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Modernist Metaphysics: Empson, Donne and the Science of Feeling

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Grierson Among the Modernists

There can be few anthologies of verse that have been quite so influential, and in two distinct directions, as Herbert Grierson's *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler* (1921), which is celebrating at the time of writing its centenary.[1] When he produced this volume, Grierson was already well-established as the most eminent professor of the relatively new discipline of English Literature in Scotland (he then held the Chair at Edinburgh); a decade earlier, he had published the defining work of editorial scholarship which was his other great contribution to early modern studies: the two-volume *Poems of John Donne* (1912).[2] In slightly different ways, both of these achievements were monumental. The edition established a reliable text of Donne's poems, using both early printings and manuscript sources; it also offered a long introductory essay together with extensive and learned contextual notes, and so made Donne both accessible and comprehensible to a generation of critics and readers. *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems* was evidently a related project, and reprinted thirty-five of Donne's poems from that earlier

[1] Herbert J. C. Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921).
[2] See David Hewitt, "Grierson, Sir Herbert John Clifford (1866-1960)," in *ODNB*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/33573, accessed 7 July 2021. H. J. C. Grierson, *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912).

edition, this time in the company of enough contemporaries to argue for an aesthetically and intellectually distinct poetic movement. As T. S. Eliot recognised, in what was to be, in its turn, an enormously influential review-essay, "Mr Grierson's book is in itself a piece of criticism, and a provocation to criticism."[3] If the 1912 *Poems* answered to the textual and bibliographical interest in Donne that had been growing throughout the nineteenth century,[4] then *Metaphysical Poems & Lyrics*, with its carefully curated contents and deftly-argued, quietly revisionist framing essay, proved a different kind of spur: it presented Donne as the brightest star in a dazzling constellation, a model for both critical study and poetic imitation. After a brief survey of the immediate impact of Grierson's scholarship, and particularly of Eliot's role in its reception, this essay will turn to the figure on whom perhaps more than any other these volumes made their dual marks: the poet and critic William Empson, who held tenaciously to the Donne he found here through more than half a century of increasingly embattled literary career.

Grierson's title, even as late at 1921, responds directly to the powerful legacy of Samuel Johnson's criticism in reclaiming and repurposing the disparaging term "metaphysical," which Johnson had employed in his *Life of Cowley* (1777) to characterise a form of wit that he thought rather poor: "a kind of *discordia Concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike." "The most heterogeneous ideas," he complains, "are yoked by violence together": a practice now known as the metaphysical conceit, though Johnson never uses the term in precisely this sense.[5] Grierson reimagines Johnson's arid clash of distant notions, his figures of preening obscurity, as a triumphant synthesis of thought and feeling. He acknowledges Donne's "fondness for resemblances in

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[3] T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1932; repr. 1999), pp. 281-91 (p. 281).

[4] For a full and fascinating account, see Dayton Haskin, *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[5] Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), I.200. See Donald J. Greene, "The Term 'Conceit' in Johnson's Literary Criticism," in René Wellek and Alvaro Ribeiro (eds), *Evidence in Literary Scholarship: Essays in Memory of James Marshall Osborn* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 337-52.

thoughts and things apparently the most remote from one another," but finds in its effects a "peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination": not a poetry "without interest and without emotion," as Johnson had it, but one of "direct and vehement utterance."[6] It is passionate Donne that catches hold of Eliot's imagination, and Grierson's characterisation of the poet that he adopts, unacknowledged, to disseminate to the world of letters at large. Eliot's acclamation of the "direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling," which Grierson shows him in Donne, and his diagnosis of a subsequent "dissociation of sensibility"—whereby poetic thought and feeling are increasingly separated from one another to their mutual detriment from the end of the seventeenth century—became influential tenets of literary modernism.[7]

The implications of the essay are interesting. In the self-conscious search for adequate forebears from whom to borrow or perhaps steal, Eliot licenses the leapfrogging of the three disappointing centuries that intervene in establishing a line of succession direct from Donne and the Elizabethan dramatists. Donne is still at this point something of a niche figure, though Grierson hotly rejects the idea that he is "being read only by scholars";[8] nevertheless, there are possibilities of recruitment and projection that Eliot sees in this moment, the opportunity to invent a poetic genealogy that is touched but not straitened by classicism or Christianity, and which has a fascinating, complex, misunderstood modern at its root. Eliot looks at Donne, in other words, and sees an "occult resemblance" quite different from the ones that so exasperated Johnson, though it turns in fact on that critic's sharp designation. "Hence," Eliot explains of "poets or our civilization," "we get something that looks very like the conceit—we get, in fact, a method curiously similar to that of the 'metaphysical poets', similar also in its use of obscure words and of simple phrasing."[9] The word "metaphysical" carries a lot of weight here, as it had for Johnson (who

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[6] Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*, pp. xxiv, xvi; Johnson, *Lives*, I.201; Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*, p. xxiii.

[7] Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," pp. 286, 288.

[8] H. J. C. Grierson, *The Poems of John Donne*, 2nd edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. xlvii. This one-volume edition was first published in 1929.

[9] Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," p. 289.

got it from Dryden) and indeed Grierson; but it is not a historical description, certainly not one that would have been recognised as a school of verse by the poets in question, and nor is it a clear designation of a set of objectively agreed traits or features: Ben Jonson, one of Johnson's chief metaphysicals, does not feature at all in Grierson's anthology.[10] Rather, it is a term of philosophical abstraction ("the first principles of things") half-turned from subject-matter to style and syntax: not a poetic innovation but a critical invention. As Stephen Orgel brilliantly observes, "The reason no theory of metaphysical poetry has proved adequate is that 'metaphysical' really refers not to poetry, but to our sensibilities in response to it."[11]

Understanding "metaphysical" at least partly as a term of reaction or response helps to explain Eliot's acquisitive interest, his desire to annex the effect of Donne, though his own poetic practice was so markedly different ("Mr Eliot's poetry," says F. R. Leavis categorically, "is not like Donne's").[12] Even before 1921, Eliot worried repeatedly at the challenge of fusing thought and feeling in verse, of finding an idiom of sufficient difficulty and dexterity that could yet convey the sensuousness and immediacy of affect. In different voices, he finds the problem insuperably the same: "I have lost my passion," Gerontion notices, though he can't stir himself to anything more than a flattened pang over it; "I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch: / How should I use it for your closer contact?"[13] In Donne, Eliot thought he might have found a model for the bridging of such painful distances,

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[10] It is generally reckoned that Dryden was the first to use the word in anything like its critical sense, when he wrote—in 1693—that Donne "affects the metaphysics […] and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts" (*Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* in *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson, vol. 2, p. 76 [London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1962]). For Jonson as a metaphysical, see Johnson, *Lives*, I.202.

