




VERSIONS OF PLURALISM: WILLIAM EMPSON, ISAIAH BERLIN, AND THE COLD WAR*

Mark Thompson



Seventy or eighty years ago the credo of value-pluralism¹ was much rarer than it is today, and no literary figure in English modernism voiced it with more thoughtful zest than the poet and critic William Empson.² Openness to plural meanings in words implies a liberal openness to plural values. This implication in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) set off warning bells among some reviewers, though Empson's pluralism was already clear in his student journalism of the '20s, praising books that "gratify our strong and crucial curiosity about alien modes of feeling, our need for the flying buttress of sympathy with systems other than our own."³

This early insight contained an ethical precept that he never abandoned, reminding readers in the '60s of our "need to feel that, whatever we do with our own small lives, the rest of the world is still going on and exercising the variety of its forces."⁴ Such was his conception of "world-mindedness."⁵ Other systems (cultures, values, ways of doing things, "modes of feeling") exist; their variety is valuable in itself; a sympathetic sense of their differentness is essential to our equilibrium; defending the former, we strengthen the latter. The notion of this sympathetic interest presupposes a humanist outlook, "recommending happiness on earth and so forth."⁶ Here lay the humanistic common ground where altruism and self-interest could merge. While this notion was not derived from literature, it is borne out by literature and in literature more intensely than in other kinds of communication. For "the central function of imaginative literature is to make you realize that other people act on moral convictions

* The author thanks Neil Vickers, Alasdair Palmer, Peter Morris, Henry Hardy, James Chappel, Robyn Marsack, and Stuart Airlie for commenting on drafts.

¹ Value-pluralists believe in "an irreducible variety of incommensurable goods." John Gray, *Berlin* (London, 1995), p. 1.

² Louis MacNeice once came close, in his 1935 poem "Snow," which found the world "incorrigibly plural." Prompted by peeling and eating a tangerine, the poet felt "the drunkenness of things being various." It was not Empson's way, however, to offer stunned images—in this case, of variousness—and then stop, swaying on the cusp of inquiry.

³ William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture* (London, 1987), p. 436.

⁴ William Empson, *Milton's God* (Cambridge, 1981; first published 1961), p. 276.

⁵ William Empson, *The Strengths of Shakespeare's Shrew: Essays, Memoirs and Reviews* (Sheffield, 1996), p. 212.

⁶ William Empson, *Using Biography* (London, 1984), p. 134.



LITERARY IMAGINATION

different from your own” (*Milton’s God* 261). This formed the basis for a secular theory of value that Empson eventually expounded—though hardly in a manner that would satisfy many philosophers—in *The Structure of Complex Words*.

Along with the exultant sense of cultural pluralism to be found in his poems, the young Empson was quick to sympathize with the social and psychological trials of *contradiction*, meaning the internal conflicts—deadlocks of interest, moral dilemmas, divided loyalties, competing claims of different kinds, the cross currents of passion—that thwart people, collectively or alone. Socially, these conflicts can become the levers of revolution (“But as to risings, I can tell you why./ It is on contradiction that they grow.”⁷) Personally, they lead to misery, crisis, resolution, endings, and renewals. His own love poems were written as a way of moving beyond this kind of deadlock—keeping himself sane, as he came to say.

Keenly alive to the contradictions allegorized and undergone by characters in literature, he was more stirred by human resourcefulness in resolving conflicts than by the distress of contradiction as such. The Note to “High Dive” disclosed (what few readers of that extremely cryptic poem may have grasped) “the idea that one must go from the godlike state of contemplation even when attained either into action which cannot wholly foresee its consequences or into a fixed condition, due to fear, which does not give real knowledge and leads to neurosis” (*Complete Poems* 188). Empson brought to his criticism a large interest in the “shifts and blurred aggregates of thought by which men come to a practical decision,”⁸ what he called “the crucial and solvent instant of decision” (*Arguifying* 370). He delighted in unpacking the elements of decisions in literature, from Milton to Auden. (Eve is the hero of *Milton’s God*, championed for her brave and generous good sense in resolving to eat the apple.)

If the reality of value-pluralism lengthened the odds against sound decision making, it also heightened the splendor of the attempt. “It may be,” he suggested in 1951, “that the human mind can recognise actually incommensurable values, and that the chief human value is to stand up between them.”⁹ This note of English liberal existentialism (in a Yorkshire key?) can also be found in the poems. “Alas, how hope for freedom, no bars bind” (*Complete Poems* 13) is a line

⁷ William Empson, *The Complete Poems of William Empson* (London, 2000), p. 70.

⁸ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1984; first published 1930), p. 68.

⁹ William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London, 1977; first published 1951), p. 42.



MARK THOMPSON

Sartre could have relished. His clearest utterance on these themes was “Doctrinal Point,” written in the early to mid ’30s. As Empson said, the poem is about the “yearn[ing] to be always sure what to do.” The budding magnolias are “free by predestination in the blood,” a freedom we cannot know, for our “sapient matter” is *not* “always already informed.” We humans know all too many acts that will not make us “fair.” For us, Empson says, turning a definitive liberal claim into a brilliant epigram, “the duality of choice becomes the singularity of existence” (*Complete Poems* 59).

Decisions are painful when they divide our loyalties and incur an irremediable loss, and because we can rarely be sure how things will turn out. But they must be taken. Acceptance that our judgments are bound to be provisional should not discourage us from reaching them, since an ethical theory can be valuable without being—what it cannot truthfully claim to be—true. In Empson’s terms, the limitations on our knowledge seem to increase the onus on intuitive judgment: for “the knowledge at every stage is finite, and beyond that one must rely on the man who claims to feel his way” (*Argufying* 546). If the need to face difficult choices is part of being human, a philosophy or political system which claims to remove the dilemmas of decision making may be, and serve, something less than human.

Empson and Berlin

In the ’20s and ’30s, “when totalitarians of both the right and left affected to reject humanistic values as such,”¹⁰ Empson did more than stand up for those values: he tested them against the challenges posed by scientific and psychoanalytic discoveries, as well as by literary modernism. Before the early ’50s, Empson’s thinking on contradiction, choice, and action; his critique of communist aesthetics in *Some Versions of Pastoral*; and his recently discovered essay on Sartrean drama implied a value-pluralist liberal position. He did not elaborate this position until he wrote the Appendix for *Complex Words*; thereafter he would do so repeatedly, and at book length in *Milton’s God*.

He once glossed “the sense of richness” in Marvell’s poetry as “readiness for argument not pursued,”¹¹ and his own work is freighted with unpursued

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London, 1991), p. 206.

¹¹ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1979; first published 1935), p. 145.



