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0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Excerpt

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I think one major and much needed reform is now in progress, a decisive break away, if it can be pressed hard enough, from the iron rule of the T. S. Eliot men. It is the recognition that people held a great variety of religious or philosophical opinions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though they were cautious about printing it; instead of all having to agree with T. S. Eliot, because they knew no other.

from the introduction to Empson's unpublished Clark Lectures, 1974

'No man really likes being promoted to the class of Licensed Buffoons', wrote William Empson in 1966, at a time when he was given cause to reflect on his own critical reputation, 'but it has been an important post in England since the time of Jaques, I suppose, let alone Bernard Shaw.'<sup>1</sup> Empson's status as a Licensed Buffoon has recently been rehearsed, or rather ironically celebrated, by John Carey, Merton Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford, in a review of Frank Kermode's *An Appetite for Poetry*. Empson, Carey writes,

was pugnacious, irascible and dogmatic – a rottweiler to Kermode's pekinese. Far from sharing Kermode's courteous hospitality to divergent viewpoints, he thought he was right, and that anyone who disagreed with him was detestable and base. In fact, he was persistently wrong, indeed crack-brained, on some issues, as Kermode shows. He believed all his life that John Donne was interested in space travel, and in the theological problems of extra-terrestrial life-forms, and he once assured Kermode that Donne's 'The Good Morrow' took place on the planet Venus. But even in these loopy seizures Empson compelled attention because he passionately believed in himself.<sup>2</sup>

Given such a stalemate – Carey's humorous allegation that Empson was wrong when he thought he was right – I propose in this introduction to review and evaluate Empson's extensive writings on

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Donne, which appeared over a period of no less than half a century, from 1930 to 1981, and to seek to understand why – during the last 30 years – they have been patronised as *divertissements*, more or less irrelevant to the proper business of Donne scholarship.

Certainly the first point to be stressed is that, as John Carey admits, Empson's arguments from Donne's poetry – specifically the love-poetry – were consistent from first to last. 'Practically all [Donne's] good poems', Empson maintained, are concerned with enunciating a secret freedom from church and state; far from being the fruits of waggishness, or 'typically capricious and inconstant' (to use Carey's phrase about Donne),<sup>3</sup> they are seriously sceptical, rebellious, and indeed revolutionary. Looking back in 1974, Empson remarked:

It was not a new idea in 1935 that the love-poetry of Donne claims a defiant independence for the air of lovers, especially by setting them to colonise some planet made habitable by Copernicus. A campaign to exterminate the idea was then in progress, using very little reasoned argument, and its success has naturally made the poems seem pretty trivial to a later generation.<sup>4</sup>

He was referring to his earliest sustained presentation of the theory, 'Double plots' (1935), in which he argued that the Renaissance cultivated a 'desire to make the individual more independent than Christianity allowed', and that 'one did not want to submit to the inquisition of a central divine authority even at best...' The Copernican hypothesis, soon to be proved by scientific discovery, allowed an escape-route for the dissident.

The idea that you can get right away to America, that human affairs are not organised round one certainly right authority (e.g. the Pope) is directly compared to the new idea that there are other worlds like this one, so that the inhabitants of each can live in their own way. These notions carry a considerable weight of implication, because they lead at once to a doubt either of the justice or the uniqueness of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

If the Logos is at once 'the underlying Reason of the universe and... the Christ who had saved man', to describe any other human being as fulfilling that dual role is to deny the singular revelation of Christ as creator and redeemer. Crashaw did as much in 'The Weeper' when he described Mary Magdalene as 'a sort of rival Christ': 'It is she now who underlies the order of nature... Since her tears are both the essential stars and the essential dew (and so on)

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they reconcile earth and heaven, they perform the function of the sacrificed god... The Protestants were clearly right in calling this version of the invocation of saints heretical, because it destroys the uniqueness of Christ...' So too, Empson went on, in

'The First Anniversarie' Donne gives an enormous picture of the complete decay of the universe, and this is caused by the death of a girl of no importance whom Donne had never seen. Ben Jonson said 'if it had been written to the Virgin, it would have been something' but only Christ would be enough; only his removal from the world would explain the destruction foretold by astronomers. The only way to make the poem sensible is to accept Elizabeth Drury as the Logos.<sup>6</sup>

What all this adds up to, by Empson's reckoning, is a version of pastoral, whereby the poet – necessarily standing at a remove, 'because an artist never is at one with any public' (*Pastoral*, p. 14) – salutes the worth of individual conscience over institutionalised rule. Jonson was astute to think the *Anniversaries* 'profane and full of Blasphemies';<sup>7</sup> but as far as Empson was concerned, that heresy was creditable and indeed heroic: 'Blasphemy was a serious accusation, and we need not suppose that [Donne] expressed his deepest feeling in defending himself against it.'