[11] Stephen Orgel, "Affecting the Metaphysics," in *Twentieth-Century Literature in Retrospect*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1971), pp. 225-45 (p. 245).

[12] F. R. Leavis, "The Influence of Donne on Modern Poetry" (1931), in *Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays*, ed. G. Singh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 23-25 (p. 25).

[13] T. S. Eliot, "Gerontion" (1920).

a writer whose intellection served as the vehicle of his passion, not its curb; part of the importance of the *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems* is, as I've suggested, Grierson's introductory essay, which combats the traditional view of Donne as coldly and elaborately cerebral, promising instead a poet whose "range and depth of feeling" sits alongside a "strain of passionate and paradoxical reading," whose writing is the product of a temperament intense, individual and bizarre.[14] For a while, Eliot was entranced; his Clark lectures of 1926 took as their text "Professor Grierson's admirable and almost impeccable anthology," and dealt extensively with Donne.[15] Already by the anniversary year of 1931, however, perhaps finding aspects of Donne resistant to assimilation, he started to frame his earlier excitement as an evolutionary phase. His withered and withering contribution to the *Garland for John Donne* asserts that "Donne's poetry is a concern of the present and the recent past, rather than the future."[16]

Eliot spoke, grandiloquently, for himself. In fact, both as a subject for critical study, and a prompt for creative and imaginative work, Donne—and indeed the debates around the idea of the "metaphysical conceit" that had been reignited by Grierson—remained culturally central in these years; and Eliot's earlier advocacy left a stronger impression than his later apostasy. In the same year as the *Garland* essay, F. R. Leavis considers in more general terms Donne's impact on contemporary writing. His judgement regarding Eliot ("not like") is cited above; he goes on to qualify this, however, by saying that what "future poets (if there are any)" will learn from Eliot is "how to learn from Donne."[17] The young poet Leavis has particularly in mind here is William Empson, who had been enjoying a certain level of celebrity in

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[14] Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*, pp. xviii, xxxiv. "Bizarre" is a favourite word of Grierson's to describe Donne (though it is not so frequent as "passionate"); see pp. xxii, xxiv.

[15] T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 61.

[16] T. S. Eliot, "Donne in Our Time," in Theodore Spencer, ed., *A Garland for John Donne* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1931; repr. 1958), pp. 3-19 (p. 5). Empson called this essay "the kiss of death, the crown of thorns": "In Conversation with Christopher Ricks," *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Allen Lane, 2000), p. 123.

[17] Leavis, "The Influence of Donne," p. 25.

Cambridge through the coterie circulation of some of the verses that would later be published in *Poems* (1935), following the pioneering precocity of his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930).[18] A teenager when *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems* came out, and a little boy of six when Grierson published his edition of Donne, Empson was nonetheless profoundly and persistently influenced by his eventual encounters with these works, probably as an undergraduate. Empson's lifelong defences of the Donne he found shaped in Grierson's pages, often mounted with an aggravating degree of blinkered self-conviction and a pugnacity that bordered on rudeness, represent the highest achievements and gravest difficulties of his critical methodology. As Frank Kermode recognises, "All Empson's writings about Donne are labours of love, and have their own inwardness. Not many professional critics nowadays love poets in this manner."[19] The other expression of this devotion was the poetry Empson wrote, primarily in the 1920s and 30s; it is a comparatively slim body of work, something less than a hundred poems all told, but com–plex, interesting, acclaimed and influential. Empson does not simply imitate Donne, though there are a few moments that look in some lights like pastiche; instead, he confronts an epistemological rupture, analogous to the advent of the new philosophy which unsettled Donne's world, with all the verbal, intellectual and emotional resources learnt from an immersive critical appreciation of the earlier poet's work.[20]

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[18] Leavis goes on to cite one of "Mr William Empson's remarkable poems," asserting that "he would not have written in this way but for Donne" ("The Influence of Donne," p. 25). More recently, this view has been rehearsed by Judith Scherer Herz: "William Empson is the poet-critic who is pretty nearly Donne's best reader and a good poet, too, in some considerable measure because of Donne" ("Under the Sign of Donne," *Criticism*, 43 (2001): 29-58 (44); William Empson, *Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935); William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930): Empson was twenty-four when this volume, an extension of an undergraduate essay for I. A. Richards, was published.

[19] Frank Kermode, "Cold Feet," *LRB* 15 (*22* July 1993): 17.

[20] Geoffrey Hill, for instance, picks up on the poem singled out by for school-of-Donne praise by Leavis ("Arachne") but finds it "dangerously close to pastiche": "Dance, like nine angels, on pin-point extremes" (Geoffrey Hill, "The Dream of Reason," *Essays in Criticism*, 14 [1964]: 91-101 [99]).

For his old tutor, I. A. Richards, he was a "metaphysical in the root sense."[21]

"A secret largeness of outlook": Empson's Donne

Before attempting an assessment of Empson's considerable poetic debts, a brief survey of Donne's place in his career as a critic provides a useful kind of contextualisation. Donne appears in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, most extensively when the "Valediction: Of Weeping" is considered as an example of the fourth kind of ambiguity—"when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author."[22] Empson's treatment is characteristic: he worries at the poem's conceits with incisive logic, glossing deftly, and offering detailed and colloquial paraphrases that break the Gordian knots of abstruse conceit in sometimes quite startling fashion. The image of tears stamped as coins, for example—"Let me powre forth / My teares before thy face"—licenses two paradoxical thoughts; it can be used "because your worth and your beauty are both royal," but the compliment is shadowed by a sense of its own illegitimacy: "because you are public, mercenary, and illegal."[23] Here is one hallmark of Empson's critical prose: a distinctive conversational immediacy that Helen Thaventhiran memorably describes as "his provocative tendency to reword poems in a brash mock-up of direct speech."[24] This tactic runs the risk of distortion, even oversimplification, of course, but there's nothing simple about Empson's reading here: on the contrary, it delights in the

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[21] *Accent*, 1944. Quoted by John Haffenden in his entry on Empson for *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Ian Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 151.