LITERARY IMAGINATION

arguments about liberal principles; those grand epigrams (“the duality of choice becomes the singularity of existence,” etc.) are only the tip. The best guide to the deeper reaches of Empson’s pluralism turns out to be not another critic, let alone another poet, but Isaiah Berlin, the Oxford essayist and historian of ideas whose name is almost synonymous with Anglo-American pluralist liberalism since the Second World War. Here are the main principles and broad commitments shared by Empson the “naïve realist” and Berlin the “moral realist”:¹²

- *That the rational subject, the reasoning mind, is sovereign. Its sovereignty can be yielded up, or conquered, but may not be presumed out of existence.* This principle informed all Empson’s work, especially his resistance to intellectual trends that provided successively “more startling reasons for believing that the critic ought to know far more about what an author means than the author did” (*Argufying* 113). It was the basis of his later hostility to anti-intentionalism and imagism, and his uses of biography. Berlin defined rationality with a professional exactness that is remote from Empson’s idiom; it rested, he said, “on the belief that one can think and act for reasons that one can understand, and not merely as the product of occult causal factors which breed ‘ideologies,’ and cannot, in any case, be altered by their victims.”¹³ He opposed the “relativism” that stemmed from “the schools of thought which look upon human activity as being largely caused by occult and inescapable forces of which explicit social beliefs and theories are rationalisations—disguises to be penetrated and exposed” (*Crooked Timber* 90). And he argued against determinism, on the grounds that, while it is not “necessarily false, . . . we neither speak nor think as if it could be true, and . . . it is difficult, and perhaps beyond our normal powers, to conceive what our picture of the world would be if we seriously believed it.”¹⁴ Both men were dubious about the Romantic exaltation of inexpressible states of mind.

- *That essential human values and purposes may be irreconcilable and incommensurable between cultures, within societies, and inside ourselves.* Berlin believed that “men cannot but seek conflicting ends; or cannot (without ceasing to be human) avoid activities that must end in self-frustration” (*Concepts* 167). And that “[w]e are faced with conflicting values; the dogma that they must somehow, somewhere be reconcilable is a mere pious hope; experience shows that it is false” (*Crooked Timber* 201). For “human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another” (*Liberty* 216). While Empson’s sense of incommensurability was ample even in his student days, by 1930, when *Seven Types of Ambiguity* was published, he was more interested in how people deal with incommensurability than in reiterating the fact of it. “[W]hether or not the values open to us are measurable, we cannot measure them,” he wrote in

¹² Empson recommended “what the philosophers like to call naïve realism” (*Complex Words* 428). The philosopher Thomas Nagel called Berlin a moral realist.

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford, 1980; first published 1979), p. 172.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2002), p. 122.



MARK THOMPSON

1935, “and it is of much value merely to stand up between the forces to which we are exposed” (*Argufying* 572).

- *That the range of acceptable human values is plural but neither unlimited nor relative.* The “practical ethics of the human race” are “fantastically varied,” said Empson in 1935 (*Argufying* 571). In his later career, he reiterated that “the chief function of imaginative literature is to make you realise that other people are very various, many of them quite different from you, with different ‘systems of value’ as well” (*Argufying* 13); “that different people act on different ethical beliefs.”¹⁵ But these beliefs were not all equally valid; putting a characteristically literal construction on Mill’s classic liberal prohibition on harming others, Empson held that the “impulse to inflict pain” is “an elementary evil . . . the only inherent or metaphysical evil in the world” (*Milton’s God* 260). “Forms of life differ,” said Berlin. “Ends, moral principles, are many. But not infinitely many: they must be within the human horizon” (*Crooked Timber* 11). Anxious to clear away misunderstanding of his position, he insisted that “pluralism—the incommensurability and, at times, incompatibility of objective ends—is *not* relativism” (87). Both men shared a strong, Orwellian belief in common decency.

- *That humankind is defined by the necessity and power to choose, any choice may involve “irreparable loss”* (*Crooked Timber* 13), *and no social arrangement can prevent the “wastage of human powers”* (*Versions of Pastoral* 5). For Berlin, “the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition” (*Liberty* 214). “The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others” (213–14).

- *That internal conflicts (contradictions) within artists or thinkers are often key to their creativity.* Empson believed that “good poetry is usually written from a background of conflict” (*Seven Types* xiii), while Berlin wrote of “the moral or emotional or intellectual collisions, the particular kind of acute mental discomfort which rises to a condition of agony from which great works of the human intellect and imagination have sprung” (*Liberty* 78).

- *That teleological or deterministic accounts of human history lack any rational or empirical basis, rest on faith, and should be treated as theodicies.* Like the anti-Hegelian Schopenhauer, Empson believed that the “German tradition” about “the reconciliation of contradictions” was “based on Indian ideas, best worked out in Buddhism” (*Seven Types* 193), because Buddhism proposed a way of deliverance from the cycles of birth and death. Berlin, who wrote hundreds of pages against determinism, also referred coolly to “a Hegelian (or Buddhist) World Spirit” (*Liberty* 98).

- *That “the general texture of experience” provides “the foundation of knowledge”* (*Concepts* 114); *theories should be judged by their results* (*Complex Words* 8); *and ordinary language is a source of solutions rather than problems for the philosopher or critic.* In this

¹⁵ William Empson, *Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume Two: The Drama*, (Cambridge, 1994), p. 97.



LITERARY IMAGINATION

spirit Empson denounced the Intentionalist Fallacy: “Estimating other people’s intentions is one of the things we do all the time without knowing how we are doing it, just as we don’t play catch by the theory of dynamics” (*Argufying* 13). He went further than any other distinguished critic of his age to avoid jargon, flattening his vocabulary ever further, disdaining even such mild falsifiers as “objectivity” and “subjectivity.”

