Clownesque’, or the much-neglected number, ‘There’s No One Left to Press my Pants’, which begins: ‘As I was walking down the street | upon a winter’s day | I saw a man outside a bar, | his aspect was distrait’. So we’ve known for some time that reading Eliot closely also means listening to him closely, listening in to all the things he might have been tuning in or out. But the question to arise from this soundbite in Little Gidding is new and more than usually complex, for it should prompt us, in the case of such a profoundly allusive poet, to speculate about all those bits of rhyme and rhythm that cannot properly be termed quotations or borrowings, but which rather seem to have stuck by accident, worming their way into the poet’s melodic repertoire. Hayward, for his part, was alive to this possibility of involuntary storage and relay, and remarked of Little Gidding’s early drafts that it was ‘as if the needle of [Eliot’s] mind had got stuck in a groove and was faltering’.

I do not doubt that Eliot should have known by heart that song from As You Like It, and that the voices of Touchstone’s obedient minstrels may have inveigled their way into the texture of Little Gidding. But how nice it would be to think that something else was playing on Eliot’s mind – playing, even, in the same room – as he set about drafting the poem. We shall never know, and the fact of not knowing is not a bad place to begin or end a reading of Eliot. In the meantime, there’s no harm in guessing what was in the air.

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Forms of Dishevelment

Helen Thaventhiran


‘This surely is the advantage of superstition’, Michael Wood writes in the sixth chapter of On Empson: ‘It does not claim knowledge it doesn’t

17 Poems, i. 249–52 and ii. 153–5. Both lyrics are thought to have been penned in 1910.
have, and it does not deny its bafflement. On the contrary, it dramatizes its disarray’ (p. 160). Like one of Empson’s own statements on pastoral or ambiguity, this remark has a double plot: Wood is puzzling out a particular essay by Empson on *King Lear*, and its knowingness about self-delusion; he is also offering, with casual philosophical force, a defence for Empson’s distinctive qualities of mind and prose. Empson is a ‘superstitious’ writer in Wood’s sense: he can ‘allow us to think about chance, character, and whatever order the world is supposed to have without recourse to religion or fatalism’ (p. 158). Wood’s ‘superstition’ doesn’t match any of the seven types of superstition defined under the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry for the word. Taken together, the senses from ‘the great work’, as Empson liked to call it, summon a more familiar, if complex, figure of the superstitious person: one engaged in excessive religious observance, heterodoxy, magical thinking, mistaken notions, fearful confusions. This dictionary superstitionist is not Empson, a dogged rationalist, whose writings, for all their extravagance, couldn’t be less credulous, less reverent. So what does Wood mean by his reinvention of the term? In Wood’s hands, superstition, a conceptual mode at once deliberately modest and overreaching, allows us to make some sense of Empson’s strange poetic and critical temperament. It offers ways of understanding how his apparent shift from early pluralisms to ever wilder dogmatisms might be told other than as a story of pure waste. It also recovers space and force for his more unexpected kinds of meditation – tenacious thinking about middle spirits, for example, or speculations about hydroptic earth – as forms of literary-critical intelligence.

If Empson is a writer who comes, improbably enough, under a version of superstitious reading, then so too does Wood in this book. On the whole, this book ‘does not claim knowledge it doesn’t have’ but instead, albeit with great surface serenity, ‘dramatizes its disarray’. This is a calm book about forms of dishevelment. On *Empson* does make a pose of organised critical form. Wood fails to resist the superstitious trick of seven chapters, for which he apologised in *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*, his Empson lectures of 2003, one of which was titled ‘Seven Types of Obliquity’, and justified itself as ‘an attempt, by sympathetic magic, to get Empson’s backing for what I’m trying to do’.1 Here Wood just lets the trick stand, and it does no real harm. What reads more strangely are the epigraphs: Giorgio Agamben, Gillian Rose, and Hannah Arendt appear at the head of chapters as voices from other systems of critical knowledge, sublimely jarring. Thus the first words of the book, below the tongue-in-cheek boldness of the chapter title, ‘Empson’s Intentions’, come from Agamben’s *The End of the*

Poem: ‘What is a hesitation, if one removes it altogether from the psychological dimension?’ Not only does the conceptual fit between Agamben’s ‘hesitation’ and Empson’s ‘intentions’ seem weak, but the critical form also strains here. Epigraphs don’t belong easily with Empson: he is unlike Eliot, who feeds off the kinds of preliminary irony and staggered voicing that epigraphs initiate; his ambiguities or indecisions are rarely of the variety of the hesitant or ‘false’ start. The best sympathetic magic for Wood’s book might have been to borrow Empson’s usual chapter form and just begin.