[22] Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 160.

[23] Ibid., p. 167.

[24] Helen Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). The phrase appears in the online precis to Ch. 4 (10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198713425.001.0001) but not in the print edition, where the point is made at slightly greater length; Thaventhiran writes of Empson, "paraphrasing lines of verse in colloquial, even trenchantly demotic, prose that imitates direct 'speech', and describes this as a 'provocation' or shock" (p. 145).

swift fluency of its own interpretive invention, and finds subtleties that amplify rather than explaining away the poem's considerable difficulties. Donne's sequential and overlapping conceits are taken apart piece-by-piece, each cog, wheel and spring weighed and examined, until it seems impossible for the mechanism to fit back into its case.

Even Empson tires of this game eventually ("The machinery of interpretation is becoming too cumbrous"); he moves to a wider perspective, turning the whole thing over in his hands and thinking about its probable circumstances of composition and the story that might best fit its strange movements.[25] Empson finds biographical corroboration important, but he presents it as inspired fancy, rather than scholarly supposition: "I always think of this poem as written before Donne's first voyage with Essex." This casual air allows further speculative leaps; accounting for his sense of the poem's end as faintly impatient or abrupt, its intricate edifice suspiciously reducible to "*please* stop crying," the critic imagines his way into the awkward space of the parting it describes. The lovers' grief is rhetorically unbounded—it is mints of money, globes, seas, tempests—but spatially and temporally bounded by the frame of the poem itself; and one of them, at least, is already eyeing its edges by the final lines. The poem's inner life, its guilty, secret impulse towards travel and freedom, is exposed in the usual ahistorical and demotic fashion; "the language itself has become flattened and explanatory," Empson writes; "so that [Donne] almost seems to be feeling for his hat."[26] Whether or not it is a true reading of the poem (and Empson generously allows for the possibility that he may be "libelling this masterpiece"), this is a brilliant, vivid phrase: "feeling for," as opposed to, say, "reaching for" or "looking for," exactly captures the shifty comedy of the imagined scene—regretful poet with one eye on his inconsolable mistress and the other on the door. Despite the empathetic flourish of its ending, Empson's account of "A Valediction: of Weeping" is neither trivial nor reductive; it is underpinned by a conviction that the poem is not a smart, scholastic ventriloquism, but the genuine vexed result of a social and emotional situation that is both historically individual and therefore irrecoverably lost, but also

[25] Empson, *Seven Types*, p. 171.
[26] Ibid., p. 173.

recurrent and universal and so plausibly reconstructible: the poem's efforts to bridge imagined distances are more than matched by the critic's. Its ambiguity is not accidental, but the only way to convey the complexities of its currents of feeling (Empson calls them "painfully mixed"); its many ways of saying one thing and meaning another are supremely expressive of a particular state of mind, and depend for their right interpretation on a just estimation of the character of the man who wrote it.

This emphasis on character persisted, unfashionably, for decades, and set Empson at odds with most modern criticism; it is almost certainly derived from Grierson, who praises "the fundamental honesty and loyalty of [Donne's] nature," and rejects the idea of poem as rhetorical performance: "The whole spirit of his work risks being misapprehended," he believes, "if one think of him as fundamentally insincere."[27] In the introduction to *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*, too, Grierson offers his own version of a stance which seems to set itself against a certain kind of scholarship: "Poems are not written by influences or movements or sources, but come from the living hearts of men."[28] Empson would certainly have agreed. The controversies that came to define his later career, such as that over Helen Gardner's edition of the *Songs and Sonnets*, are ostensibly fought on textual grounds; but at their heart is this question of what John Donne was like, and how far that can be determined from the textual witness of his poems.[29] For Empson, Grierson's "magnificent" edition represented—almost regardless of the soundness of its editorial principles or the quality of its textual scholarship—a stable text, back from which it was possible to read a fully functional, three-dimensional, charismatic and

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[27] Grierson, *Poems of John Donne*, pp. xxxviii-xxxix.

[28] Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*, p. xvii.

[29] John Donne, *The Elegies; and the Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965). There is no space here to give a full account of the dispute, which was rancorous and extensive; John Haffenden describes it in detail in his introduction to William Empson, *Essays on Renaissance Literature, Vol 1: Donne and the New Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See also Adam Rounce, "'With Love and Wonder': Empson, Donne, and Milton," in *Critical Pasts: Writing Criticism, Writing History*, ed. Philip Smallwood (Bucknell University Press; Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), pp. 145–170; and Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists*, pp. 92-122.

comprehensible Donne: a good poet insofar as he was a good man.[30] Grierson's edition went without saying: "If you start at the first poem in the book," Empson writes airily in "Donne the Space Man" (1957), confident his readers will know which book he means.[31] Graham Hough takes this referential nonchalance as a signature of Empson's conversational, deceptively dilettantish style ("You feel that if he was asked what text of *Paradise Lost* he was using he would say 'the blue one, on the third shelf up behind the door'"): the large assumption of common ground allows for the confident staging of sometimes daring arguments as if they were simply self-evident.[32]