- *That biography is an essential source of insight into creative achievement, and empathy is indispensable for access to other minds, a precondition of good work in criticism and the history of ideas.* Berlin extolled “what Vico called *fantasia*: man’s unique capacity for imaginative insight and reconstruction”;¹⁶ “the historical imagination, which can enable us to ‘descend to’ or ‘enter’ or ‘feel oneself into’ the mentality of remote societies” (*Crooked Timber* 82); “imaginative insight, at its highest point genius . . . at its normal level called common sense.”¹⁷ His own studies of Tolstoy, Herzen, Herder, Hamann, de Maistre, and others are vivid with this sort of insight. “A student of literature ought to be trying all the time to empathise with the author (and of course the assumptions and conventions by which the author felt himself bound),” wrote Empson at the very end of his life (*Using Biography* viii). He urged that “in the teasing work of scholarship, a man must all the time be trying to imagine another man’s mind” (*Argufying* 125). But he went further than Berlin: because “the act of knowing is itself an act of sympathising,” poetry—and not only poetry—cannot be appraised objectively; and “so far as a critic has made himself dispassionate about it, so far as he has repressed sympathy in favour of curiosity, he has made himself incapable of examining it” (*Seven Types* 249, 248). His criticism conveys us uncannily into the mind and moment of the poet—Shakespeare, Marlowe, Donne, Milton, Coleridge—or of seeing *Hamlet* in its first run or reading *Paradise Lost* with Charles II on the throne, even when an interpretation lacks buttressing evidence, as with his late arguments about Joyce (*Using Biography*) and Marlowe.¹⁸ Both men were masters of paraphrase and cavalier quotation, for which they have been both praised and chided. And both practiced interpretative generosity, habitually rejecting the imputation of cynical motives.¹⁹

- *That critics or philosophers do not stand outside the objects of their analysis.* If the act of knowing is an act of sympathizing, it follows that the “idea that the theorist is not part of the world he examines is one of the deepest sources of error, and crops up all over the place” (*Complex Words* xii). Berlin’s caution was very similar: “There is no Archimedean point outside ourselves where we can stand in order to take up our

¹⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (London, 2000), p. 13.

¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* (London, 1996), p. 25.

¹⁸ William Empson, *Faustus and the Censor*, ed. John Henry Jones (Oxford, 1987).

¹⁹ Examples of this generosity are legion in their work. Empson’s essay on Fielding is an outstanding instance (*Using Biography* 131–57). For Berlin, consider his contention that Disraeli could not have risen to lead the Conservative Party, comprising “men so utterly different from himself, . . . unless he truly believed himself called upon to be the champion of their cause, genuinely believed in their attributes, idealised them as something far superior to qualities and interests represented by the Whigs and radicals with whom he had begun life” (Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* [London, 1979], p. 267).



critical viewpoint, in order to observe and analyse all that we think or believe by simply inspecting it . . . the supposition is a self-evident absurdity” (*Shakespeare’s Shrew* 16).

- *That the quality or faculty of equilibrium is central to a satisfactory life and a decent society.* “The object of life, after all,” remarked Empson at twenty-four, already teaching readers not to confuse the object of life with the object of criticism, “is not to understand things, but to maintain one’s defences and equilibrium and live as well as one can” (*Seven Types* 247). For “human life is so much a matter of juggling with contradictory impulses . . . that one is accustomed to thinking people are probably sensible if they follow first one, then the other, of two such courses” (197). Berlin was, as often, plangent by comparison: “promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair—that alone, I repeat, is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behaviour” (*Crooked Timber* 19). Achieving this precondition may be “the best that one can do”: “to try to promote some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of differing groups of human beings” (47).

- *That exposure to unlike ways of life and thinking encourages a liberal, tolerant, pluralism of outlook.* Berlin quoted John Stuart Mill: “It is hardly possible to overrate the value, in the present low state of human improvement, of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar. . . . Such communication has always been, and is peculiarly in the present age, one of the primary sources of progress.” Berlin commented that “This amounts to a thesis . . . with which . . . perhaps a good many of us today . . . might not disagree” (*Crooked Timber* 90). Empson certainly agreed, proposing that “we need to feel that, whatever we do with our own small lives, the rest of the world is still going on and exercising the variety of its forces.”²⁰ Among his poems, “Homage to the British Museum,” “Manchouli,” and “Sonnet”—all quoted above—evoke and praise this contact with the world’s diversity, while “Autumn on Nan-Yueh” (*Complete Poems* 91–98) expresses the poet’s gratitude for his experiences in a place whose sheer remoteness is felt as valuable.

- *That civil society needs protection from elites, however well-intentioned these might be.* Berlin made the pluralist case for democracy by tracing political extremism to pluralism’s opposite, monism. “The consequence of this belief [monism] . . . is that those who know should command those who do not. Those who know the answers to some of the great problems of mankind must be obeyed, for they alone know how society should be organised . . . no better excuse, or even reason, has ever been propounded for unlimited despotism on the part of an elite.”²¹ This is very close to Empson’s view that “the point about democracy is not that people all really have equally good judgement; no sane man believes this; the claim is that the government or the constitution has no right to presume that some group of citizens has better judgement than the rest. People with better judgement must try to convince their neighbours, and not over-rule them” (*Complex Words* 421). Which in turn was why the tradition of “fair public debate”

²⁰ *Milton’s God*, p. 276. See also *Argufying*, p. 436, cited above, n. 3.

²¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas* (London, 2001), p. 14.



LITERARY IMAGINATION

(*Argufying* 168) was so important for Empson; absent this debate, societies cannot deliberate truthfully on the political alternatives facing them.

Of course differences could also be listed. Their styles, compared, almost allegorize the ancient discordance between Rhetoric and Philosophy. Empson cannot match Berlin's powers of exposition and definition, his steady illumination of landscapes of ideas and historical shifts. These are remote from Empson's elliptical style, his intuitive bolts that flood new light on scenes and characters, forging unsuspected connections. Though Berlin was not a tidy thinker—philosophers tend to find him careless, essayistic, conceptually lax—he was much tidier than Empson cared to be. On the other hand, Berlin's essays often circle over the same terrain; the variations in flight path cannot dispel a sense that we have been here before. It was as if he never recovered from the impact of realizing that values are irreducibly plural. Empson in his early twenties almost took the idea as read. More than any other Anglophone critic of his age, the gusto and airy trenchancy of his style, colloquial, nimble and condensed, has the quality of *sprezzatura*, the rehearsed spontaneity admired by Renaissance humanists. His focal statements—the load-bearing statements of principle—are usually buried in the texture of his analyses; he prefers not to launch them with a bang or build them up slowly. The effect is heady and baffling, often in the same moment.

Berlin's calming qualifiers and intensifiers, the cohorts of philosophers' names pushed to the fore as he encroaches on his argument don't always render his thinking more precise; sometimes they rehearse the academic's self-protective accountability to his peers—an institutional game that Empson had no time for. Nor is Berlin's undoubted warmth much like Empson's buoyancy; his sociable good humor can be almost doggedly temperate, refusing to risk offence. Empson's unfeared gaiety seems scandalous by contrast, almost transgressive, a kind of shock-tactics against readerly distance. Reading Berlin rarely turns one's mind along a quite unexpected track. On the other hand, one never feels that his ideas lack any evidence or are simply wrong. With Empson, this feeling grows; though a stickler for due process ("I submit that . . .") and evidentiary logic, the older he became, the readier he was to gamble everything on interpretations for which his evidence was that there *is* none. How did this come to pass? I suppose he did not, ultimately, believe that the kind of seriousness fitting to the study of literature was the kind fitting to other matters. Criticism, even scholarship, is not economics, medicine, or military strategy. It requires method but not methodology: hence his preference for amateur critics (George Orwell or Hugh Kingsmill)



MARK THOMPSON

over “geared-up” academics, who are prone to miss literature’s ample fusion with the rest of life. Critical method has to be shaped by the free play of intelligence and, with it, the unbiddable stirring of empathy. Empson would not renounce this play; would not, as it were, be sober. The upshot? Moral intuition tussled with method and trumped it in the end, but joyously, the joy of dissent being part of its value.