When Wood does begin ‘in earnest’ it is, appropriately enough, not in earnest. The book opens with a protracted piece of joke-work. Wood stages the moment at which Empson ‘decides to linger in Macbeth’s mind’, as Macbeth urges himself to believe (in Wood’s paraphrase) ‘that murder might be not so bad a crime (for the criminal) if he could just get it over with’ (p. 1). Wood’s slightly over-literal preposition – ‘in Macbeth’s mind’ – is mock-Empsonian; it’s a common trick in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* to figure mental operations with this physiological verve, and *Macbeth* is a play that Empson feels particularly viscerally; in it, ‘the whole frame of body, as I read the lines, is lit up and imposed upon the reader’. The more obvious ‘richness’ of Wood’s first sentence lies with its tension between the words ‘decides’ and ‘linger’. To linger is to decide to stay, shading slightly from hesitation’s restraint towards the luxuriance (sometimes painful) of lengthened encounter. There’s a kind of languor to lingering, by which Wood summons the spirit of ‘the wavering and suggestive indefiniteness of nineteenth-century’ literature that Empson busily rejects early in *Ambiguity*. Thus the word ‘linger’ tricks us into thinking that it pulls against ‘decides’, even as it includes it. Such tensions matter repeatedly to Wood, who finds versions of this pull of feeling across Empson’s poetry (notably in his villanelle ‘Aubade’, which circles around its reluctant sense that it’s ‘the best thing to be up and go’), as well as in the lattice-work of his criticism.

The local vividness and care of Wood’s vocabulary as he stages Empson fumbling in the thoughts of the tragic protagonist also urge a disorienting sense of how Macbeth’s plight, somewhere between lingering and decision, resembles that of the critic, as Empson reinvented it. Quoting Wood’s opening sentence in full now, we can see the implied joke – critic as hesitant murderer – unfold. ‘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 ...’, Wood writes, knowingly opaque in his pronouns, as he asks us to shift from ‘he’ (Empson) to ‘himself’ (the dish-evelled Macbeth?). ‘The future killer’ carries an Empsonian mild shock of

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3 Ibid., p. 190.
the demotic along with its calculatedly unclear reference. Such forms of style allow Wood a mild experiment in ‘making things seem odd’, much as Empson’s paratactic jolts around the quotations he presents for close reading often unsettle our sense of how to respond to them. The delayed punchline of Wood’s joke comes several pages later when, just before picking up once again the thread of his analysis of Macbeth’s dramatic disarray, he recalls hearing Empson give the Cambridge Clark lectures in 1974 somewhat in the manner of his own Macbeth, ‘dishevelled and fumbling among the powers of darkness’.4 ‘I suppose’, Wood remarks of Empson, ‘I already thought that he might have his own forms of dishevelment.’

Wood’s recollections of Empson’s lecturing form part of a significant thread of (auto)biography in this book. Such details are, like Empson’s ambiguity types, partly used as ‘fictions that give us time to think’ (p. 35) about the critical matters around which Wood circulates: agency, intentions, human imprints. It’s more than dutiful when Wood details the facts of Empson’s life and travels, and when he adds the facts of his own. ‘I was born thirty years later than William Empson’, chapter 2 begins, ‘fifty miles or so away from his native Howden’. The sense of individual human scale that shapes the book is, first of all, apt for its subject, author of the collection of late essays Using Biography (1984), and of the early (1928) thought-experiment: ‘Did you know that, with the scale of a map of the world, you can magnify only once downwards, before space ceases to be spacelike, and only four times upwards, before it all closes round you, and there is no more room for you in the inn?’5 Wood is illuminatingly alert to Empson’s scaling, noting his moves from ‘social space’ (p. 26) to ‘interplanetary spaces’ (p. 182), both with their powerful cognitive correlatives. ‘Almost every fantasy Empson has about literal space and mental freedom is contained in this image of a world too small for us’, Wood writes of Empson’s response to Donne’s poem, ‘I am a little world’, giving a powerful gloss to Empson’s remark that Donne leaves us ‘baffled among the cramped, inverted, cannibal, appalling entangled impulses that are his home upon the world’ (p. 183).

Wood’s accumulation of such images creates a compelling topography for Empson’s mind and world; where he places himself within or with relation to its performance of authority and ‘bafflement’ is then the challenge. Bafflement, Wood reminds us, is relative: he does not believe Empson to be quite so ‘entangled’ as he declares in the face of Donne’s poem.

