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DECOROUS SEDUCTION: THE SELF-ANNOTATED POETRY OF WILLIAM EMPSON

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The paper considers the poetry of William Empson from one specific aspect: the authorial notes which he attached to many of his poems. Empson was a staunch believer in the need for authorial annotation in modern poetry, and one of the issues which this paper discusses is the extent to which his poetic practice was consistent, in this respect, with his theoretical positions. The paper also considers the relations that hold between the poems and the notes in Empson's poetry, and outlines some of the notes' key stylistic features and rhetorical strategies.

Key words: William Empson; 20th-century poetry; authorial annotation

Having to read a footnote, Noël Coward once reputedly quipped, is like "having to go downstairs to answer the door while in the midst of making love" (Grafton 1999: 69 – 70; Grafton's phrasing). Drawing on the same field of experience, in his reflections on the same problem, William Empson offers a very different simile: "A whole new book of poetry without prose seems … rather like a seduction without conversation; it becomes almost indecently portentous" (Empson 1988: 72). By "prose" Empson means here authorial annotation and commentary on the poems; and what his claim suggests is that poetry which lacks this kind of annotation reveals a poet who is self-important and self-serving. Such poetry is, all in all, a rather indecorous affair.

In his own relations with the reader Empson showed himself, in this respect, the perfect gentleman. He annotated most of the poems in *Poems* (1935) and *The Gathering Storm* (1940), often repeatedly (providing new versions of the notes for new editions)[1]; and at public readings he would

[1] Such as the audio recordings of his poetry. Shortly before he died, he also volunteered to write further glosses for the Hogarth Press's 1984 edition of his *Collected Poems* (Haffenden, ed. 2000: li). It is on the poems that appeared in *Poems* (1935) and *The Gathering Storm* (1940) that this paper focuses on; all quotations follow the text

combine the poems with "affable … extended explanation and exegesis" (Rounce 2003: 134). Empson was a firm believer in the necessity and value of self-annotation in modern poetry[2]; and was openly scornful of the anti-intentionalism of the New Critics. He held John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* in high regard, and took great interest in Richard Bentley's controversial edition of *Paradise Lost* (Haffenden, ed. 2000: xlvi).

To return to his own poetic practice: Empson does leave some poems un-annotated, but, generally speaking, these seem to be premeditated silences rather than inadvertent omissions. One such un-annotated poem (to take a single example) is "Ignorance of Death" – a poem that concludes with the following stanza: "Otherwise I feel very blank upon this topic, / And think that though important, and proper for anyone to bring up, / It is one that most people should be prepared to be blank upon" (Empson 1940: 30). That no note should be attached to this poem is only appropriate. In a sense, the absent note negatively complements the poem, confirming and endorsing its professed ethos. At the same time, it may also be considered to act as a silent critique of it: through its absence, the note draws attention to the poem's paradoxical presence – a presence that runs counter to the poem's own beliefs.

So what do the authorial notes that Empson usually provides for his poems aim to do? This is the self-annotation programme Empson set himself: "… I should want to write very full notes; at least as long as the text itself; explaining not only particular references, paraphrasing particularly condensed grammar, and so on, but the point of a poem as a whole, and making any critical remarks that seemed interesting" (letter to editor Ian Parsons qtd. in Haffenden, ed. 2000: xlvii). These, furthermore, must be notes that are "simple, goodhumoured, [and] illuminating" (Empson 1988: 71).

To begin at the beginning then: the notes must be long (a point that Empson insists on – see also Empson 1988: 71, 80). This may appear wilful or eccentric, but in fact is fundamentally connected with Empson's understanding of what poetry should be. Empson believes that poetry needs to be as concentrated as possible[3] – but such concentration, he is aware, can be difficult for the reader to deal with, if it is not relieved by prose: readers, as he puts it, "do not like [a book of poetry] to keep them

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of those two collections. References to "Bacchus" are to the full version of the poem as it appeared in the later collection.

[2] In this paper, the terms *self-annotation* and *authorial annotation* are used interchangeably.

[3] See Empson 1988: 76 – 77.

strung up to a high level of difficulty or exultation …. [P]oetry published with long discursive notes … would be much nearer the concentration they are prepared to swallow” (ibid.: 72).

