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LITERATURE AND THE TASTE OF KNOWLEDGE

What does literature know? Does it offer us knowledge of its own or does it only interrupt and question other forms of knowledge? This book seeks to answer and to prolong these questions through the close examination of individual works and the exploration of a broad array of examples. Chapters on Henry James, Kafka, and the form of the villanelle are interspersed with wider-ranging enquiries into forms of irony, indirection and the uses of fiction, with examples ranging from Auden to Proust and Rilke, and from Calvino to Jean Rhys and Yeats. Literature is a form of pretence. But every pretence could tilt us into the real, and many of them do. There is no safe place for the reader: no literalist's haven where fact is always fact; and no paradise of metaphor, where our poems, plays and novels have no truck at all with the harsh and shifting world.

MICHAEL WOOD is the Charles Barnwell Straut Professor of English and Professor of Comparative Literature at Princeton University, and from 1995 to 2001 he was the Director of Gauss Seminars in Criticism at Princeton. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a Member of the American Philosophical Society. His works include books on Stendhal, García Márquez, Nabokov, Kafka and films. Additionally, he is a widely published essayist, with articles on film and literature in *London Review of Books*, *New York Review of Books*, *New York Times Book Review*, *New Republic* and other journals.

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In memory of
F. W. Dupee
E. W. Said
J. P. Stern
and my father
teachers of thought and courage and care

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'That is what comes of the taste for generalisation. You have only to hear nothing for a few days, in your hole, nothing but the sounds of things, and you begin to fancy yourself the last of human kind.'

Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*

'It does not even satisfy the understanding to stop living in order to understand.'

William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

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Acknowledgements

This book began life as the William Empson Lectures, given in Cambridge in October and November 2003, and I am deeply grateful to the University of Cambridge English Faculty and Cambridge University Press for the honour of their invitation. The occasion was a particular pleasure because I have always associated Empson, and my reading of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, with my earliest sense of what criticism could really do – how much it could do, and how exciting it could be. Not that it's exciting all the time, or that the rest of us are Empson.

I wish to thank my Cambridge hosts Stefan Collini and John Kerrigan for their kindness, hospitality and intellectual support, and my Cambridge audiences for their intense attention and shrewd comments. I'm especially grateful to Gillian Beer, Pat Boyde, Martin Davies, Mary Jacobus, Hermione Lee, Robert Newsom, Jacqueline Rose and Sheila Stern, whose advice and insight improved this book in so many ways. I learnt a great deal from Angela Leighton's wonderful British Academy Lecture 'Elegies of Form in Bishop, Plath, Stevenson', which she kindly sent to me.

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Patterson and Linda Peters. And then there are traces in this book of more conversations than I can count. I should like to mention, as emblems of so many others, my talks long and short with Rita Copeland, Stanley Corngold, Jeff Dolven, Hal Foster, Claudia Johnson, Mark Johnson, Jeff Nunokawa, Philip Pettit, Jonathan Steinberg, Susan Stewart, David Wallace, Gillian White and C. K. Williams.

I have added to the text here and there, filling out discussions and examples, and I have tried to get rid of some of the wilder inconsistencies. I have modified the conversational tone where it wouldn't translate on to the page, and dropped the local jokes where they wouldn't travel beyond the Fens. But I have tried to maintain the pace and style of the lectures, their sense of ongoing speculation and often surprised discovery, their conjuring of questions in rather restless dialogue with further questions.

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Princeton
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