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978-0-521-35386-1 - William Empson: The Critical Achievement

Edited by Christopher Norris and Nigel Mapp

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William Empson (1906–84) was one of the twentieth century's most distinctive critical voices, and left (perhaps unwittingly) a profound mark upon Anglo-American literary culture. This book is the first full study of Empson's literary criticism in its various aspects, taking account of recent developments in critical theory and of Empson's complex – at times deeply antagonistic – attitude towards those developments. In their diversity of viewpoint and critical approach the essays reflect this sturdy resistance to the fashionable trends of 'Eng. Lit.' opinion. Topics include Empson's speculative treatment of language and the sublime in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930); his brilliant redefinition of the pastoral genre; the logico-semantic theory of multiple meaning developed in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951); his critique of 'neo-Christian' values and assumptions in *Milton's God* (1961) and the essays of his last two decades; and the relation between Empson's and Derrida's approaches to the issue of textual 'undecidability'. There are also chapters on his highly individual methods of teaching and postgraduate supervision, as well as his prominent (if unwilling) role in the shaping of English as an academic discourse.

The nine essays by experts on twentieth-century criticism and theory follow on from Christopher Norris's introductory piece which charts the ground and offers a major reevaluation of Empson's place in the broader theoretical tradition. Altogether, the book presents Empson as by far the most intelligent, inventive, humane, and sheerly *readable* of critics in the modern 'analytical' school.

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ACHIEVEMENT

EDITED BY

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

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and

NIGEL MAPP

*Sir James Knott Fellow in English Literature
University of Newcastle upon Tyne*



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Neil Hertz teaches in the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (1985) and co-editor of Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism and Responses: on Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (1989).

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Foreword

Editing this book has been an enjoyable task for various reasons, not least the unfailing helpfulness and generosity of my contributors, the encouragement received at every stage from Kevin Taylor and Josie Dixon of Cambridge University Press, and the welcome opportunity to reread Empson in the company of colleagues and students, some of them encountering his work for the first time. As the essays came in I often asked myself how Empson might have responded had he lived to offer comments on their many and varied lines of approach. In 1978 I sent him the proofs of my own early book (*William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*) and invited him to write a short postscript addressing any points of interest or passages where he thought I had got him wrong. The result was a mild but firm rebuke in the familiar late-Empson manner, remarking that the book had caused him to wonder ‘whether my work deserved such devoted scrutiny, or at least to wish I had not written so confusedly that it was needed’. Moreover, Norris’s kind intentions turned out to have sharp limits; ‘anything I had printed for the last quarter of a century was irrelevant nonsense, to be dismissed briefly with a sigh’. So yes, he would write the postscript as requested, but wanted to make it clear that – *pace* Norris – ‘I have not been entertaining myself with frippery in my old age; . . . I have continued to try to handle the most important work that came to hand’.

I thought then – and still do – that Empson’s response was oddly out of key with what I had written about his later work. All the same I can see why he found it so irksome to be taken up as a kind of honorary precursor by a whole new school of ‘bother-headed’ theoretical critics whose enterprise – as Empson understood it – had nothing in common with his own outlook of sturdy common-sense rationalism, his principle that ‘theory’ was only of use in so far as it helped to clear away the sources of confusion (or the downright corruptions of moral and intellectual judgement) brought about by

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the current neo-Christian revival in orthodox Eng. Lit. circles. 'Surely', he concluded, 'when things have got as loony as that, it becomes a duty to speak up; even if it feels less momentous than propounding a theory of Ambiguity.' Anyway – to cut short this brooding reminiscence – it strikes me that Empson would probably have had mixed feelings about the present volume of essays. They are by no means all given over to 'theory', in Empson's disapproving sense of that term, although some (Hertz, Norris, McCallum, Durant and MacCabe among them) make large claims for Empson's importance as a theorist *malgré lui*, one whose work – especially *The Structure of Complex Words* – may be said not only to 'anticipate' recent developments but also to go far beyond them in certain crucial respects. Certainly there is no attempt to annex his criticism to any one prevailing theoretical trend, whether post-structuralist, New Historicist, deconstructionist or whatever. On the contrary, one could take it as a hopeful sign that 'theory' is coming of age when it manages to find room for a strong but problematical figure like Empson, a critic whose thinking goes so markedly against some of its basic precepts and principles. Besides, the book offers what Empson might have thought a decent leavening of non-theoretical pieces, or – more accurately – essays which bear out his point from the closing chapter of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: that 'normal sensibility is a tissue of what has been conscious theory made habitual and returned to the pre-conscious', so that 'conscious theory may make an addition to sensibility' even where the critic shows little interest in addressing such matters. Here, as so often, his remark is worth bearing in mind when confronted with the warring claims and counter-claims of present-day critical debate.

The editors would like to thank Kathy Kerr and Peter Sedgwick for various pieces of help and advice during the preparation of this volume; Sumie Okada, an authority on Empson's pre-war years in Japan; John Haffenden for his interest in the project (and also for his splendid editorial work on the posthumous collection *Argufying*, a scholarly labour of love if ever there was one); Terence Hawkes for his many good ideas about Empson over the past decade; Lady Hetta Empson for kind permission to reproduce material featured in Philip Hobsbaum's essay; and our friends in Cardiff for their constant supply of good humour and intellectual stimulus.

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS
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Note: Neil Hertz's essay – or a version thereof – has appeared in *diacritics* 20:3 (Fall 1990), 2–27, having first been commissioned by the editors for a special number on Paul de Man. Paul Fry's essay is based on a chapter of his book *William Empson: Prophet against Sacrifice* (London: Routledge, 1991), a volume in the series Critics of the Twentieth Century.