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Research Article

Strange Meeting: T.S. Eliot and William Empson

John Wallen
University of Sharjah, UAE

There is little direct connection between the style and construction of William Empson's"clotted" poetry and the rich—sometimes even opulent—poetry of T.S. Eliot. However, the relationship between these two writers is distinct. F.R. Leavis in his New Bearings in English Poetry brought out the nature of this connection very well:

> The significant kind of relations to…(Eliot)…is illustrated by the half-a-dozen remarkable poems that Mr. William Empson contributed to Cambridge Poetry 1929. Mr. Empson's poetry is quite unlike Mr. Eliot's, but without the creative stir and the re-orientation produced by Mr. Eliot it would not have been written.1

As Leavis points out, Empson's debt to Eliot was not primarily structural (though there was some influence here), but intellectual. In particular, Empson was indebted to Eliot for his establishment of "the seventeenth century in its due place in the English tradition."2

One of Empson's poems, "Arachne" opens:

"Twixt devil and deep sea, man hacks his caves;

Birth, death; one, many; what is true and seems;

Earth's vast hot iron, cold space's empty waves.

King spider, walks the velvet roof of streams;

Must bird and fish, must god and beast avoid Dance, like nine angels, on pin-point extremes.

Leavis quite rightly pointed out Empson's great debt to Donne in this poem, and further asserted that Empson's debt to Donne is at the same time a debt to Eliot and his work in reasserting the importance of the seventeenth-century tradition to the modern poet.

At this point, it is necessary to take a close look at Eliot's much quoted essay on the Metaphysical poets:

The poets of the seventeenth-century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcante, Guinicelli, or Cinna. In the seventeenth-century a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never recovered.

A little later, in the same essay, Eliot states his belief in the peculiar similarities and connections which exist between the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets and poets writing in the modern age:

> We can…say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility,must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to
> dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning…Hence we get something which looks very much like the conceit—we get, in fact, a method curiously similar to that of obscure words and of simple phrasing.3

If we consider Eliot's 1920 volume, Ara Vos Prec, in the light of these comments, we will go a long way towards finding a satisfactory explanation for the arcane and eclectic nature of the poems. Empson's poems usually lack the musical flow of Eliot's 1920 volume, but always there is the same intention to yoke "the most heterogenous ideas…by violence together."4 Just occasionally, Empson even achieves something of Eliot's lyrical quality:

Lucretius could not credit centaurs:

Such bicycle he deemed asynchronous.

"Man superannuates the horse;

Horse pulses will not gear with ours."

Johnson could see no bicycle would go;

"You bear yourself, and the machine as well."

Gennets for germans sprang not from Othello.

And Ixion rides upon a single wheel.

Courage. Weren't strips of heart culture seen Of late mating two periodicities?

Could not Professor Charles Darwin Graft annual upon perennial trees?

Invitation to Juno Usually the connections with Eliot in Empson's poetry are more oblique than in "Invitation to

Juno". Leavis, in New Bearings, accurately asserts that Empson's debt to Eliot is,on the whole, an intellectual one. It was Eliot, through his poetry and criticism, that reestablished the seventeenth-century in its place in the poetic tradition and it was this that made the writing of Empson's poetry—so profoundly influenced by metaphysical concepts possible:

> In the seventeenth-century (at any rate in the tradition deriving from Donne) it was assumed that a poet should be a man of distinguished intelligence, and he was encouraged by the conventions to bring into his poetry the varied interests of his life. Mr. Empson's importance is that he is a very intelligent man with an interest, not only in emotions and words, but also in ideas and the sciences, and that he has acquired enough mastery of technique to write poetry in which all this is apparent.5

Empson's "Camping Out" requires of the reader the same kind of ingenious drawing out of suggestions and implications that is so typical of Donne's poetry:

And now she cleans her teeth into the lake:

Give it (God's grace) for her own bounty's sake

What morning's pale and crisp mist debars:

Its glass of the divine (that Will could break)

Restores, beyond nature: or lets heaven take

(Itself being dimmed) her pattern, who half-awake

Milks between rocks a straddled sky of stars.

