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William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral and Related Writings*, ed. by Seamus Perry (Oxford: OUP, 2020) pp. xxxii + 453. £80. ISBN 978-0-19-965966-1.

As I child I learned to hold my tongue at the dinner table when visiting my mother's family. Stiff awkward questions from relatives about what subjects I liked at school would recede as the adults became engrossed in their conversation and lost sight of me. If I were quiet, the juicy stuff would come out: snippets of gossip about Great Aunt Catherine's first husband or what happened to her sister in Spain between the wars. The difficulty lay in piecing things together. No one thought to explain the basic details to a silent childish listener and asking questions would have broken the spell.

Reading *Some Versions of Pastoral* by William Empson is not dissimilar. There is a strong sense that the text picks up a conversation started elsewhere, and a brisk assumption that the material is familiar, leaving the reader to make connections. The first chapter launches into a discussion of 'proletarian art' but switches to close analysis of Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* as 'an odd case of poetry with latent political ideas' (p. 6). Empson observes that 'pastoral' is a 'puzzling form which looks proletarian but isn't' (p.7) and then explains 'good proletarian art is usually Covert Pastoral' (p. 8). The logic is both baffling and ingenious: whilst proletarian art is not pastoral, 'good' proletarian art is secretly pastoral and thus probably not really proletarian art. Keep up.

Empson is open about being more interested in pursuing close readings than establishing a clear argument: 'once started on an example I follow it without regard to the unity of the book' (p. 18). And when he does explain the effect can seem tenuous: 'I shall add here some remarks about irony and dramatic ambiguity ... only connected with pastoral so far as they describe a process of putting the complex into the simple' (p. 37). But these aspects account for his popularity in some critical circles: the close readings in *Pastoral* of Donne, Marvell, Gray and Shakespeare are brilliant and enlivening. His loose definition of pastoral in terms of simple and complex means that the book is of little use for anyone looking to understand the conventions of Classical pastoral forms; but its scope is breathtaking. Empson taps into the way that the power of much literary writing lies in compressing a breadth of meaning and response into fictive premises that will always seem simple relative to the complexity of lived experience.

*Pastoral* was Empson's first major project after being dismissed from a fellowship at Magdalene College, Cambridge because of a sexual scandal when condoms were discovered in his rooms. (His first book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* had originated in precocious undergraduate essays written for I.A. Richards.) The disregard of conventions in *Pastoral*, then, may be a deliberate gesture of defiance towards the academic establishment. Empson, for example, is not much bothered about providing references or sources. Of Lewis Carroll's familiarity with Charles Darwin's work, for example, he writes:

He had met Tennyson in '56, and we hear of Tennyson haranguing him later on the likeness of monkeys' and men's skulls. (p. 175)

Like knowledge of a family's history, Empson's manner assumes the reader is familiar with the basics, so that he can get to the juicy stuff. The effect is both flattering (since it assumes a shared set of intellectual resources and abilities) and unsettling, since most will struggle to keep up.

Fortunately Seamus Perry is able to fill in the gaps in this new, critical edition of *Pastoral* from Oxford University press. On the journey home my parents could relax, having discharged their familial duties. That was the time, I learned, to put questions from the back of the car. Surprised to discover that greedy ears had been listening in, my mother would nevertheless relate what happened in Spain or which famous writer had skewered my great aunt in his diaries. In a similarly expansive fashion at the back of the book, Perry's notes supply essential details that provide context for Empson's arguments; he traces sources and offers glosses that clarify the sequence of thought.

In the passage above, for example, it turns out that 'we hear' an encounter between Carroll and Tennyson in Stephen Dodgson Collingwood's *Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (1892), which reports the Laureate's remarks about the shape of monkey's skulls. Perry's knowledge of Empson's genealogy extends to the textual history of *Pastoral* before and after publication. He records that earlier editions of the text had Tennyson 'lecturing' Carroll on this topic. Empson seems to have decided upon the word 'haranguing' when looking over his book for an edition published by Penguin in 1966. The effect, Perry observes, 'seems a bit harsh' (p. 370n), although he doesn't speculate about why Empson adopts this description of Tennyson's disposition.

The text's broader history may explain why parts of it feel like joining a conversation halfway through. Much of *Pastoral* was first published in Japanese periodicals, including *Studies in English Literature* and *Rising Generation* whilst Empson taught in the Far East. Some of his close readings carry on discussions initiated in the margins of his students' essays or within articles published by his contemporaries at Cambridge. As well as tracing the book's origins, Perry helpfully provides contextual material in appendices, such as James Smith's essay 'On Metaphysical Poetry' from *Scrutiny* in December 1933, which is an important influence on Empson's response to Donne and others.

The critical apparatus in this new edition is extensive, making up around half of the 490 pages in the volume. But Perry manages this wealth of information nimbly. The slight informality of tone and abstention from false speculation in his remark about Empson's 'harsh' verdict on Tennyson is characteristic. Describing his own practice, Perry draws attention to his use of 'presumably' and 'perhaps' in places 'where the argument seems condensed or knotty enough to present a challenge' (p. xxviii). His notes and commentary manage to fill in the scholarly gaps, without becoming dull or pedantic. They are true to the tone and spirit of Empson's enterprise.

Perry is clearly a fan. He describes *Pastoral* as 'the most fleeting, rangy, and allusive' (p. xxvii) of Empson's books. Although he concedes the book's difficulty is as much to do with its manner as its subject matter, Perry proposes: 'the imaginative coherence of the book is partly poetic and cumulatively associative' (p. xii). Like one of Empson's own poems, the force of the book lies in recurring keywords or connections drawn by inference and contiguity. So, for example, Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books are important to Empson's project because of the way in a supposedly 'simple' child character like Alice allows for the exploration of 'complex' contemporary ideas about politics and the science of evolution. Drawing on Freud, Empson breaks down this simple opposition and puzzles through the odd mixture of innocence and knowingness that runs through Alice's own curious and precocious (or 'pert') passage through Wonderland and the Looking Glass world.

Other chapters are as eccentric as some of Carroll's creations. A chapter on Milton, approaches the theology and ideology of *Paradise Lost* through the idiosyncratic commentary and suggestions for textual improvements proposed by the eighteenth-century scholar Richard Bentley. Empson considers these alongside response from Bentley's intellectual opponent Zachary Pearce, the Bishop of Rochester. His declared intention is 'to

try to wipe the eye of both of them' (p. 104). The effect is like watching an overconfident uncle weigh into a deeply entrenched and long-standing argument amongst elderly family members. In comparison, Perry's ministrations are restrained: he provides passages from Bentley; lists Empson's misquotations; and, where necessary, supplies connective suppositions to fill the gaps in Empson's stated logic. His presence is reassuring and humane.

Empson's work tends to split readers. If you did not already love *Pastoral* there is some chance that this new edition could reconcile you to its terrible brilliance, but it seems like a slim one. If you do love Empson, however, this is a gift and a treasury.

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### **Contributor's Note**

Matthew Creasy is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Glasgow. His critical edition of Arthur Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* was published by Fyfield-Carcenet in 2014. He has written articles and essays on the work of James Joyce, Arthur Symons, William Empson and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. He is currently working on a critical edition of George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* for the Jewelled Tortoise Imprint of the MHRA.