Alterations to Grierson's Donne in respect of readings or dating tended, therefore, to be met with trenchant resistance if not angry repudiation, usually on the basis that the revision proceeds from a failure of sympathy, a misunderstanding of what precisely is at stake; Empson mourns and resents a desecration born of "habitual mean-mindedness" and "moral emptiness."[33] A relatively minor example of this is Gardner's re-assignation of a verse letter to Donne's friend Rowland Woodward from 1603-4 (where Grierson puts it) to 1597-8. "I stick to Grierson's dating of 1603-4, not long after Donne's marriage," Empson declares. His reason? "It seems to me that my opponents fail to imagine the letter as a real one, conveying a real snub, and therefore do not grasp how damaging to Donne's character their date would be."[34] Much the same kind of logic lies behind perhaps the most infamous of Empson's skirmishes, which centres on the elegy "To his Mistris Going to Bed," and spans several journals and some twenty-five years. This poem's frank celebrations of the pleasures of "Full nakedness" were considered too risqué for the 1633 edition of Donne's poems, and so it was published for the first time in the much less textually authoritative edition of 1669; the pre-penultimate line, a culmination of some

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[30] Empson defends a reading offered by "Grierson in his magnificent edition of 1912"; "Rescuing Donne" (1972), in Haffenden (ed.), *Essays on Renaissance Literature* (p. 160).

[31] Empson, "Donne the Space Man," in Haffenden (ed.), *Essays on Renaissance Literature* (p. 95).

[32] Graham Hough, "Graham Hough thinks about William Empson and his Work," *LRB* 6 (21 June 1984).

[33] Empson, "Rescuing Donne," p. 159.

[34] Ibid., p. 185.

excellent arguments for undressing, is given there as "There is no penance due to innocence." This is the reading that Grierson prefers, though he notes that "most MSS" give the line as "There is no penance, much less innocence."[35] Gardner's 1965 edition restores the dominant manuscript reading, a practice largely followed ever since: Empson was outraged.[36] Such cynical cajolery—"telling the lady how much he despises her"—is an affront to the poem's particular moral code and its good sense: not only is this jibe unpleasant, Empson argues, it is evidently "unpractical" in being highly unlikely to advance the rhetorical project of seduction.[37] He finds some historical and textual evidence in support of his and Grierson's more playfully generous line, but the dispute is essentially about who understands Donne's character better; Gardner's revisions of the 1912 text are inadmissible because they make Donne "a feebler kind of man than he was," and threaten to damage the integrity of a figure very deeply and precisely internalised: with changing lines and moving dates, all coherence is gone.[38] Empson's position is vulnerable, because his argument is essentially circular; but his utter conviction is never in doubt.

Donne's Place in Empson's Poems: Imitation & Allusion

The point of this is not so much to determine who had the right of these arguments, or even to think particularly about a critical method that Adam Rounce, in his excellent account, finds "extraordinary (not to say naive and eccentric)," while recognising that "it lays down a challenge [. . .] not easily answered."[39] It is, rather, to demonstrate that Empson's idea of Donne, derived loyally from Grierson and adhered to with dogged devotion throughout his life, was based on scrupulous

[35] Grierson, *Poems of John Donne*, p. 108. See also the introduction to the two-volume edition of 1912, where Grierson writes, somewhat surprisingly, "I suspect the original cast of the line was that pointed to by the MSS" (II.90).
[36] As, for example, in the *Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 2 *The Eleg*ies, ed. Gary A. Stringer *et al.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).
[37] Empson, "Donne in the New Edition" (1966), in Haffenden (ed.), *Essays on Renaissance Literature* (p. 133).
[38] Ibid., p. 146.
[39] Rounce, "With Love and Wonder', p. 158.

alertness to textual subtlety but expressed as a vivid sense of the poet as a person: someone changeable and complicated; someone to admire and emulate; someone *close*. Empson's critical reflections on Donne were not, however, confined to his essays; as Christopher Ricks recognises in thinking about Empson's levels of engagement with the earlier poet, "the most important, sensitive and abiding form that criticism can ever take is that of subsequent creation": Empson's poems, written while he was relatively young (the last major collection, *The Gathering Storm*, was published in 1942 when he was thirty-six), represent modernism's most thorough and abiding response to the Donne of thought and feeling liberated by Eliot from Grierson's pages.[40]

There are circumstantial as well as temperamental reasons for this; Empson started off his university career as a mathematician, and his intellectual interests remained broad. The "new science" of the 1920s—particularly advances in relativity theory, particle physics and astronomy—remade the known universe quite as unsettlingly as had Brahe, Vesalius and Kepler at the turn of the seventeenth century. Donne's cross-disciplinary analogies, his precarious but perspicacious intellectual leaps, held an obvious appeal for a culture negotiating its own seismic shifts in the basis of knowledge; Empson is quite explicit about this parallel when he thinks back to the origins of Donne's influence on his writing:

> In the twenties, when my eyes were opening, it was usual for critics to consider that Donne in his earlier poetry held broad and enlightened views on church and state, that he was influenced by the recent great scientific discoveries, and that he used the theme of freedom in love partly as a vehicle for these ideas [. . .] I was imitating this Donne, the poet as so

[40] Christopher Ricks, "William Empson and the Loony Hooters," in *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 341-53 (p. 341). The unsurpassed account of Empson's poetic debts to Donne, and indeed his poetic practice in general, remains Ricks' "Empson's Poetry," in *William Empson: The Man and His Work*, ed. Roma Gill (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 145-207; for fear of duplication, I've avoided looking in detail at any of the works he considers in that essay.

> conceived, in my own verse at the time with love and wonder.[41]

Here, Empson identifies some of the most resonant qualities of Donne's poetic: a subversive spirit, excitement over the imaginative possibilities of scientific discovery, and an analogising trick of using them to think about the life of the heart (and vice versa). "It was usual for critics" gestures expansively, but Grierson, for whom the term "metaphysical" crucially comprehends the marriage of scholasticism and a "new psychological curiosity [about] love and religion" is clearly discernible in the shadows.[42] Elsewhere, Empson singles out another important characteristic, again one already identified by Grierson: "I can see now," he reflects in 1963, "that I really liked (Donne) because he argued."[43] The 1912 edition transformed understandings of Donne in part because its notes uncovered allusions and demonstrated the strain of logic underpinning the poems' complex imagery; the point is amplified in the introduction (Donne "is talking, arguing, expostulating, playing with his thoughts") and emphasised again in *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*: "Donne is perhaps our first great master of poetic rhetoric, of poetry used [. . .] for effects of oratory rather than of song."[44] The Donne of the 1920s was, therefore, a powerful poetic model along quite different lines from the decorous aesthetics of the generations before, something Eliot had intuited; Empson's achievement was in finding a way to replicate his effects of argument, analogy and conceit in an answering style—without, that is, direct quotation or slavish imitation.