Empson’s own notes are, in fact, of various length; but it is true that compared with the poems they comment on some of them are disproportionately long. “Sea Voyage”, a poem of 19 lines, is accompanied by a note that is one page long; the note to “China”, a poem of 28 lines, takes up three pages and amounts to a mini-essay on selected aspects of Chinese history and culture. The most remarkable note by far, in this respect, has to be the note to “Bacchus”. Admittedly, this is a fairly long poem – 92 lines, but even so the almost six-page note is formidable, especially, perhaps, as it comes at the beginning: it is the note to the first poem in the collection. Empson was, of course, aware of this enormity: the prefatory note to the individual notes in the collection opens with the bold “These notes may well look absurdly pretentious, and they start off with the most extreme example” (Empson 1940: 55).

At the other end of the length spectrum is a note like that to “Aubade”. The poem, which with its 42 lines is among Empson’s longer poems, is accompanied by a note that consists of a single short sentence: “*The same war* in Tokyo then was the Manchurian Incident” (Empson 1940: 63; italics Empson’s). The contrast is striking and, again, surely deliberate. It is a matter of style as well as size: a contrast between elaborate villanelle-inspired repetition of alternate lines and a simple pointed sentence. This more narrowly technical contrast also draws attention to a sharp thematic contrast: that between the title, which identifies the poem as a love poem, and the note, which presents the poem as a political one. “Aubade” is one of Empson’s most personal and most explicitly amorous poems, and it is hard not to read the note as a deliberate refusal to comment on the situation described and the persons involved.

A similarly functional contrast of size and style can also be observed in “Missing Dates”: the taut, elaborately patterned villanelle is coupled with a note that consists of a single loosely coordinated, casually parenthetical sentence: “It is true about the old dog, at least I saw it reported somewhere, but the legend that a fifth or some such part of the soil of China is given up to ancestral tombs is (by the way) not true” (ibid.: 65). We find here, in addition, a clash between the profound angst of the meditation on the waste that “remains … remains and kills” (ibid.: 31) and the trivial detail of “the old dog”, which in the note is given disproportionate – and thus ludicrous – prominence. This counterpoint which the note provides can be seen to serve, in the first place, as the relief

that, according to Empson, is necessary to prevent readers from being too "strung up" to too "high [a] level" of emotion for too long. In addition, it can also be seen to act as an ironic comment on the poem, to cut it down to size: the offhand, frivolous note makes the poem proper appear, by comparison, ponderous and solemnising. In this sense, it can be considered as the author's own check against the excesses of particular attitudes and emotions; and the whole – poem and note – achieves a tentative balance that is an alternative to both extreme gravity and levity.

Some of the remarks just made about notes that sound casual and offhand, even frivolous, lead us, in fact, to what in Empson's view is probably the most important aspect of the authorial note: namely, the manner in which the note conveys information, the attitude which it projects. Empson believes that a note should be "chatty" (letter to Julian Trevelyan qtd. in Haffenden, ed. 2000: xlvi); that it should be "goodhumoured" and "casual[…]" (Empson 1988: 71, 72). Both the diction and the syntax of Empson's notes are, indeed, quite informal. Although such casualness can occasionally also be found in the poems, it is limited to only a few of them, and so the notes produce a powerful contrast with the poems proper, especially with those that make use of technical vocabulary. The note to "Missing Dates", quoted above, is a typical example of casual syntax and diction ("*It is true about the old dog*, *at least I saw it reported somewhere*, but the legend that a fifth *or some such* part of the soil of China is given up to ancestral tombs is (*by the way*) not true" – emphasis added here and in all quotations that follow). The note to "Bacchus" tells us that "A mythological chemical operation to distil drink *is going on* for the first four verses", and that "*Anyway* the drink is now chiefly needed for anaesthetic"; the note to "Reflection from Rochester" begins "*The idea is that* nationalist war is getting to a crisis …" (Empson 1940: 56, 60, 64); etc. Some of the notes blithely refer to the poem they comment on as "the thing": "*The thing* is about a surprised pleasure in being among Japanese again" (note to "The Beautiful Train" – ibid.: 66); "*the thing* expresses a kind of innocent glee …" (note to "China" – ibid.: 67).

Also casual is the way in which the titles of the poems are, appearing at the head of the respective note, often truncated in a kind of convenient shorthand: "Reflection from Rochester" is shortened to "Rochester", "The Beautiful Train" is shortened to "The Train", "Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs" is shortened to "Four Legs", "Your Teeth are Ivory Towers" is shortened to "Your Teeth", etc. The use of characters rather than words or phrases is another kind of shorthand: "These two = the salt and water sublimed and distilled over from the retort = the sea from which life arose

and to which the proportions of all creatures' blood are still similar" (note to "Bacchus" – ibid.: 57). And while this example of shorthand is perfectly readable, it also rather reminds one of *private* notes, of notes jotted to oneself. The privateness, although it does not present a problem in communication in this particular case, alerts us to the possibility that casual does not necessarily equal (publicly) accessible or simple – as we shall see a little further on.