While these discrepancies highlight the solid commitments linking Empson and Berlin, there is a more fundamental difference. It lies in their identification and treatment of the enemies of their liberal principles. For Berlin, pluralism’s foe had a single over-arching name: *monism*, “the ancient belief” that “only one set of values is true, all the others are false”; that “there is a single harmony of truths into which everything, if it is genuine, in the end must fit . . . monism is at the root of every extremism” (*Power of Ideas* 13–14). The opponents were “those who seek for final solutions and single, all-embracing systems” (*Liberty* 215); who would deny groups and individuals their scope for self-realization, subjecting them instead to the dictate of ideology, offering them up “to theories and abstractions, a form of idolatry—and of human sacrifice—colder and more destructive than the more intelligible follies of previous eras, and one for which future generations will, with incredulity and anger, rightly condemn our age” (*Power of Ideas* 142). The enemies were “irrational instinct, the power of faith, the force of blind tradition,” but also “the idealistic social scientists, the bold political and economic planners, the passionate believers in technocracy” (*Crooked Timber* 166–67)—those who apply the procedures of scientific investigation to human society. Politically, his target was Soviet communism as the avatar of so-called scientific socialism, the most inhumane expression of monist extremism.

Beside this gallery of villains, Empson’s direct target seems trifling. He opposed what he called “neo-Christian principles of literary criticism” (*Milton’s God* 229). By neo-Christian critics, he meant those “who interpret any literary work they admire by finding in it a supposed Christian tradition.” Such critics “tend to appear quaintly savage; they boast of the morally disgusting aspects of the religion . . . [They] will often impute to an author a meaning too nasty-minded for the author to have intended” (229–30). In other words, their approaches revolved around sacrifice, renunciation, asceticism, sexual prurience and other-worldliness. As the ’50s wore on, he found “pietistic writing” (*Shakespeare’s Shrew* 47) more and more widespread, as schools of critics inspired by T. S. Eliot and led by C. S. Lewis in his heyday, Helen Gardner, some of the



LITERARY IMAGINATION

moral desperadoes around Leavis, and many others, read the English canon through a Christian ethical lens of sin and redemption, leading to judgments that often struck Empson as “unhistorical and, on the whole, harmful” (55), or even, in some cases, “blindly inhumane” (53). Harmful above all because a generation of students was being trained to internalize a set of perverse and cruel values instead of learning that “different people act on different ethical beliefs” (*Renaissance Literature* 97).

His hostility was not sheer atheist militancy, for example like Richard Dawkins’ today. He respected the human hunger for transcendent meaning (again like Berlin in this). His objection was specific: as the only great world religion that had not shed the “ancient Neolithic craving for human sacrifice” (*Milton’s God* 247), Christianity was uniquely repellent. The Father’s sacrifice of the Son in the Crucifixion is Christianity’s unpardonable crime. Ethical consequentialism was at the root of his repugnance, above all at the Atonement, which in his terms was the worst conceivable fiction, presented to entire societies as mere truth and defended with mind-bending “false identities” (244) like the Trinity. “Men always try to imitate their gods,” he said, “so that to worship a wicked one is sure to make them behave badly.” Of course, a Christian can live a good life despite “the basic evil of the system he has submitted to”; but an “outsider cannot help feeling that it is still in a way present in his character” (258). Christianity’s central sadism is defended by doctrinal irrationality: the Trinity is a piece of Orwellian newspeak, “a means of deceiving good men into accepting evil; it is the double-talk by which Christians hide from themselves the insane wickedness of their God” (245). “Terms such as ‘redemption,’” he said Nietzscheanly, “deep into human experience though they undoubtedly plunge, are metaphors drawn from the slave-market” (246).

By tilting at neo-Christianity, Empson gave himself an infinite target, an inexhaustible well of dissenting energy for bringing humanist, non-Western standards to bear on Anglo-American ethical and critical norms. He wanted to clear away the undergrowth of what Christopher Norris calls “pious revisionist readings” around canonical authors, from Marlowe through Donne and Milton to Fielding, Coleridge, Yeats, and Joyce. Empson was not rewriting the inherited canon of “Eng. Lit.” so much as scouring away the encrustation of anti-humanist commentary in order to highlight the original (because intended) properties of moral dissent.

In poetry and criticism, he opposed trends that promoted anti-intellectual modes of expression. This opposition was not dogmatic: successes in the enemy



MARK THOMPSON

camp, such as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, were acclaimed. He rejected the jargon of literary criticism; as he wrote privately in 1954, soon after his final return from the East, "I have to read so much Mandarin English Prose now, especially in literary criticism, and am so accustomed to being shocked by its emptiness, that I feel I must do otherwise at all costs" (*Argufying* 395). He was outspoken against critical approaches that belittled authors' responsibility for the meanings of their work, and that hid their own premises from argument. (W. K. Wimsatt and F. R. Leavis were respectively the worst offenders.) In sum, he was against what might be called, after Berlin, "moral monism," or the certainty of the possession of the exclusive truth about morals. ("I became rather startled when I realised that he [Wimsatt] takes it for granted there is only one right code of morals, a thing already known to himself" [*Argufying* 126]).

Although Empson's and Berlin's targets bore different names, partly because they were being sighted from different professional fields, it would be pedantic to claim that these nominal differences were substantive. The underlying identity of their targets is demonstrated by one case where the name was the same; Empson denounced symbolism as an anti-rational form of expression that precluded moral debate (*Argufying* 167), while Berlin located "the doctrine of symbolism" as "the first great doctrine which emerges from this combination of Fichte's doctrine of the will and Schelling's doctrine of the unconscious"—a key element in the "fundamental, anti-Enlightenment doctrine of art."²² Like Empson, Berlin believed this doctrine had done intellectual harm, though it was not his way to condemn such developments so bluntly.

But over the ideological confrontation of the Cold War, they genuinely differed. This was such a momentous issue during the post-war decades that a convincing explanation has implications for any general comparison of their thought.