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4 Ibid., p. 50.

Certainly, born ‘thirty years later than William Empson’ and ‘fifty miles or so away’, Wood confesses to experiences of a much greater sense of disarray than his subject’s. He dramatizes this through a reading of a particular line in Empson’s poem, ‘Letter I’, which has become, Wood writes, ‘for me, since I first read it, sometime in 1974, a touchstone for social or national confidence in its most intimate and intriguing manifestations’. The line is this: ‘I approve, myself, dark spaces between stars’. Wood finds in Empson’s grammar of confidence, inserting ‘myself’ into the firmament, ‘a wonderful ease with the idea of having a right to an opinion about everything’ (p. 28). This ease Wood does not share, not feeling ‘entitled to approve (or not) of spaces between the stars’. That ‘small distance, and the gap in time’ of Wood’s birth from Empson’s assumes significant proportions in terms of their ease of ‘social or national confidence’ in criticism, which is made all the more legible here by Wood’s human scales of measurement.

Wood’s negotiation of confidence, authority, and risk includes a strong affinity with moments when Empson is less sure of himself and his capacity to (dis)approve. Wood is at his best when weighing up the affectation of nervousness, or self-knowledge about worry, or mildly theatrical unease, both his own and Empson’s. The occasional discordant notes of the book arise from the opposite feeling: when the prose experiments with brisk Empsonian assumptions (about ‘a properly considered act of reading’, for example (p. 36)), or even mock-professorial Eliotic declarations about the intelligent way (‘There is no general rule here, one simply has to do the work of reading and thinking’ (p. 11)). But when Wood remains open to possible dishevelment, then he catches the sense of the darker potential spaces of Empson’s poems, with their ‘intimate mimicry of a frightened person’s lordly fantasy of control’ (p. 57) and of Empson’s often puzzlingly self-obtuse critical performances, ‘as if he didn’t know his own grand casual manner could also be a pose’ (p. 71). ‘I’m sure his unease was authentic’, Wood writes sharply of Empson’s worries about his poem ‘This Last Pain’ (1932), which seemed to others to praise Wildean affectation, ‘but it shows an odd innocence’. Wood inserts himself into the reading of this poem with a clause not quite as bold as Empson’s intrastellar ‘myself’, yet still confident enough to approve: ‘for me it beautifully mimes the nervousness of a man stepping out onto an intellectual limb he knows won’t bear much weight’ (p. 73).

It’s this thread of autobiographical investigation, ‘working on oneself’, in Wittgenstein’s terms, that lends force to Wood’s writing with, about, and through Empson; here also is its vulnerability. Wood steps out onto a number of intellectual limbs he knows won’t bear much weight and he often gets off far too briskly. Wood seems right to dismiss attempts to theorise
Empson as a bell-bottom jeans sort of moment: ‘There was a minor vogue in the 1970s and early 1980s for associating him with French theory.’ But what is wittily brisk here becomes glib elsewhere. Empson is wrenched into a standard mangling of literary-critical history: he can be ‘considered 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’ (p. 10). ‘Walter Benjamin’s thinking’, it is no surprise to learn, ‘was often, perhaps always, inseparable from the turns his language took’ (p. 20). Even ‘the austere Adorno’ and committed Brecht get clause-long caricatures. At these moments, when Wood feels the obligations of a wider literary-critical history, he loses the tone that otherwise allows the book – particularly for its assured performances of unease – to introduce Empson with all the aplomb of a good host.

Wood’s book has been described as ‘conversable’, ‘an “introduction” [to Empson] in the social sense, a recommendation that allows us to get to know and appreciate him much more quickly than we could otherwise do’.6 This is so, but the book falls short of one of Empson’s most characteristic accounts of how we might best introduce and converse. ‘[I]n a party that goes unexpectedly well’, Empson writes, in a social analogy for critical practice, ‘you often notice that the host has been stuck away in the corner most of the time, talking to some expert about a technical point he is really interested in.’7 This is not Wood’s form of hosting. The expert in the corner wouldn’t, for example, have cared so little about the details of Empson’s Wittgenstein that surface when Wood is reflecting on some lines from ‘This Last Pain’:

‘What is conceivable can happen too,’
Said Wittgenstein, who had not dreamt of you;
But wisely; if we worked it long
We should forget where it was wrong.