Empson's decision to write notes that are casual, good-humoured and chatty was, it seems, largely made against the background of Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*: while Empson affirms that those notes "had to be written" (*Criterion*, 15 [April 1936], 519, qtd. in Haffenden 2005: 372), he also bristles at Eliot's "schoolmaster's tone" and his "air of intellectual snobbery" (Empson 1988: 71; letter to Parsons qtd. in Haffenden 2005: 371). Accordingly, his choice of an informal manner extends to his style of referencing as well – Empson's references are markedly unacademic, markedly different from the typical *Waste Land* note's formal source reference for the respective quotation or allusion. Although Empson draws, in his poetry, on a vast range of ideas, he typically does not refer the reader to exact sources. Thus, for example, "This Last Pain" paraphrases Wittgenstein ("'What is conceivable can happen too,' / said Wittgenstein" – Empson 1935: 29), but the note to the poem, while it makes an ironic comment on the philosopher's relevance to the poem (ibid.: 46), does not identify the idea's source. A reference to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* would clash with the general casualness Empson aims at – not to mention a reference like "v. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Proposition 3.02", which is how it would appear in an Eliot note. Likewise, in the same note, explaining the poem's "Those thorns are crowns which, woven into knots, / Crackle under and soon boil fool's pots" (ibid.: 29), Empson quotes the tag "As the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of a fool" (ibid.: 46), but does not identify its source – Ecclesiastes 7: 6. Furthermore, when Empson does cite the exact source, he is not necessarily accurate: thus, the reference to "*Outline of Life* by Wells, etc." in the note to "China" (Empson 1940: 70) should really be a reference to "*The Science of Life* by Wells, etc." (see Haffenden, ed. 2000: 374). Nor is he consistent: in the note to "To an Old Lady" (Empson 1935: 43), for example, he identifies the quotation from *King Lear* ("Ripeness is all": the poem's opening words), but not the allusion to Milton ("And but in darkness is she visible": the poem's closing words), even though the two probably have approximately the same degree of recognisability.

Most typically, Empson's references are vague – and rather insouciantly so. The notes tell the reader that, for example, "Dr Johnson said it, *somewhere in Boswell* …" (note to "Invitation to Juno" – Empson 1935: 39; emphasis added here and in all quotations that follow); "It was done *somewhere* by missionaries …" (note to "This Last Pain" – ibid.: 46); "It is true about the old dog, at least *I saw it reported somewhere* …" (note to "Missing Dates" – Empson 1940: 65). The manner in which the reader's attention is drawn to the author's unreliability seems deliberate – consider "… Darwin tried this, *but I forget whether it was true or not*" (note to "Plenum and Vacuum" – Empson 1935: 40); or "The Roof of the World is, *I believe*, the Himalayas; *the geography [in the poem] is as dim as Mandevil's*" (note to "Part of Mandevil's Travels" – ibid.: 43). This, I believe, is meant to suggest – to insist – that factual validity or truthfulness have no bearing on poetic value and effect; that what poetry feeds on is ideas, not facts. Such a view allows Empson, in "Missing Dates", to use the image of "the Chinese tombs … / Usurp[ing] the soil" to make a point, and at the same time explain in the note that it is not true that a large part of China's land is taken up by tombs (Empson 1940: 31, 65).

But let us return to the suggestion that the casual language of Empson's notes does not necessarily make them simple or easy to read – indeed, the notes may require one to read them with much the same care and attention as the poems proper. In the first place, the notes' syntax is often severely compressed – this is the syntax, partly, of informal notes to oneself (or of extremely succinct reference-book prose); but to an even greater extent it is the compressed syntax of the poems proper – what one Empson parodist dubbed "the fraught laconic" (Dickenson 1954: 63). Just as in the poems proper, in the notes too we often find accumulations of phrases, ellipsis, disjunction and abrupt transitions. "*Taut*: the lines of string in the game would make a knot, the water ice, the salt a crystal" (note to "Sea Voyage" – Empson 1935: 41; italics Empson's) is not fundamentally different from "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" (the opening tercet of "Arachne" – ibid.: 21). The first sentence of the note to "The Scales", "Alice in Wonderland, Ulysses appearing to Nausicaa, and the jackal sandhole through which the heroes escaped in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*", yokes images together just as violently as the opening of the poem proper, "The proper scale would pat you on the head / But Alice showed her pup Ulysses' bough / Well from behind a thistle, wise with dread" (ibid.: 45, 22), and is syntactically more compressed (a string of noun phrases rather than a

series of clauses). Furthermore, although it does identify the poem's personae, it also introduces a disorder of another kind: while Alice and Ulysses occur in the same early line in the poem, the jackal sandhole appears much later; and so the note effects an even greater condensation.