In 'On Metaphysical Poetry' (*Scrutiny*, 2:13, December 1933), James Smith, a Cambridge friend of Empson's, ventured to define the essence of metaphysical verse in these terms: 'verse properly called metaphysical is that to which the impulse is given by an overwhelming concern with metaphysical problems; with problems either deriving from, or closely resembling in the nature of their difficulty, the problem of the Many and the One.' As old as Plato, the problem of the Many and the One includes these examples, he noted: 'At times the individual has fought against, and depended upon, its fellow individual, much as multiplicity unity; or the individual has fought against the universal; or against the universe, or against God.'<sup>8</sup> Empson agreed with Smith's essay, which he thought 'excellent'; adding only: 'The supreme example of the problem of the One and the Many was given by the Logos who was an individual man.'<sup>9</sup>

Empson worked outside the current of Anglo-American criticism for most of the 1930s and 1940s, teaching first in Japan and then in China; so that the message he carried to his Far Eastern students, as in these unpublished notes linking the strategy of Donne's poetry to

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the political appropriation of Petrarchism by the Elizabethan court, reiterated what he took to be the orthodox view of the ‘deeply sceptical and inquisitive’ character of Donne’s mind – albeit that Donne may have ‘felt the drama of scepticism rather than any rational necessity for it’:

The assertion that somebody *is* the whole world, or that their death will destroy the whole world, is always coming up in Donne’s work ... It is an ancient belief that the king or emperor has a magical effect on the country he rules; if there are floods and disasters, that proves he is insincere. In a sense he *is* everything, because he is magically connected to everything. In Donne’s time this line of thought, partly because recovered from the classics, had been revived in a remarkable degree about Queen Elizabeth. ‘The divine right of kings’ is not a medieval idea, but one taken up by the family of Tudor, and in England this kind of poetry was first written about the queen. But the metaphysical idea, that the person is everything just as whiteness is all white things, makes a different connection. Christ is the logos in theology, that is, he is the underlying reason which keeps the universe obeying its laws, and he was also an individual man. And by his death he altered the conditions of the whole world. So what Donne says about his heroines was seriously believed about Christ. He is stealing fire from the two most sacred sources, royalty and religion, and the effect is to say with insolent force that he cares about nothing but the love-affair that he describes.<sup>10</sup>

James Smith had fully concurred in 1933: ‘To Donne the most important things that exist are himself and his mistress, the most important relation between them the everyday one of love.’<sup>11</sup> Just so, Empson wrote about ‘Donne and his imitators’: ‘they really are metaphysical. They believe (though not all solemnly) that a love-affair is the fundamental means of understanding the world, or that the real purpose of building any system of knowledge is to understand love. If this is so, it is natural to bring your whole world-view into a love-poem.’

By Empson’s reckoning, the damage was done to ‘traditional’ critical readings such as his own by the reactionary forces of the Christian religion, with T. S. Eliot as its literary high priest. In 1931 Eliot made the unsupported assertion, ‘Donne was, I insist, no sceptic’,<sup>12</sup> and in due order Allen Tate (among other critics) bowed to the new wisdom. In 1611, Donne had balefully discerned in ‘The First Anniversarie’ that the ‘new Philosophy calls all in doubt’; but following Eliot’s lead Tate chose to observe in his review of *A Garland for John Donne* (the volume in which Eliot’s ‘killer’ of an essay

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appeared) that Donne's interest in the new cosmologists, Copernicus and Kepler, took the straightforward form of 'an anxiety about the physical limits of consciousness and the bearing of that question on the scholastic conception of body and soul, which Donne presents in the terminology of St Thomas. Donne knew nothing of a scientific age, or of the later open conflict between the two world-views, science and religion.'<sup>13</sup> Empson felt justified in scorning what he termed Tate's 'elegant mufflement'. Christian critics celebrate the Creator, he said, and yet they deny that a seventeenth-century poet could have felt staggered by the soul-provoking news about the true disposition of the cosmos He created. Empson enjoyed pointing up the ironically heretical implications of Tate's false position:

Well come now, this bit of hush-up naturally excites an impulse to hush-up this awful bit of hush-up too, as it happened to be an awful gaffe our old pal [Tate] made. Donne invented this conflict at the same time as the Roman Inquisition, but apart from the high terrible example of Donne it has been rare among English poets; it is a gross slander to pretend that they all despise the works of their Creator and the discoveries of the divine plan achieved during their lifetime.<sup>14</sup>

Empson first had to fight for this ground after the war, in 'Donne and the Rhetorical Tradition' (1949), where he argued that 'the final point' of the arcane research of Rosemond Tuve's *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, as applied to Donne, 'turns out to be that he did not at all mean the kind of thing a modern critic admires him for, because Donne thought he was only applying the rules of rhetoric in a particularly rigorous and stringent manner.'<sup>15</sup> As he understood Rosemond Tuve, he explained,

she treats the Donne line of talk that the idealised woman is a world, or that the two happy lovers are a world, as a straightforward use of the trope *amplificatio*. That is, in effect, it is like Pope in the 'Pastorals', saying 'Where'er you walk, cool gales will fan the glade./Trees, where you sit, will crowd into shade.' I do not mean that the Pope lines are flat; the nostalgia of their frank untruth is almost heartbreaking; but still the thing is meant to be untrue; it is a trope. I do not think you get anywhere with Donne unless you realise that he felt something different about his repeated metaphor of the separate world; it only stood for a subtle kind of truth, a metaphysical one if you like, and in a way it pretended to be a trope; but it stood for something so real that he could brood over it again and again... But [Miss Tuve] says that the astronomical images in Donne are 'dialectical counters in a war of wits', and she has a firm footnote denying that 'what we like to think of as the peculiar character of metaphysical imagery' has among its

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causes ‘the disturbed *Weltanschauung* which accompanied the acceptance of the Copernican world-picture’... I think it is obvious that his separate planet... was connected with Copernicus; and I notice that Miss Tuve gives no reason for thinking otherwise. She merely finds it natural, as she is classifying tropes, to assume that they are all fairly similar standard objects, rather like spare parts of machinery...

I deny, then, that Donne is simply ‘using’ a well-known trope, the standard howling hyperbole of the Counter-Reformation, when he identifies any person or pair of persons he chooses to praise with the Logos; because he regularly throws in the idea forbidden to Catholics of a separate planet, out of reach of the Pope, and this inherently lifts the old trope into a new intellectual air.

Thus Empson highlights in Donne’s poetry this recurrent nexus: the syncretism of ‘the metaphor of the separate planet’, derived from the contemporary debate about astronomy or cosmology, with ‘the trope based on the Logos’, meaning that one might escape the sanctions of Christian dogma. Yet the generality of criticism in post-war years has tended to share Tuve’s view that the astronomical metaphors in Donne are ‘dialectical counters in a war of wits’; that he is at best brilliantly outrageous but hardly dissentient in any seriously sustained way. Frank Kermode, for example, proposed that Donne’s ‘commonest device’ was to depend ‘heavily upon dialectical sleight-of-hand, arriving at the point of wit by subtle syllogistic misdirections... making a new and striking point by a syllogism concealing a logical error’. The poet ‘exercised his wit on the theme of sexual love, and... was inclined to do this in a “naturalist” way’.<sup>16</sup> To state only so much is to rest content with the bluff masculinity of Donne; let us delight in his audacious wit and look no further. Empson believed that Donne’s celebrations of love amounted to a defiant doctrine, challenging canon law and received morality; as he wrote to Kermode: ‘you take for granted that Donne does not mean what he says’.

‘I entirely agree that Donne must have been felt as a shock’, Kermode replied, ‘and all the part of Miss Tuve’s book which says he wasn’t is not only wrong but easily shown to be so. Some of this shock is a matter of being a little risqué in theological matters, certainly’. However, he went on, Donne ‘always uses’ the new-philosophy argument ‘exactly as he uses alchemy, angelology and all the rest of it, as providing useful illustration’.<sup>17</sup> But surely, to call Donne’s imagery ‘illustrative’ is to mitigate the shock of the poetry. James Smith made the appropriate deduction more than twenty years

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earlier: 'If Donne merely plays ducks and drakes with metaphysics, we may as well abandon our investigation'.<sup>18</sup> For his part, Empson sought to credit Donne with being purposefully provocative, slicing through convention, with his imagery not incidental but integrative.