Soap tension the star pattern magnifies.

Smoothly Madonna through-assumes the skies

Whose vaults are opened to achieve the Lord

No, it is we soaring explore galaxies,

Our bullet boat light's speed by thousand flies.

Who moves so among stars their frame unties:

See where they blur, and die, and are outsoared.

Empson's poetry shows how far, as a result of the success of Eliot's poetry, wit and intellectuality had come to be thought of as natural in modern poetry. In the introduction to the notes in his Collected Poems, Empson writes:

It is impertinent to expect hard work from the reader merely because you have failed to show what you were comparing to what, and though to write notes on such a point is a confession of failure it seems an inoffensive one… Also there is no longer a reasonably small field which may be taken as general knowledge.6

Empson's notes are very interesting and serve a rather different function from Eliot's.

Often Empson's notes appear to supply some helpful detail or hint which failed to get into the poem. In this respect, Empson's notes are integral to the meaning of the poem in a way which the notes to The Waste Land are not. For Empson they are the literary complement to the poem, and the language of poetry is often continuous with the explanatory language of prose.

Empson's own finest poems make plain the weakness of the rest of his work. In a poem like "Arachne" his ingenuity is completely under the direction and control of the central feeling of the poem. Rarely does Empson succeed so well (though "Legal Fiction", "To an Old Lady" and

"This Last Pain" would provide three further examples). Usually Empson's wit lacks the power to reverberate throughout a poem and to clinch its argument emotionally (as in Donne). This is very largely because Empson is too interested in the arguments of his poems, and unlike Donne

he tends not to use false argument as an important poetic device. In Empson's poetry there is usually a clear line of argument,, which carries the main interest of the poem: the wit too often consists in sharp or obscure ways of saying what is said.

I think at this stage of the discussion—and in the light of everything that has been said—it would prove useful and enlightening to take a close look at one of Empson's better poems, in order to view the poet's allusive technique at work.

II

The idea of the poem is that human nature can conceive divine states which it cannot attain; Wittgenstein is only relevant because such feelings have produced philosophies different from his.7 This is how William Empson himself interprets the central theme of "This Last Pain", and indeed the whole poem would seem to be, at least to some extent, a dialogue with the figure of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the ideas propounded in his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. However, Wittgenstein's concepts are on occasions used very loosely—or perhaps with a deliberate intention to subtly misinterpret (and this hypothesis is reinforced by the latter part of the above "note" which accompanies the poem). In "This Last Pain" Empson appears to take the position that utterances about such matters as "God", "The soul" and "heaven" are conceivable in imaginative terms—but are, nevertheless, completely untrue:

> This last pain for the damned the father's found They knew that bliss with which they were not crowned Such but on earth let me foretell Is all of heaven and all of hell.

In the first two lines of this stanza Empson makes a point of stating man's ability to imagine divine states, while in the last two lines he insists that such imaginative activity is a merely spatio-temporal phenomenon. Man's ability to imagine or conceive divine states is a self-deluding activity. There can be nothing beyond the temporal world of material existence. The second stanza of the poem reinforces this point:

Man as the prying housemaid of the soul,

May know her happiness by key to hole:

He's safe; the key is lost; he knows

Door will not open, nor hole close.

Implicitly, the view of reality propounded by Empson in the first two stanzas of the poem appears—at least in part—as an attempt to refute some of the major ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein who had insisted in his Tractatus on the impossibility of talking about, or logically conceiving, divine states. Wittgenstein himself was a good deal of a mystic and did not necessarily believe that nothing lay beyond logical, linguistic expression. Indeed, there is a very real, if vague, religious faith expressed in the latter part of the Tractatus—as a couple of examples will serve to show:

> 1.432 How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world.8

And:

> 6.52 We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course, there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer.9

Wittgenstein's essential concern in Tractatus is expressed in his short preface:

> The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.10

It was Wittgenstein's concern, then, to discover the exact location of the line dividing sense from nonsense, so that people might realize when they had reached it and stop; what lay beyond the line was unutterable and, consequently, incapable of being formulated in terms of a logical proposition. However, what lay beyond logical formulation was real enough for Wittgenstein:

> 6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it)….He must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright.11

For Empson, however, it is impossible to "transcend these propositions" as it is his belief that there is no state of existence beyond the material world. It is his conviction that it is man's self-deceptive faculty of imagination—which is perfectly capable of being expressed linguistically—that leads to the popular illusion of a state of existence beyond space and time.

In the third stanza of "This Last Pain" Empson refers to Wittgenstein directly:

> What is conceivable can happen too Said Wittgenstein, who had not dreamt of you.

In spite of Empson's remarks in his "note" to the poem and the earlier implicit criticism of Wittgenstein's philosophy, the poet here—perhaps, willfully—subtly suggests that Wittgenstein's thoughts can be used to justify his own point of view. The lines were undoubtedly suggested by a statement from Tractatus:

> 3.02 A thought contains the possibility of the situation of which it is the thought.What is thinkable is possible too.12

Here, Wittgenstein is asserting that all "states of affairs" that might develop from a logical thought are capable of being described linguistically. However, Empson seems to imply in his poem that as Wittgenstein would certainly place matters of religious "truth" outside the scope of logical propositional statements, he would necessarily conclude that mystical and religious insights are worthless and intrinsically nonsensical. However, as we have seen, this would be to misinterpret Wittgenstein.

Perhaps Wittgenstein's most essential point in Tractatus is that mystical and religious "truths" lie outside the jurisdiction of philosophy and language as they are inherently unprovable. Mystical and religious insight may or may not express "truth", but they are certainly incapable of being analyzed linguistically. A religious tenet is not a factual hypothesis,but something which affects our thoughts and actions in a different way: the meaning of a religious insight is not a function of what would have to be the case if it were true, but a function of the difference that it makes to the lives of those who maintain it. Religious beliefs, unlike scientific beliefs, are not hypotheses, are not based on evidence and cannot be regarded as more or less probable.

In "This Last Pain" Empson makes the error of presuming that what may be termed "nonsense" in Wittgenstinian linguistic terms must also necessarily be untrue. In fact, Wittgenstein uses the word "nonsense" not in the sense of "obviously untrue", but rather to mean incapable of verification. Certainly, Wittgenstein would have little sympathy with the ideas expressed in lines such as:

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.

This is to be dogmatic and assertive in linguistic terms about that which is nherently unknowable. For Wittgenstein, it was necessary to pass over matters of religion and metaphysics in silence.

In the final stanza of the poem, Empson seems to ask the reader to forget his pain at the cruelty of the difference between appearance and reality and lose himself in impossible

visions, which may at least make his life bearable: again, a very un-Wittgenstinian idea.

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.

To conclude then, Empson in his poem "This Last Pain" makes very obvious use of current Wittgenstinian thoughts and concepts in order to fulfill his own poetic purposes. In this respect, Empson appears very much as the difficult, modern Eliotic poet with "his intellect at the tip of his senses"; and indeed there can be little doubt that Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets" did provide an intellectual and artistic context for Empson's poetry.

NOTES

1. F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London: Chatto, 1932), Pelican edition 1982, p. 146 (All references to New Bearings are taken from the Pelican edition).

2. Ibid.

3. T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber 1932), 3rd edition (enlarged) 1951, pp. 287-289.

4. Samuel Johnson, "Life of Crowley," Lives of the English Poets, Vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 14.

5. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, p. 146.

6. William Empson, Collected Poems (London: Chatto, 1955), p. 93.

7. Ibid. p. 102.

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuiness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1961), International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method, ed. Ted Honderich, reprinted (with corrections) 1972,p. 149.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid, pp. 2-5.

11. Ibid, p. 151

12. Ibid, p. 19.

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