The Cold War and "The Problem of Evil"

"I thought the defeat of Hitler so important that I could do nothing else," Empson wrote to a friend much later, explaining why he had "dropped all my literary interests" during the war (*Complete Poems* 126). After five years as a propagandist in the Far East department of the BBC, he went to China in 1947, staying until 1952 when he returned to work at Sheffield University. The Cold War got underway while he was in Peking; the Soviet imperium sealed its power

²² Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (London, 2000), p. 99.



LITERARY IMAGINATION

in Eastern Europe, Hungary and Czechoslovakia staged show trials, Tito was expelled from the Cominform, Berlin survived the blockade, the People's Republic of China and NATO were born, Stalin got the atom bomb, the Korean War raged, and the United States was shaken by the McCarthy witch-hunts, the Hiss affair, and the Rosenberg trial.

Empson's vantage point outside the East-West axis during these years would have confirmed him in the outsider's stance that was his by character and election. A letter written in 1948 or 1949 to an American critic expressed high-spirited disdain for the bloc confrontation: "It is too silly to tell me that everybody who matters has got to be killed because these two colonial powers [the U.S.A. and Russia] have made it a point of honour to destroy everything that knows better as well as each other. . . . Nobody has anything to gain from the muchtalkedof third world war, and if I, in my small way, can do anything to prevent the belief that it is inevitable I can do it better here than elsewhere" (*Complete Poems* 398). His sympathy with the Chinese revolution comes over strongly in the letter, leading him to link Britain and China as two countries that "want to survive, whereas the two lunatic colonials haven't got anything worth keeping and only want to win."²³ In this mood he wrote one of his last poems, a lordly villanelle urging fortitude in the face of superpower stupidity:

²³ Empson's feeling of solidarity with the Chinese revolution—after his experiences with the refugee universities in the '30s and his ring-side seat in Peking in 1949—seemed to endure far longer than it should have. He saw Chinese communist practice as superior at the outset to the Soviet bloc, opining that "the Chinese work-out [a euphemism for the communist clamp-down after taking power in 1949] was different [implying "better"] from anything corresponding to it in Eastern Europe." ("China," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 20 June 1953.) In the words of a recent historian: "There were reasons to see the new government as both determined and idealistic. But in the first twenty years of Mao's rule China experienced two of the century's great man-made catastrophes: the Great Leap Forward [1958–62] and the Cultural Revolution [1969–76]" (Jonathan Glover, *Humanity. A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* [London, 1999]). But systematic repression in the universities began much earlier—two years before Empson wrote the review just quoted. "1951 saw the start of a massive campaign of 'Thought reform' aimed at Chinese intellectuals . . . an attempt to get inside people's minds and restructure their system of beliefs. It put them under strong physical and psychological pressure to repudiate their beliefs and accept new ones. . . . [The campaign] lasted a year and was directed mainly at universities" (ibid.). At the conference where this argument was presented, in Sheffield on 20 July 2003, Professor Christopher Ricks—a friend of Empson from the early '60s—remarked that his failure to speak out against the oppression in Mao's China reflected a wish not to know what was really happening there. While this complaisance did not mar his work, it could not go unnoticed; recalling the early years of the Cold War, British philosopher Stuart Hampshire explained one strand of British anti-Americanism in irritated terms of "a kind of Wykehamish snobbery meets Chinese left-wingery, epitomised by people like Empson."



MARK THOMPSON

Two colonies of Europe now form schools
Holding absolute power, both of them fatuous.
The ages change, and they impose their rules.

One claims the State is naked between ghouls
The other makes it total Octopus.
We must endure, and stand between two fools. . . .

Both base their pride upon ill-gotten tools
And boast their history an Exodus. . . .

There is world and time; the Fates have got large spoils;
There need not only Europe make a fuss.
The ages change, and they impose their rules.
We must endure, and stand between two fools. (102)

One would expect such strength of feeling to have surfaced elsewhere in his work. It did not, perhaps because he disliked scolding or grumbling (he never published the villanelle), but perhaps too because his feeling altered after he started teaching in England. Contemptible though the superpower confrontation was, it did not pose any direct problem for literary studies. Indirectly, however, it boosted organized religion in the West, a development he thought had noxious effects on critics and students (presumably writers too, though he had less to say about that).

In this sense, the Cold War helped to shape his later work. The churches had a vital binding role in the anti-communist camp. Organized Christianity flourished in the U.S.A. at the height of the Cold War. The Truman Doctrine, a sort of cultural charter for the Western bloc, warned in flaming words in 1947 that the choice facing the world was “tyranny or freedom. . . . And even worse [*sic*], communism denies the very existence of God.” Taking the cue, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin called for Britain and the West to strengthen their propaganda by “remembering the strength of Christian sentiment in Europe. We must put forward a rival ideology to Communism.” The nexus of Christianity and American nationalism was clear at the time, with Billy Graham (backed by the Hearst press), Norman Vincent Peale and Reinhold Niebuhr becoming national celebrities. The Austrian émigré scholar Leo Spitzer noted in 1960 “the religious tendencies—at times hesitant, at times blatant, even clericalist—in America today” (*Representative Essays* [Stanford, 1988]).

This was the background of Empson’s fixation upon “neo-Christian” ideology, which he assailed with all the passion and occasional special pleading that



LITERARY IMAGINATION

anti-communists of that era brought to their own, state-sponsored crusade. Christianity's lack of executive power did not abate his hostility. True, "by this time we seem pretty well inoculated against its more virulent forms. But," he contended, "it is not sensible to talk about Christianity so cosily as is now usual, ignoring its theoretical evil, ignoring its consequent use of rack, boot, thumbscrew and slow fire" (*Milton's God* 254–55). Such warnings that old horrors might be biding their time were not convincing, even for Empson. "Theoretical evil" was a vivid though concessionary phrase, pointing to the problem at the heart of the anti-Christian campaign. If the evil in question was theoretical, why did it worry him more than the actually existing evil of Soviet communism, which did avail itself of rack, boot, thumbscrew, and worse? The Christian revival in the '50s goes some way to explain his position; the main reasons, though, were hatred of cruelty, the robustness of his own liberal principles, and his professional priorities as a critic and teacher.

He was not the only thinker to be preoccupied, after the inconceivable destruction of the Second World War, with what Hannah Arendt called, in 1945, "the problem of evil." Arendt prophesied that this would be "the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe—as death became the fundamental question after the last war." Her own investigations produced *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), where she wrote that the "subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live." This feeling that the intellectual and cultural heritage of the West must have nurtured the seeds of totalitarian catastrophe behind their backs, was shared with more glee by Adorno and Horkheimer, whose *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) indicted Western technological progress for stoking pressures that found release in fascism's appeal to barbaric irrationalism. Altogether elsewhere on the political spectrum, Lionel Trilling, doyen of American liberal critics, published his landmark book, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950). In his preface Trilling noted that "liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition" in the United States. Given this monopoly, "a criticism which has at heart the interests of liberalism might find its most useful work not confirming liberalism in its sense of general rightness but rather in putting under some degree of pressure the liberal ideas and assumptions of the present time." The liberal tradition should be tested by brushing it against the grain. While this advice did not quite coincide with Arendt's bitter insight, they overlapped: both thinkers urged a salutary re-examination of the Western mainstream tradition.



