’t spell Derrida’s name quotes Rimbaud as if he were an unruly but articulate young neighbor in Yorkshire.