In "Rolling the Lawn", the note is a perfect mirror of the poem proper – is, we could say, a distillation of its poetic method: "*Our* … *despair*: said by Belial in Milton ("in act more graceful and humane"). There was some advertisement urging us to roll the abdominal wall and thus improve our health" (ibid.: 40; italics and ellipsis Empson's) encapsulates the essence of a poetry that brings together, and constructs elaborate puns on, such disparate elements as the English lawn, Milton's fallen angels, physical exercise, popular advertisement, and the Trojan War.

Such abrupt transitions between ideas can be found in much of Empson's self-annotation. Here is part of the note to "Plenum and Vacuum": "Matter *includes* space on relativity theory, in a logical not spatial sense, because from a given distribution of matter you might calculate the space-time in which it seems to move freely. The line is not meant to be read as anapaests. Then the space not in our space-time, which we cannot enter, is thought of as glass with the universe as a bubble in it" (ibid.: 40; italics Empson's). This, in addition, is a good illustration of the heterogeneity of Empson's notes, which freely combine glosses and comments on disparate levels: in this case, a combination of scientific explanation and commentary on the poem's prosody. Furthermore, the way a subject (space-time) is introduced, then relinquished, then returned to is reminiscent of the repetitive patterning of one of Empson's favourite poetic forms – the villanelle.

The suggestion that Empson's notes combine explanation on many levels leads us, in fact, to the question of the notes' substance – the question of the kind of information that the various glosses and comments supply. Empson's own idea on the subject is that "notes ought … to give information, as to grammar, purpose, and meanings of words, and the mode of action of tropes" (Empson 1988: 72); that he "should want to write very full notes … explaining not only particular references, paraphrasing particularly condensed grammar, and so on, but the point of a poem as a whole …" (letter to Parsons qtd. above).

Authorial annotation on particular phrases, linguistic uses and figures, on particular references and allusions will seem suspect to many readers – after all, shouldn't meanings and associations arise naturally within the poem? Shouldn't the poem itself make it clear what is being compared to what? But even those readers who are prepared to cede the

poet the right to comment on such matters will probably baulk at Empson's larger claim to a right to explain a poem's general idea. What makes such explanation problematic is not only that it may be seen as a sign of the poet's inadequacy, but also, and more importantly, that it seems to give the poet undue authority over his or her poem. One critic who has expressed this view is Jean-Jacques Lecercle: "We cannot but interpret the notes … as an attempt at damming the free flow of our interpretation, at dictating the right meaning to us, at blocking the paths opened up by our own poetic imagination …. True, the constraints on our own interpretation are not unbearable, and there is no cause to resent the pedagogic devices of a great teacher. But it is a question of all or nothing. If there is an author's meaning, then there is one (right and only) meaning …" (Lecercle 1993: 275 – 276).

Naturally, Empson himself does not see the matter in this light: he does not view annotation as an attempt on the author's part to usurp the reader's right to interpret, but as an attempt to communicate – to communicate at many levels, to ensure, for example, that a less- than-perfect poem does not lead to complete communication breakdown.[4] He repeatedly argues that when a poet supplies notes for his or her own poetry, this is an expression not of arrogance, but of thoughtfulness for the reader, who, in Empson's view, "has the right to demand" authorial notes (Empson 1988: 72). What would be arrogant is to ignore this right: it is "positively impertinent *not* to write [a note] which would save [the reader] further trouble" (ibid.: 71; emphasis added). With this gesture, Empson transforms the self-annotating poet from the reader's schoolmaster into his servant. Yet Lecercle clearly has a point; and with his objections in mind, we may be tempted to ask: what *kind* of servant is this? Obliging, certainly, and amiable – but not humble, and definitely not self-effacing. He may be, one could tentatively suggest, rather like the valet who, while serving his master, makes his decisions for him – suavely but firmly; he may be rather like Jeeves, who makes sure that at the end of the day Bertie will be wearing the quiet twill suit, not the snazzy checked one.