MARK THOMPSON

In his work of the '50s and after, Empson was doing this too. Any real resemblance with Trilling stops there (which may explain why the two men seem never to have mentioned each other in print, although they would have met at Gambier in the late '40s). For Trilling's liberalism of complexity, nuance, variousness, and "moral realism" was premised on anti-Stalinism. When he opposed reductive political approaches in literature and politics, he was exorcising illusions that he had once shared. He became a cultural pessimist, fearful of the disintegrative, anti-liberal dynamic of much Modernist art ("no connection exists between our liberal educated class and the best of the literary mind of our time," he claimed in 1946, counting Joyce among the reactionary modernists, an error that Empson's essays on *Ulysses* would try to correct). Trilling's late enthusiasm for the singular will was remote from Empson's faith in the rational intelligence; the will is an ambiguous warrantor of individual freedom.

Unlike Arendt or Adorno, Empson did not react to the catastrophe as a philosopher; and unlike Trilling or Berlin, he was ready to challenge the ideological underpinning of the anti-communist camp—and willing to pay the cost in perceived eccentricity. If he stood quite outside what Judith Shklar was to call the "liberalism of fear"—the retrenchment by liberal thinkers in the '50s and '60s, Berlin and Trilling among them, recoiling from the berserk utopianism of Moscow and Berlin—it was because those horrors left him intellectually unshaken. He rejected the Cold War ultimatum of either/or (democracy/tyranny, individual freedom/social justice, Washington/Moscow, etc.). From the outset his choice was not to choose, not in the publicly available terms. Nothing he wrote suggests he accepted for a moment that Soviet communism posed a grave threat to the democratic world. He never felt an obligation to accept that the appalling behavior of the adversary justified any dilution of principles. "Anti-communism" as an ideology or prejudice could no more get a grip on his mind in the '50s than communism had done in the '30s. Unlike certain renowned contemporaries, he did not flaunt his liberal credentials;²⁴ and he was too hopeful of the human capacity for reasoned resistance to swallow the oracular

²⁴ Contributing to "A Portrait of Louis MacNeice," a radio program broadcast on the BBC Radio Third Programme in September 1966, Empson contrasted MacNeice favorably with the two other Oxford poets with whom his name was linked—Auden and Spender—firstly for having been more measured in his political commitments before 1939 ("less hopeful of the immediate future though he was committed all right"), and then for not becoming penitent about those commitments after 1945. "Louis went on being sardonic and responsible," said Empson, "hardly surprised even when appalled."



LITERARY IMAGINATION

pessimism of his friend Orwell, or of Arthur Koestler. As he wrote in 1933, “no human system can work without the free judgement of the individual” (*Argufying* 569)—a sublimely optimistic standpoint, almost like Locke, which survived the war intact: “the public human mind as expressed in a language, is not irredeemably lunatic and cannot be made so” (*Complex Words* 83). Elsewhere in *Complex Words* he proposed that “The man who satisfies his own nature . . . is expected to have generous feelings from his own unobstructed nature” (216): such Enlightenment faith in human decency was fully at odds with the early-’50s gloom.

He would not take his bearings by current events, regardless how momentous, and never borrowed the prestige of historical tragedy to aggrandize his work. The enormities of the age, from the *Somme* to the Holocaust and Hiroshima, do not darken his writing, except when he likens Milton’s God to Stalin and then to a Nazi concentration camp commander. The phrase “real bad temper” hardly sufficed to characterize Stalin’s dark side; it seems almost tasteless; but Empson was not writing history, and his odd phrase implicitly rebukes the sort of portentous cultural criticism that forever addresses the jury in posterity’s endless, consoling prosecution of Europe’s worst mid-century monsters.

This seems in keeping with the sunlit Edwardianism that is one aspect of his critical (though not his poetic) character. Few critics were less prone to mourn those enormities or condemn the twentieth century for them. For anti-metaphysical Empson, evil meant cruelty, meaning sadism. In 1951, the year of *Complex Words*, a Polish writer’s horrific memoir of Soviet prison camps was published in English translation with a fundamental preface by Bertrand Russell, whom Empson always admired. “Communists and Nazis alike have tragically demonstrated that in a large proportion of mankind the impulse to inflict torture exists, and requires only opportunity to display itself in all its naked horror,” wrote Russell. In such a pass, the priority must be “to understand and eliminate the springs of cruelty in human nature that has become distorted by bad social systems.” This comes very close to Empson’s anti-Christian position. His work after *Complex Words* was devoted to understanding those “springs of cruelty,” or one of them at least, and bolstering our resistance to them. Empson wanted to know where the human impulse to sadism came from; and the answer he came up with was that, in his culture, the most clearly identifiable stimulus to cruelty was the archetype of torture. This answer would be the source of the splendor of his next book, *Milton’s God*, which with a bit of stretching could be called Empson’s version of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and comes as close as literary



MARK THOMPSON

criticism perhaps can to enacting the sort of rebellion that Camus had extolled, also in 1951; a passionate affirmation that creates knowledge, awakens conscience, and “liberates stagnant waters.”

As for professional priorities: I suppose he would have argued that communism was an ideology marginal to the democratic West and a practice external to it. Communist influence was marginal to Anglophone literary criticism in the '50s (though it would not be so a decade or two later), hence did not pose a problem for English departments at British universities; whereas “neo-Christianity” not only lay at the heart of Western ideology and practice, it threatened the integrity and values of literary studies. The threat was not Christian propaganda so much as the rehabilitation in crypto-religious guise of critical doctrines that ducked the process of empirical argument in order to attribute meanings to poems and novels that their authors would have disowned and that wreak moral harm on contemporary readers, and on students above all. In essay after essay, review after review, he wittily exposed the abrogation of argument and the evidentiary deficits of other critics, showing that the narrow ground of literary criticism was cluttered with Western commonplaces in the global *Kulturkampf*.

These faults were, in his view, ultimately underwritten by the religious revival, which was tolerated by liberals who should know better. He teased American critics for sharing Cold War paranoia and transmitting Cold War prejudices. His treatment of Milton was strongly colored by his sense that modern American critics were “twist[ing] him into something usable to stop the kids from going Red.”²⁵ James Joyce, too, had to be defended against critics (such as the “spanking neo-Christian” Hugh Kenner [*Milton's God* 247]) who traduced *Ulysses* by denying its humanism. His campaigns against the Intentionalist Fallacy, Imagism, and Symbolism, and for biography, were pitched against pernicious intellectual habits that were indulged by Cold War liberals for political reasons.