Considering it afterwards, Empson did not believe he had succeeded. "The simple desire to think of something rather like Donne was the basic impulse"; but "I imitated Donne only, which made me

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[41] Empson, "Rescuing Donne," p. 159.

[42] Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*, p. xiv. He also stresses the importance for Donne of "the clash between the older physics and metaphysics on the one hand and the new science of Copernicus and Galileo and Vesalius and Bacon on the other" (p. xiv).

[43] Empson, "Argufying in Poetry," *The Listener*, 22 August 1963, p. 277; quoted in Haffenden, "The Importance of Empson I: The Poems," *Essays in Criticism* 35 (1985): 1-24 (3).

[44] Grierson, *Poems of John Donne*, p. xliii; *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*, p. xxv.

appear pointlessly gawky or half undressed." He remembers the "earnest conviction" with which he set about "imitating" the earlier poet's cast of mind and verbal structures; and, speaking on the radio in 1952, gives a disingenuously dismissive account of the culture of which he had been a central part:

> There was a general movement in the 1920s for the revival of what is called Metaphysical Poetry, mainly the style of John Donne, and mine I think was more direct imitation than anybody else's. This kind of poetry works by what are called 'conceits', following out a comparison ruthlessly or carrying an argument to an absurd extreme, without paying any attention to the demands of 'romantic' poetry, that the theme has to be exalted by the stock suggestions of the 'images' presented, or the words used, so that a general poetical tone is somehow in the atmosphere. [. . .]
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> The object of the style, in my mind and I believe in Donne's mind, is to convey a mental state of great tension, in which conflicting impulses have no longer any barriers between them and therefore the strangeness of the world is felt very acutely.[45]

It is not quite clear here who is ruthless and absurd, though Empson probably means himself; the terms, however, disguise a certain wistful pride in this uncompromising approach: such strenuous and knotty writing is pitched against the kind whose interest is a "general poetical tone [. . .] somehow in the atmosphere," which sounds like a worthy object of contempt. At the heart of this endeavour to write like Donne, as this makes clear, is the idea of the conceit, with its property of making the world strange as a way of reflecting a conflict or extremity of emotion. There are other things Empson picks up from his model; a pitch of startled immediacy sometimes, as in the opening of "Laus Melpomines": "Ah! God thy mock me." Or, slightly more whimsically,

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[45] Empson, *The Review*, June 1963, quoted in Ricks, "Empson's Poetry," p. 183; Empson, *Contemporary Poets*, 1980 (Empson means by this that he imitated no other poets so consciously), quoted in Haffenden, "The Importance of Empson," p. 2; Empson, "Donne the Space Man," p. 78; Empson, quoted in Haffenden, *William Empson, Vol I: Among the Mandarins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 359.

"Letter III": "Re-edify me, moon,"[46] Both of these have something of the direct address, cry or command that animates the Holy Sonnets ("Oh my blacke Soule!"; "Spit in my face you Jewes"), though thoroughly translated. There are, too, isolated moments of embedded quotation or allusion; Empson borrows a fragment or two from Donne for his "Two centos" (p.8), and adopts the word "hydroptic" for his poem "Arachne" ("vain / Hydroptic soap," p. 34). He produces lapidary couplets that feel like Donne at the height of his Elizabethan pomp; this, from "Sea Voyage," concerns the mesmerising patterns made by foaming waves:

> Drawn taut, this flickering of wit would freeze
> And grave, knot-diamond, its filigrees. (p. 21)

The lines imagine the sea's incessant wash and ripple, magnificently described as the world's "wit," suddenly hardened to jewellers' ornaments that inscribe ("grave") their shapes on its surface: the world is contracted to a globe, and the frozen foam becomes its parallels of latitude and meridians of longitude. Secondary and more sombre senses of "grave" shadow the lines with an air of vanitas. Donne's influence here is clear.[47]

Such allusive gesture inevitably shades over into conceit, and often the use Empson makes of these borrowings—even when they seem glancing—is subtle and difficult. The phrase of Donne's that, more than any other, stuck fast in the throat of Modernism was the "bracelet of bright haire about the bone" from "The Relique"(l. 6): Eliot for example is dazzled by it, and returns to fiddle with its "brief words and sudden contrasts" several times, as well as holding it as a symbol of Donne's sensibility: "No contact possible to flesh / Allayed the fever of the bone."[48] Empson's "High Dive," on the surface a very different kind

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[46] *Complete Poems of William Empson*, ed. Haffenden, pp. 27, 45. Future references to the poems will be to this edition, and will be given as parenthetical page references in the body of the text.

[47] The globe conceit appears most prominently in the "Valediction: against weeping" (ll. 10-13), but also in "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" (ll. 6-10) and several sermons.

[48] Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," p. 283. Steven Matthews describes it as "his perennially favourite line," and details other occurrences in his prose (*T.*

of poem, wears its debts to Donne in various ways: it concerns a diver poised on a board above a pool, prompting contemplation of how the actual and potential orders of the universe shift at this moment of indecision between two states. Its frame is mathematical, scientific: the yet-undisturbed water is "irrotational," though its stillness and stability will be ruptured—its knowable nature altered—as the diver breaks its surface (pp. 22-23). It is Donnean in that it advances an argument encompassing elements of science and theology to think about a crisis in emotional state: and it is plagued, too, by the familiar spectre of death and decomposition, watery ripples seen as maggots, an anatomised "muscle on bone," a skull held "pike high" that "mirrors and waits for me." For Veronica Forrest-Thomson, a tough and penetrating reader of Empson's work, this poem not only describes but exemplifies a tense act of bridging: this "conscious assumption of a style that was 'artificial' and 'anachronistic' according to the assumptions of his period," she writes, "implied a specially valued awareness that such a style was the only possible way to maintain the function of the poet, his contact with his literary past and with his ideological present."[49] That literary past is deeply inwoven, here allusively as well as in premise and procedure. The last line of "High Dive" figures the suddenly decisive, plunging diver as a dog dropping something real to chase its reflection: "puppy / Drink deep the imaged solid of the bone." Striking on its own terms, this also carries with it echoes of that talismanic braceleted bone. The notion of misapprehension in a poised, projected future is common to both ("Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen" where "mis-devotion doth command" (ll.17,13)), and recalling Donne's "Relique" allows the later poem to profit from its churchyard setting; the maggots, the muscled bone and socketed skull of earlier lines have already intimated that the puppy's bone didn't come from the butcher's. "High Dive" has its air of swaggering blasphemy too, as the diver regards the water like the creating God: "I Sanctus brood thereover, / Inform *in posse* the tank's