‘Whatever we see could be other than it is’ is a famous line in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, but Empson was apparently thinking of a closer verbal equivalent in the same work: ‘what is thinkable is possible too’. (pp. 73–4)

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Neither ‘line’ as quoted by Wood here was available to Empson in this form; both derive from the Pears–McGuinness translation of 1961. The close verbal equivalents to which Empson (not a German speaker) had access were the Ogden–Ramsey translations, published in 1922: ‘Everything we see could also be otherwise’ (*TLP*, 5.634); ‘What is thinkable is also possible’ (*TLP*, 3.02). Such minor differences gain consequence in the context of Empson’s poem, which is, in the words of its own note, an investigation of the idea ‘that the mind can imagine states which it cannot attain’. With his invented ‘quotation’ from Wittgenstein, Empson achieves the feat of imagining a philosophical proposition he cannot attain; his verse imagination brings him closer than his contemporaries to the now standard translation of Wittgenstein. This is not to say that Empson’s quasi-translation is a closer verbal equivalent to Wittgenstein’s words; no English version yet keeps their chiastic power. All lose the ‘gridiron’, as we might say in the vocabulary of *Ambiguity*, of the German, where the form speaks to the balanced propositional truth of the thought: ‘Was denkbar ist, ist auch möglich.’ Empson’s reasons may savour of the mechanical: perhaps he adjusts Wittgenstein’s words from what he finds in (or misremembers from) the 1922 translation with the rhyming instinct to generate ‘too’, as end-word to match ‘you’, a pronoun to which his poems and prose forcefully direct attention. Recovering such ‘technical’ details of Empson’s lines from the slight historical fudging of Wood’s reading restores their power to display his characteristic capacity, both poetic and critical, to imagine vividly a state of mind, without sharing in it.

Such problems aside, Wood’s book is commendably that of a ‘writer’ according to the definition it includes from Roland Barthes: ‘celui pour qui le langage fait problème, qui en éprouve la profondeur, non l’instrumentalité ou la beauté’ (p. 6). *On Empson* is no more ‘immediately useful’ than its subject’s ambiguity types in terms of advancing either scholarly knowledge or even a particularly distinctive line of interpretation of Empson. But it is compellingly ‘conversable’, talking through language as ‘problem’. It is also likely to make its reader smile. It made Wood smile, he recalls, to read John Haffenden’s description of Empson, in his biography, as ‘quite the ordinary baby’ (p. 27). ‘In the ordinary manor house, with the ordinary governess’, Wood jokes. There’s another extra-ordinary baby who rears his head in the pages of Empson’s prose, and in those of Wood. ‘Any speaker, when a baby’, Empson writes in *Using Biography*, briskly stepping over the near-oxymoron, ‘wanted to understand what people meant’ (p. 16). Empson’s extraordinarily talkative baby is another version of the figure of the critic that he continually reformulates across his prose: the truth-teller, with strong affinities to the fool, the outsider to the tribe, the rogue. Criticism begins almost amniotically: ‘we could not use language
as we do ... unless we were always floating in a general willingness to make sense of it, Empson argues, and literature is only the most successful end of life’s general business of attempting to ‘understand what people meant, why mum was cross’. Wood’s prose leaves room for us to hear the mixed seriousness and comedy of these baffling moments in Empson’s writing. Through such quiet ways of ‘using biography’ alongside criticism, On Empson goes beyond a sketch of Empson’s idiosyncrasies or dishevelments to remind us of the firmly human measures of his writing.

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Ancient and Modern Britons

Jane Aaron


The refrain to a patriotic jingle published in 1904 – ‘Every Briton is brave for Wales his country’ – reads oddly in translation unless one bears in mind the fact that in the Welsh original (‘Dewr yw pob Britwn dros Gymru ei wlad’) the term ‘Britwn’ signified a Welshman, an Ancient Briton. The disjunction between the modern and ancient significations of ‘Briton’, and the complexities of identity and national allegiance to which it could give rise, are at the heart of Bethan M. Jenkins’s new study. Britain was forged anew after the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland, when the ‘Parliament of Great Britain’ was established to unite the parliaments of Scotland and England. For the Welsh, however, and particularly for Welsh antiquarians, such as the three authors who constitute the main focus of Between Wales and England – Lewis Morris (Llewelyn Ddu o Fon, 1701–65), Evan Evans (Ieuan Fardd or Ieuan Brydydd Hir, 1731–88), and Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg, 1747–1826) – the word ‘Briton’ still signified those people conquered by Rome, from whose British, or Brittonic,