His opposition to New Critical doctrine seems overdone unless it is set against the wider political backdrop. Once again Berlin supplied a hint of the context that Empson did not care to explain, when he identified the “cluster of views” which “rest on the assumption that belief in the importance of the motives is delusive; that the behaviour of men is in fact made what it is by causes

²⁵ Letter to the Editor, *Hudson Review* 20 (1967).



LITERARY IMAGINATION

largely beyond the control of individuals” (*Liberty* 98). Empson stood in the long dissenting tradition that had once made intent into a foundation of individualism in the Western world, emerging against the power of the mediaeval Church. “Wimsatt and Beardsley” were merely the latest ciphers of a perennial foe. In upholding the availability and desirability of authors’ intentions as one standard of judgment, Empson upheld the ordinary practice of human beings as they make sense of the world and live purposive lives; the intention of creative writers against academic criticism that was increasingly prone to disregard and disparage it; and hence the legitimacy of inferring from biography to text to support or discredit interpretations.

His defense of the value of biography also evolved from his own earlier thought, which had always moved easily between authors and works. What was new from the ’50s onwards was his emphasis on the *rights* of authors to be cleared of imputed meanings. In the most elaborate case, that of Coleridge, this meant defending the author from his own self-criticism. Coleridge’s Christianized conscience—false consciousness, in Empson’s view—had put his best-known poem on show trial, and his subsequent revisions were almost an early equivalent of Rubashov’s forced confession in *Darkness at Noon* (*Shakespeare’s Shrew* 129–55).

His zeal to clinch a case led him sometimes to overstate it, as when he claimed that we need Rochester’s letters to know that his poems were sincerely meant, and that lacking such proof, the poetry becomes trivial. This is too narrow to be right; the younger Empson knew better: that we decide something is good for a number of reasons, most of them probably obscure until analyzed. Rochester’s poems carry conviction within themselves, if they do at all; biography cannot substitute for what the poem lacks.²⁶ This zeal led Empson to abandon criticism for a sort of speculative biographical antiquarianism, in the case of the long late essay on Marvell’s marriage. “To establish the marriage is of no great consequence to literature, as it came so long after his best poetry, though I do think it saves Marvell from a scandal” (*Using Biography* 76). The great critic’s absorption in his project is small consolation for the sense of energies misplaced. (Empson might have retorted that a proper liberal should be ready to pay this price: the legal costs, so to speak, of libel cases on behalf of dead authors who

²⁶ This point is well made by Charles Rosen, “Ambiguous Intentions,” in *Romantic Poets, Critics, and Other Madmen* (Cambridge and London, 1998).



MARK THOMPSON

would be plaintiffs if they were alive.) Yet this essay was an exception; for the most part, even if Empson did eventually corner himself with false antitheses over intention and biography (the final revenge of Cold War logic!), curtailing the autonomy of texts and tying poems too closely to persons, in practice he remained wonderfully open to diverse interpretations.

Isaiah Berlin, on the other hand, was an establishment liberal, content to swim in the Anglo-American mainstream, where he became very eminent indeed.²⁷ Like Trilling's, his liberalism was hammered into shape on the anvil of Soviet communism. He had crossed an intellectual watershed at the end of the war,²⁸ and by the '50s was committed to writing and teaching the history of ideas. His work covered three main areas: exploring the remote hinterland of modern totalitarianism in the monist and irrationalist philosophies of, respectively, the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment (with Romanticism as sequel); reflecting on the nature of liberty; and rehabilitating liberal trends in nineteenth-century Russian thought. Offshoots from these main lines of inquiry included a sympathetic interest in libertarian, Mazzinian nationalism.

Like other establishment liberals, Berlin was passionately anti-communist, a commitment which occasionally led him in the 1950s to posit far-fetched connections between bygone utopians and latter-day totalitarians. Take the judgment that Helvetius' "utilitarian system . . . leads directly to what is ultimately a

²⁷ No such status was offered to Empson or, as far as one knows, sought by him. Among the reasons for this contrast is the two men's very different conduct with the great and good. T. S. Eliot was one of the grandest icons of Western culture in 1948—the year of his Nobel prize and Order of Merit—when Empson sent him what Eliot called "the most insulting letter which I have ever received," complaining that he, Eliot, had not kept his word to help find an American publisher for his poems (*Complete Poems* xxvii). When Berlin reprinted in 1952 his remarkable essay on "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation" (1951), he deleted, at Eliot's request, some remarks associating him with anti-Semitism—a concession he came to regret (*Power of Ideas* xii). The same pattern showed in their relations with Stephen Spender: Empson provoked Spender so unremittingly—and as it turned out, accurately—about the U.S. intelligence services pouring money into *Encounter* (which Spender co-edited), teasing him about his "American playmates," that Spender broke off their friendship. (Decades later he—the ex-communist—was still ready to tell an interviewer how much like a communist Empson was. [See *The Literary Review*, November 1985.]) Berlin dedicated his landmark volume, *Four Essays on Liberty*, to Spender, "one of my greatest friends," whose "poetry speaks to me very directly" (Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* [London, 1993], p. 197).

²⁸ "[T]owards the end of the war," a conversation with a mathematical logician had the effect of persuading Berlin that he "should prefer a field in which one could hope to know more at the end of one's life than when one had begun; and so I left philosophy for the field of the history of ideas" (*Concepts* viii).



LITERARY IMAGINATION

kind of technocratic tyranny.”²⁹ The distinction of Helvetius, according to Berlin, was to elevate a single idea into an all-explaining principle. To worry then about the fell consequences of implementing this naïve fanatic’s idea in its logical extreme form is a stretch that seems inexplicable except in terms of Berlin’s determination to alert people to the danger of underrating the intellectual credentials and appeal of modern totalitarianism. The same holds for his claim that Attlee, Hitler, Roosevelt, and Stalin all expressed the Saint-Simonian “idea” (128). Applications so unlike exposed the unitary idea as a figment.

Berlin’s philosophical genealogy of monist illusions has deservedly become part of the standard intellectual apparatus of our time. Yet the telescoping habit described here was a weakness, very much in the spirit of those times when, in Senator Fulbright’s words, Western leaders “became liberated from the normal rules of evidence and inference when it came to dealing with Communism . . . Our ‘faith’ liberated us, like the believers of old, from the requirements of empirical thinking.” How severely this weakness should be judged is another matter; one would not have had to be a signed-up member of the liberal establishment to concede that short-circuiting of this kind, on this scale, was pardonable for the sake of better understanding the enemies of liberty.