S. Eliot and Early Modern Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 45). See also Josephine Miles, "Twentieth Century Donne," in *Twentieth Century Literature in Retrospect*, ed. Brower, pp. 205-24: "What did Donne give to English poetry in the twentieth century? To my youthful recollection, it was the *bracelet of bright hair about the bone*" (p. 205).

[49] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, "Rational Artifice: Some Remarks on the Poetry of William Empson," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 4 (1974): 225-238 (232).

triple infinite": if the diction and syntax are Miltonic, echoing the invocations to *Paradise Lost*, the personating daring is Donne's: "and I / A something else thereby" (ll. 17-18).[50]

Shared Conceit: The Science of Feeling

These kinds of allusive gestures and verbal parallels demonstrate debts and enrich readings, but the poems do not necessarily depend on them for their effects. The conceit, by contrast, which is procedurally central to both Donne's and Empson's poetics, presents a different order of puzzle. Commonly, definitions of the metaphysical conceit will talk about it in terms of elaborate imagery or the extended metaphor; they will look to Johnson's disobliging remarks, and perhaps explain that such a device is predicated on a doctrine of correspondences, whereby everything in the ordained universe can be illuminatingly twinned or matched with something else, allowing abstract phenomena to be understood in concrete terms. The mind is offered a visualisable bridge, whether gorgeously ornamented or splintered and rickety, from the domestic and the known to the uncharted and the speculative: outward to the stars, or inward to the core of the heart (which sometimes, bafflingly, turn out to be the same thing). More historically alert accounts want, as Empson does, to divorce the conceit from the idea of the image and explain it instead in terms of argument; and to register the opportunities and difficulties of a changing intellectual culture which interrupted established correspondences by casting old ideas about order all in doubt. Donald Green, in addition, points out that much of what we assume to be received wisdom from Johnson, the first to collect and codify these effects, was in fact "a product of the 1930s

[50] John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd edition (London: Longman, 2007): "thou from the first / Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread / Dovelike satst brooding on the vast abyss" (1.19-21); "the rising world of waters dark and deep / Won from the void and formless infinite" (3.11-12). "Something else" is metrically interchangeable with, and therefore strongly hints at, "Jesus Christ"; Empson acknowledges this in "Donne the Space Man," p. 87. See also Joe Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 335-36.

or 1940s, the heyday of 'New Criticism'."[51] Most accounts agree that these figurative affordances can be conventional, but are usually characterised as ingenious, artificial, "far-fetched": more concerned with drawing attention to their own cleverness than with any sense of fitness or internal coherence. The usual example here is the ending of Donne's "Valediction: forbidding mourning," which uses the newfangled scientific device of the compass (invented by Galileo in 1597) to negotiate a parting:

> If they be two, they are two so
> As stiffe twin compasses are two,
> Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
> To move, but doth, if the'other doe.
>
> And though it in the centre sit,
> Yet when the other far doth rome,
> It leanes, and hearkens after it,
> And grows erect, as that comes home.
>
> Such wilt thou be to mee, who must
> Like th'other foot, obliquely runne;
> Thy firmness makes my circle just,
> And makes me end, where I begunne. (ll. 25-36)

One leg of the compasses stands for each of the lovers, who are therefore securely connected, despite the distance that separates them; the "fixed foot" twirls imperceptibly in telepathic response to the peregrinations of the other, and straightens welcomingly as he returns. This is a good archetype for explanatory purposes, because it presents a clear image (the compasses) that can be pursued in various directions to advance an argument answering to an emotional predicament ("parting does not imply separation").

It also neatly exemplifies a feature that is, depending on your perspective, either a grave shortcoming or an exciting opportunity: the vehicle, rather than being in service to the tenor, starts to intrude its

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[51] Donald Green, "The Term 'Conceit' in Johnson's Literary Criticism," in *Evidence in Literary Scholarship: Essays in Memory of James Marshall Osborn*, ed. René Wellek (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 337-51 (p. 339).

logic distortingly (revealingly?) into the world of the poem. There are, in other words, at least two problems with the way this particular conceit works: the gleeful innuendo of "grows erect" pertains to the wrong foot; and, more seriously, the perfect circle that symbolises the bond must either keep the lovers permanently apart, or find itself disastrously bisected at their reunion. Either of these solutions undermines the ostensible narrative purpose of the conceit, which is to comfort the soon-to-be-deserted mistress with a fantasy of perpetual incorporation. Johnson's gruff verdict ("it may be doubted whether absurdity or ingenuity has the better claim")[52] demonstrates an interest in completeness and propriety that is severely tested by the wayward impulses of such a conceit; Empson gently guys the limitations of this mindset in "Invitation to Juno": "Johnson could see no bicycle could go; / 'You bear yourself, and the machine as well'" (p. 12). But it is precisely this brokenness, the tension between the poem's competing economies, that attracted modernist poets to the conceit, because of the intensity and complexity of feeling it is capable of generating. In his account of "Valediction: Against Weeping," discussed above, Empson recognises that the impediment represented by the poet's "painfully mixed" emotion—sorrow at parting, guilty delight at the prospect of freedom—is what tangles that poem's figures: "the variety of irrelevant, incompatible ways of feeling about the affair that were lying about in his mind were able so to modify, enrich and leave their mark on this plain lyrical relief as to make it something more memorable."[53] The conceit in such cases has an independent presence and an imaginative life of its own: metaphorical relations which refuse to resolve are more, not less, expressive because of it.