The early Elegy XIX, 'To his Mistris Going to Bed', which Kermode was quite right to call 'magnificently erotic',<sup>19</sup> became for Empson a crucial measure of Donne's outrageousness. Spoken by a naked man, already abed, to a woman who is classily dressed in 'wyerie Coronet', gown and 'spangled breastplate', the poem hurries her to bed – hustles her, if you will – with a blend of exaltation and rapt encouragement. 'Off with that girdle, like heavens Zone glittering/ But a far fairer world encompassing.' As she doffs successive garments and accessories, the poet hymns her:

Now off with those shooes, and then safely tread  
 In this loves hallow'd temple, this soft bed.  
 In such white robes, heaven's Angels us'd to be  
 Receavd by men; Thou Angel bringst with thee  
 A heaven like Mahomets Paradise; and though  
 Ill spirits walk in white, we easly know,  
 By this these Angels from an evil sprite,  
 Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.  
 Licence my roaving hands, and let them go,  
 Before, behind, between, above, below.  
 O my America! my new-found-land,  
 My kingdome, saffiest when with one man man'd,  
 My Myne of precious stones, My Emperie,  
 How blest am I in this discovering thee!  
 To enter in these bonds, is to be free...

And finally, to extol the virtue of shared nakedness, he claims that women:

are mystick books, which only wee  
 (Whom their imputed grace will dignifie)  
 Must see reveal'd. Then since that I may know,  
 As liberally as to a Midwife shew  
 Thy selfe; cast all, yea this white lynnens hence.  
 There is no pennance due to innocence.  
 To teach thee, I am naked first: Why then  
 What needst thou have more covering than a man.

Sex, says the poem, is not what the churchmen say, it is not sinful but pure; there is no need to mortify ourselves. At least, that proposition



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is what the text of 1669 (the first to print the poem), as enshrined by Sir Herbert Grierson, says; it is the *textus receptus* which Charles Coffin could celebrate in 1937 as needing ‘no apology for treating love, unattenuated and unrefined by spiritual encumbrances, in a robust and downright manner. The refreshing realism is saved from being objectionable – though perhaps not sufficiently for those who always regard Donne in ecclesiastical perspective – by the native vigor of the poet.’<sup>20</sup> Empson thought it needed no apology for the vigour with which it confuted conventionality, its resolute heterodoxy. But the lovely line 46, ‘There is no pennance due to innocence’, is a textual crux; other manuscripts, arguably more authoritative, read variously ‘There is no pennance, much less innocence’ and ‘Here is no pennance, much less innocence’ – both of which reverse the meaning of the line, as Empson maintained, by scoffingly acknowledging the speaker’s impenitent guilt. The wooer’s expressions of urgent wonder turn into the rake’s profession of bad faith. Grierson printed ‘There is no pennance due to innocence’, from the edition of 1669, on the grounds that it represented ‘a softening of the original to make it compatible with the suggestion that the poem could be read as an epithalamium’.<sup>21</sup> Empson favoured that reading, but certainly not for its softening properties: ‘we need not give much weight to [the] charitable idea that Donne wrote the poem for his own marriage’, he suggested.<sup>22</sup> The reason why the woman addressed and undressed is innocent, he argued, ‘is that she is the Noble Savage, like Adam and Eve before the Fall (they are indeed the type case of lovers on a separate planet); she is America, where they are free as Nature made them, and not corrupted, as we are, by “late law”. Sweet the line may well be called, but it was meant to take effect as a culminating bit of defiant heresy.’ When determining a copy-text in this case, he thought, a key question is obvious: ‘what was the origin of *due to*? It cannot be an unmeaning slip; it reverses the whole point of the line, wittily.’

Frank Kermode admires the poem for what Saintsbury termed its ‘frank naturalism’; for cocking a snook at morality, but not for transgressing it in a deliberative way. ‘I take this poem’, he told Empson, ‘as being of the sort that does habitually say, “let’s have no more of all that cant about ‘honour’, ‘innocence’ etc.” “You certainly aren’t penitent; thank god you’re not ‘innocent’; so off with that white linen.”’<sup>23</sup> In short, for Kermode, the speaker vaunts his guiltiness, and expressly bows to conventionality through the very