“Dear William,” “Yours Affectionately”

Like Berlin, then, Empson from the ’50s onwards sought to strengthen liberalism by identifying and stripping away anti-liberal ideas or ideologies that clung to real liberal values which they exploit, imitate, and may eventually suffocate. If their understanding of liberalism was surely very close, their conceptions of the threat to liberal principles were different. For Berlin, the essential threat was political and lay outside Western Europe but was philosophically native to it, originating with the monist thinkers of the Enlightenment. For Empson, the more salient threat was professional (within his own field of work), internal to the democratic West (where he was born and now lived, worked, and raised his family), and “neo-Christian” above all. The two conceptions quiz each other: Empson’s asks how far pluralism can afford to stay within liberalism’s comfort zone, ignoring religious monism and other enemies. Berlin’s asks if pluralism can afford to be non-committal towards a historic struggle where liberal politics, in their compromised reality, are pitched against something much worse.

²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty* (London, 2003), p. 25.



MARK THOMPSON

Biography can be useful in accounting for this difference, in terms of background and temperament: on the one hand, Empson of Yokefleet Hall, with his privileged self-assurance and principled bloody-mindedness, his globetrotting followed by insistence on a Yorkshire job, allergy to either/or alternatives, his boldness and isolation; on the other, Berlin of Riga and Petersburg, Jewish, fleeing revolution, with family members murdered by the Nazis, his direct awareness of Stalinism, his clubbability and devotion to an English way of life with All Souls and the Albany at its heart.

Some of these variances come across in a correspondence in 1976. Berlin had long admired Empson's work, choosing *Complex Words* as a book of the year in 1952 (something he would also do for *Argufying* in 1987). As the president of the British Academy and the country's most celebrated public intellectual, Berlin solicited Empson's assurance, as "a personal favour," that he would accept an invitation to become a fellow of the Academy. Of course it should have come much earlier, he said; "disgraceful" that it hadn't. "I need not enlarge to you on the less estimable characteristics of literary specialists in England, and probably elsewhere," he confided; "enough of them in the relevant section of the Academy now feel repentant to have shamed the rest, and they should not be penalised for seeing the light, however late." After a paragraph about subscriptions and attendance, Berlin anticipated Empson's response directly. "Perhaps I am quite wrong in thinking that your instinctive reaction would be to ignore the proffered hand, but I somehow do not think I am. If I may say so," he ventured, "you shine so brightly by your own light that you confer distinction on institutions rather than derive it from them."³⁰ In a handwritten postscript, Berlin called his letter "madly indiscreet and quite improper"; he had "never written so to anyone else, or ever expect to again! But I find the prospect of quite understandable disdain from you too awful."

Empson's response confirmed the aptness of Berlin's tribute. Thanking him for his "sympathetic letter," he accepted the invitation, despite misgivings ("No doubt the Academy does valuable work, but I am not needed for it"), and with the rider that "I don't want to have to hire a dinner jacket [for a lot of charitable committee work], if that can be avoided." He added that he did not "feel resentful at any lack of official recognition and don't think I have suffered from any. . . . I

³⁰ Berlin to Empson, 20 May 1976. Quotation by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Shelf mark bMS Eng 1041 (34).



LITERARY IMAGINATION

wouldn't refuse out of pique."³¹ At a later date he clarified his attitude to the Academy: "The profession of Eng. Lit. has become a terribly closed shop which is felt at its most stifling in the B.A.," he wrote. "I hope you realise that I had paid my ten guineas by banker's order for many years before you coaxed me into joining the committee, always feeling it [the B.A.] ought to be supported, always sickened and appalled by any lecture I attended." He signed off, "Yours affectionately."³²

Does this exchange yield clues to why Berlin's value-pluralism—what John Gray calls his renowned "single idea of enormous subversive force"—is so famous while Empson's is overlooked even in the field of literary criticism, and by his admirers?³³ Berlin's opportune compliments and flattering melodrama hint at skills that helped to make him the ultimate mandarin insider, a position that Empson would surely have found ignoble; while Empson's comic but pointed bluntness about the Academy suggests well enough why his invitation came so late.

A less intriguing reason why Empson's value pluralism has been overlooked is that nobody reads him for this; unlike Berlin, he hardly explains what he means by it; it occurs in his work as something self-evident, a starting point, empirically true about the world. (The difference between Rhetoric and Philosophy recurring again.) Yet, whether or not you go to Empson for this, you get it from him; it may be a background reason for the posthumous interest in his work, value-pluralism being an idea whose time has very much come since the end of the Cold War, though it could be objected that none of the claims made for Empson in this essay touches his stature as critic. While these claims would

³¹ Empson to Berlin, 25 May 1976. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Berlin 327. Quoted with permission of the Empson estate.

³² Empson to Berlin, n.d. Quotation by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Shelf mark bMS Eng 1041 (34).

³³ The only other discussion of Empson's pluralism I have found lets both its author and his subject down. "It might be argued," contends Paul Fry in a warm and perceptive study, "that for all his show of pluralism Empson is loyal in earnest only to the administrative classes of his own country, and is fraternally forgiving, almost fond, of even their ugliest prejudices wherever these peep through: failure to disapprove of Hitler except on nationalist grounds, lukewarmth about democracy, after-dinner coarseness about women," and "smug provincialism." While Empson "obviously thinks through and around all these prejudices . . . it does not follow . . . that he was necessarily free of them" (Paul H. Fry, *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice* [London and New York, 1991], p. 113.) Indeed it does not follow necessarily, though it could also—and more convincingly—be argued that Empson's Englishness inflects and dates his version of pluralism without undermining it. For pluralism need not be purely "PC" or ideally cosmopolitan, intact only in the no-man's land between given identities. Every pluralism has a dialect and a home.



MARK THOMPSON

not be worth making if he was not anyway a great critic, his liberal values are intrinsic to his achievement, which is unimaginable without them.

An essay like this could not have been written about any other English critic since Coleridge—or about any other historian of ideas. Still, the argument may seem overdone to anyone not convinced that value-pluralism matters more than either literary criticism or the study of ideas, as Empson and Berlin would have agreed. For it is an explicable paradox, not a mystery, that the best criticism won't let us forget how the genre's importance is qualified by the world at every turn. Can criticism, thus qualified, bid us as the archaic torso bade Rilke? Must we, too, change our lives? Empson's work is Arnoldian enough to raise the question, but grandly, with no hint of command and rarely a reproach, more as a heartening reminder of something so essential that we really knew it already. "What is known of the universe so far is astoundingly wonderful and beautiful, and I am glad that I was born" (*Milton's God* 321).