There's one last feature of the conceit to draw out before turning to its place in Empson's verse. Katrin Ettenhuber brilliantly associates it with the rhetorical term catachresis, described by George Puttenham as "the figure of abuse," by John Prideaux as "far-fetched," and by Donne's friend and boon companion John Hoskins as "somewhat more desperate then a *Metaphore*": "[T]his is a vsuall figure with the fine conversants of our tyme," he goes on, "when they strayne for an extraordinary

[52] Johnson, "Life of Cowley," p. 213.
[53] Empson, *Seven Types*, p. 173.

phrase."[54] This argues for a level of deliberation in the way the conceit often seems to misfire; and it has a further implication for the kinds of poetic functions it might perform. Ettenhuber draws attention particularly to the notions of physical distance, foreign voyaging and remoteness bound up with the idea of the "far-fetched": the conceit, itself, travels beyond the bounds of propriety in its laboured ingenuities, but that is often because of the extreme distances, whether actual, emotional or philosophical, it is rhetorically required to bridge. Donne's valediction poems find in the uneasily suturing powers of the conceit a way to think around their own desolate proposition that "thou and I are nothing then, when on a divers shore" (l. 9): "The act of recovering an obscure conceit," Ettenhuber writes, "of embodying thought in far-fetched rhetorical places to which the lover's minds can travel, compensates for the 'Absence' of more tangible forms of contact."[55] Empson, too, turns to the mechanisms of metaphysics to confront the unthinkable wastes of distance; "The World's End" (p. 23), an early poem, is concerned with a conflicted relationship; his models here are what he thought of as Donne's planetary poems—those that imagine two lovers as, or on, separate planets, involving the most ungraspable distances of them all. In his essay "Donne the Space Man," Empson lays out his theory that Donne as a young man believed quite seriously in the possibility of space travel, and thought there might be other inhabited planets in the universe, one of which he was quite keen to colonise with his mistress—Donne "was interested in getting to another planet," and "brought the idea into all his best love poems."[56] Whether or not this is true, the concept was profoundly important for Empson both critically and creatively; as Katy Price observes, it was a "vital and unchanging source of inspiration to Empson from his late

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[54] Katrin Ettenhuber, "'Comparisons are Odious?' Revisiting the Metaphysical Conceit in Donne," *Review of English Studies* 62 (2010): 394-413 (401, 395).
[55] Ibid., p. 410.
[56] Empson, "Donne the Space Man," p. 78. His examples are extensive, and include "The Good Morrow" ("where can we finde two better hemispheares"), and "The Extasie" ("Wee are / The intelligences, they the spheare"). For a thorough exploration of Empson's position, see Stuart Christie, "Empson the Space Man: Literary Modernism Makes the Scalar Turn," *Comparative Literature: East & West* 1 (2017): 25-39.

teens until his seventies."[57] "The World's End" begins with an invitation which is equally far-fetched:

> 'Fly with me then to all's and the world's end
> And plumb for safety down the gaps of stars;
> Let the last gulf or topless cliff befriend,
> What tyrant there our variance debars?'

The lovers, like all lovers, trust in the intensity and particularity of their emotion to create a new world; instantly and dizzyingly, that commonplace is thrown into the jaws of a conceit that takes it literally: they are transported to the dark spaces between the stars of a universe that, unlike Donne's, is governed by Einstein's theory of relativity.

Here, the tyrant-figure gives some impulsion to what becomes a fairly desperate bid for escape; and already before the first stanza ends, the couple's "variance"—disguised by a characteristic complication of syntax—raises troubling questions. Variance from one another, or from every other creature on the inhabited earth? That line—"What tyrant there our variance debars?"—responds to the last stanza of Marvell's "Definition of Love," a deliberate reworking of Donne's planetary conceits, which Grierson had printed in the *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*:

> Therefore the Love which us doth bind
> But Fate so enviously debars,
> Is the Conjunction of the Mind,
> And Opposition of the Stars.[58]

Marvell's poem dispassionately laments its lovers' severance, reunion impossible unless the earth should collapse in on itself and be squashed flat ("Be cramp'd into a *Planisphere*"), because they are so truly parallel they can never meet. Empson's star-crossed lovers receive a shock

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[57] Katy Price, *Loving Faster than Light: Romance and Readers in Einstein's Universe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 161. Others of Empson's poems that treat this theme include "Camping Out," "Earth has Shrunk in the Wash," and "Letter III."

[58] Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*, pp. 77-8. For this poem's relationship with Donne, see Nigel Smith (ed.), *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (London: Longman, 2007), p. 107.

which realises this playful metaphysical thought-experiment when they fly from tyrant Fate to the imaginative realms of space: no longer welcomingly infinite as it was for Donne and Marvell, a metaphorical match for the ardent extremes of love, it proves instead—paradoxically, unthinkably—claustrophobic and imprisoning: "Space is like earth, rounded, a padded cell / Plumb the stars' depth, your lead bumps you behind." The slapstick comedy of this line should not detract from its serious wonderment: Empson discovered in the works of Sir Arthur Eddington that the universe, though of a "vastness" that "appals the mind," was "boundless though not infinite": and that rays of light would, theoretically, if they travelled for long enough, simply 'converge again at the starting point." No matter that this would take some "1,000 million years": this notional constraint destroys forever any chance of freedom.[59]

A hundred million years can be compassed in a heartbeat by a poet, and a universe that is bounded but endless proves little use for fleeing lovers; if they "plumb for safety down the gaps of stars" they will end up where they began: bumped behind. The relativity conceit expresses a hopelessness beyond what could have been imagined by the speaker at the poem's opening, and the logic of its argument is inexorable: if the fabled space of the world's end can't exist because matter will always eventually return to its starting-point, then the end has already happened: is everywhere.