One particular type of note which we often find in Empson and which bears an interesting relation to the question of the authorial power exercised through self-annotation, is what we could call his poetry workshop note. This is a kind of metaliterary note that focuses on what the poet was trying to achieve through (for instance) a particular device, on how a particular device is supposed to function – as in "The grammar is

[4] See, for example, the prefatory note in *Poems* and the sleeve note to a record of *Selected Poems*, quoted in Haffenden 2005: 372.

meant to run through alternate lines; I thought this teasing trick gave an effect of the completely disparate things going side by side" (note to "China" – Empson 1940: 69); "*Gravely*, the spelling of the original, means "of gravel" but suggests graves" (note to "Part of Mandevil's Travels" – Empson 1935: 43; italics Empsons's); "Ether and chloroform smell to me much alike though only chloroform has got chlorine in it, so I swap drugs to bring in poison gas" (note to "Bacchus" – Empson 1940: 60); etc.

That Empson should produce such notes, that he should expose the workings of the writing mind in this manner, is eminently consistent with his views on literature. Empson is passionately opposed to ideas of the mystique of poetry – he finds the view that "poetry cannot be safely analysed" "ignoble" and advocates the belief that "all sorts of poetry may be conceived as explicable" (Empson 1953: 57, 256). In addition, he considers that "[t]he merits of [his] age are among the critics rather than poets, or rather among the poets who are critics …" (Empson 1988: 84). He also places great value on poetic *self*-examination, claiming that "a poet ought to try to understand his own mental operations" (ibid.: 78). Indeed, one of the four types of obscurity warranting authorial annotation that Empson distinguishes between in "Obscurity and Annotation" is exclusively focused on the poet's grappling with the workings of his or her mind: "The second main case [of obscurity] occurs when the author does not himself clearly understand how the effect has been produced" (ibid.: 77). Likewise, in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* the fifth and the seventh (most convoluted) type both focus on the act of writing and the state of the poet's mind: "The fifth type is a fortunate confusion, as when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing … or not holding it all in mind at once …", and "[t]he seventh type is that of full contradiction, marking a division in the author's mind" (Empson 1953: vi).

Significantly, very often Empson's poetry workshop notes remark on his failure to achieve the desired effect: "The unconfined surface of her sphere is like the universe in being finite but unbounded, *but I failed to get that into the line*" (note to "To an Old Lady" – Empson 1935: 43; emphasis added here and in all quotations that follow); "The intention behind the oddness of the theme, *however much it may fail* …" (note to "Camping Out" – ibid.: 44); "Then *the poem drifts onto the stock defence* that …" (note to "Your Teeth are Ivory Towers" – Empson 1940: 63); "The two main ideas put forward *or buried* in this poem *now seem to me false* …" (note to "China" – ibid.: 67); etc. Such notes seem to deliver ammunition straight into the hands of those critics who, as was suggested above, would object that authorial annotation is evidence of authorial incompetence. Yet there is a

certain boldness in the way Empson calls a spade a spade, in the way he repeatedly uses a word like "fail"; there is a certain brazenness in his mea culpas. This is not to say that the self-deprecation in these notes is necessarily false: it is simply never unnecessarily pious; while the poet may admit a shortcoming, he is not going to cover his head with ashes. Yet again, the notes do not merely *admit* shortcomings – they positively draw attention to them, as if to suggest the poet's nonchalance, his unsusceptibility to negative criticism. Thus, in the end, the self-critical notes may actually help to maintain the poet's control over his poetic production: may, in other words, be seen as a strategy to establish authorial power.

So what conclusions can we draw at the end of this brief outline of Empson's self-annotation practice? Empson's notes certainly emerge as one of the most fascinating features of his poetry. They pose fundamental questions about authorial power, about the relations that hold between author and reader, about the rights that each can claim – and give those questions ambiguous answers. In addition, the "long discursive notes" meant to temper the concentration of the poems, making them easier to "swallow", are often only apparently leisurely: while they serve to dispel some of the difficulties of the poems, they often present challenges of their own. The stylistic distinctions between the poems proper and the notes, too, are often tenuous, thus undermining, in part, the division into text and paratext. Last, but certainly not least, poems and notes enter into complex relations of critique, mirroring and counterpoint, making Empson's poetry particularly plural and dynamic.

Empson's self-annotation is part of a deliberate poetic programme that reflects and embodies some of his most passionately held views on (modern) poetry and its mode of action, and should thus be regarded both as an intrinsic feature of his poetry and as an important aspect of his criticism.

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