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act of reckoning with it in such a form. Empson constantly pressed the point that the poem must be honourably heretical, or else it is obscene and – if you follow the logic of its argument – directly insults the woman who is otherwise exhorted to share a free act of love; ‘why is it essential’, he challenged Kermode to explain,

to suppose that the young Donne was not heretical, however much he appears to be? In other cases, the Christian critics are quite happy to say that an author had very wrong ideas till he was converted, but in the case of Donne they have somehow decided to twist both the text and the biography so as to pretend he never was... Of course, I should agree that the convention of wit-writing made it safer for Donne to write like this... and maybe he did alter the line in the elegy himself later in life, to remove the only bit which has to be regarded as heretical if taken seriously. But this let-out process gives no reason for supposing that he can't really have entertained the ideas which he expressed.<sup>24</sup>

In a series of essays, published in 1957, 1966, 1972 and 1981, he returned to Elegy XIX as a touchstone of critical taste and judgment; perhaps most convincingly in an essay-review of Helen Gardner's edition of *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*:

All through the poem, the lady is encouraged to undress by being told it is the right thing to do, for very exalted reasons...[and] most of the comparisons are celestial: she is a better world, and her girdle is the Milky Way; she is one of Mahomet's angels, or a sacred or magical text, only to be read by men dignified through her ‘imputed grace’ (the Calvinist doctrine here implies an awestruck sense of unworthiness). There is a steady rise in these exhilarated claims, and he calls her ‘innocent’ when he gets to the top. Donne is fond of arguing his way through an apparently indefensible case, and his logic is habitually sustained; he would think it shame to collapse and confess himself guilty... at the climax of a speech for the defence. Or is he supposed to be telling the lady how much he despises her? The crucial moment of seduction seems the most unpractical time he could choose.

Indeed, a more general question imposes itself: ‘Why is this not simply a dirty poem, please?’ I think it becomes very dirty if you make the poem jab his contempt into the lady at the crisis of the scene of love, thus proving that all his earlier flattery of her must be interpreted as jeering.

In conclusion, he averred, the poem ‘is defiant, and that is why it is not dirty; it is a challenge... It is only our modern orthodox young Donne who has to be made to express a specific sense of sin even while writing a love-poem.’

Nonetheless, it can be maintained, Donne's elegies are in any case only ingenious variations on subjects out of Ovid's *Amores*: displays of

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sheer cynical wit, or what J. B. Leishman termed 'discourses upon a broomstick',<sup>25</sup> outrageous in the degree to which they are impudent. Leishman classified Elegy XIX as a 'dramatic' elegy, smoothly witty and frankly suggestive *à la* Ovid, as opposed to certain others which might be considered in some way (speciously) logical or argumentative (p. 76). Yet few critics deny that Donne's elegies are much more than pastiches of Ovid's mode of sexual provocation; and Elegy XIX makes little sense at all unless it prosecutes a logical argument. One might also claim that the line 'Here is no pennance, much less innocence' is merely a superb example of apodosis, a rhetorical clincher that turns the argument on its head. Even so, the line still seems more like a sneering inversion, the crowing of a cad, than the thrillingly subversive 'There is no pennance due to innocence', which proposes a radically progressive principle.

J. B. Leishman enters a further caveat, however, which is to say that we must 'resist the temptation to regard such poems as autobiographical, or to infer from them anything about Donne's own conduct, morals and opinions' (p. 58). To that warning one must again reply: Donne was not just mimicking Ovid, he was reworking his model, reinventing the material, and we serve him ill to evade his individual meaning.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it is a staggering irony that Empson's long campaign to prove the courageously heretical character of Donne's poetry, and to defend the poet from pietistic detractors, gains all the more point when you contrast his high-minded version with the portrait of the poet that John Carey presents in *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (1981). A number of Empson's readers (including Kermode) have judged that his account of Donne's style of mind and poetry is obsessively wayward; that he is at best describing himself in the image of Donne. John Carey's Donne, let it be said, is obnoxious. Donne's poetry is impelled by egotism, which is its 'consuming force', says Carey;<sup>27</sup> Donne is best understood as a shame-faced recusant, driven by a lust for power; his art is the art of ambition, seething with self-regard and relentlessly on the make. The poems, which Carey seems scarcely to like at all (apart from 'The Progresse of the Soule', which he considers a neglected masterpiece), prove it. The *Songs and Sonnets* are 'largely about the instability of the self', and riddled with symptoms of apostasy: 'the love poems', he writes, 'are a veil for religious perturbations'.<sup>28</sup> Most likely taking his cue from Helen Gardner, who says that in the early poems 'one is aware of the dominance of the masculine partner who, if his mistress denies him