> Each tangent plane touches one top of earth
> Each point in one direction ends the world.
>
> Apple of knowledge and forgetful mere
> From Tantalus too differential bend.
> The shadow clings. The world's end is here.
> The place's curvature precludes its end.

[59] Eddington was a significant figure in Cambridge during Empson's undergraduate years, and he was much influenced by his works of popular science; these quotations are from *Science and the Unseen World* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1929), p. 9; and *Space Time and Gravitation: An Outline of the General Relativity Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), pp. 159-61.

"End" is everywhere, too, in these last lines; its sound anticipated in "bend," then repeated so that the final rhyme has, like the quirk of the universe it describes, happened already. The extravagant extension of thought that fits its subject—far-fetched rhetoric for physical distances that map deep emotional rifts—is recognised by Ricks as an inherited trait: "I think it characteristic too of Empson, as of Donne," he writes, "that his metaphors are not reduced to blank obedience but are allowed to ask for themselves a richer presence."[60] Relativity theory, it turns out, is even more stubbornly assertive than a pair of compasses. The vehicle of the conceit has come to dominate its tenor completely, interstellar lovers left behind as the poem puzzles out the bleak implications of its new philosophy; if they surface in these old tales of aspiration and temptation rightly punished—Eve, Tantalus, Satan—it is as shadowed and secret selves, the history of their love inscribed in the impossible physics of the stars. There are some contradictions that poetry cannot resolve.

Epilogue: Extasies

Even before he stopped writing them, Empson sometimes got tired of these riddling complexities: "My pleasure in the simile thins"; "You are a metaphor and they are lies."[61] But his verse is, among other things, a demonstration of what a thoroughly inward and assimilated reading of Grierson's and Eliot's Donne looked like for modernist poetics, both in preoccupation and procedure: in deftly, almost obsessively analogising verse, Empson exposes the implications of a new scientific understanding for the human passion that looks fragile, infinitesimal, in its light. For his most patient and careful reader, John Haffenden, "His poems are metaphysical in the strict sense, based not on what man's spirit might suppose about the world, but what the understanding of reality compels us to consider": though their elaborate, obscurantist conceits are eye-catching, the poems think hard about real complexities of feeling, which remain their gravitational centre.[62] For Empson, as for

[60] Ricks, "Empson's Poetry," p. 186.
[61] "Letter III," p. 45; "Letter V," p. 60.
[62] Haffenden, "The Importance of Empson," p. 5. Graham Hough also stresses this point: "It is often the case that what comes across to most readers as an

Donne, writing poetry was chiefly an occupation of youth, and both poets tended to be a little disparaging about their efforts in subsequent years; Izaak Walton claims Donne wished his poems "had been abortive, or so short liv'd, that his own eyes had witnessed their funerals"; Empson doesn't go that far, but he does say "how right I was to stop writing. If I'd gone on it would have got appallingly boring."[63] Perhaps as a result, Empson is now, as Donne once was, seen as an over-intellectualizing writer, delighted with his conceited cleverness, all thought and no feeling; this, as it proved the first time, is a misjudgement, and the emotional complexity of these difficult, playful lyrics, and their influence on subsequent generations of poets, demands a more serious attention.

In drawing this exploration to a close, I want to offer one final brief comparative reading of two poems with the same title. Empson's "The Extasie" has a curious history: it was written in the late 1920s, and the only copy submitted for publication in an anthology of verse which was subsequently abandoned; it was not recovered and published until 1989, after the author's death.[64]

> Walking together in the muddy lane
> The shallow pauses in her conversation
> Were deep, like puddles, as the blue sky;
> So thin a film separated our firmaments.
>
> We who are strong stand on our own feet.
> You misunderstand me. We stand on the reflections of our feet.
> Unsupported, we do not know whether to fall upwards or downwards,
> Nor when the water will come through our shoes. (p. 28)

This short lyric explicitly invites consideration with Donne's great poem; there, the urgent and impossible impulse of spiritual and sexual love, the desire to breach the boundaries of the body and mix essences with the beloved other, is staged around a hushed tableau on a violet-covered bank. Two untenanted bodies look and touch hands, silent, as

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intricate intellectual puzzle was experienced as a painful knot of feeling" (*LRB*, 21 June 1984).

[63] "In Conversation with Christopher Ricks," *Poems*, ed. Haffenden, p. 125.

[64] For the full story, see Haffenden's introduction to *Poems*, p. xli.

their dangerously truant souls interinanimate in a higher realm, drifting starwards; then begins the slow declension back to the clumsy flesh, consecrated now by this spiritual communion. It is a poem of argument, philosophically alert, but fundamentally concerned with the "defect" of "lonelinesse" (l.44), and with the tormenting limitations of the contact possible even to lovers. Being alone together is a condition Empson touches on elsewhere with moving grace, when he writes of "the waste even in a fortunate life, the isolation even of a life rich in intimacy."[65] In this poem, after Donne, a note of dry comedy is to the fore. The setting is transposed from a floral idyll to a "muddy lane," and desultory chat replaces the sepulchral silence; rather than earthbound bodies and aerial intelligences, the lines of separation are on a lower plane: the puddled surface of the track figures the deceptive, impassable barrier between the two people walking along it ("So thin a film separated our firmaments"). They look down, and therefore up simultaneously, such is the property of a reflective surface; but Empson's opening catachresis of a doubled simile—the contradictory shallow pauses are deep like puddles, which are not deep, unless you see the sky in them—interrupts any idea of perfect mirroring he might have found in Donne's original. The second stanza turns on a word—misunderstand—which is almost certain to be misunderstood. If you stand on a puddle you will, in a sense, stand on (the reflections of) your own feet, which cliché of self-sufficiency has been brutally reanimated: the same is true in reverse of those reflections, which therefore stand under, or understand, you. To mis-under-stand ("You misunderstand me") is a failure to mix souls, to swap reflections: you can only ever stand under yourself, and this complete and insuperable physical separation, determined by the laws of the universe, implies an emotional separation Donne's "Extasie" cannot admit. The conceit is pursued to a whimsical extreme—reflections are not, after all, substantial things to be standing on—before being bathetically abandoned: "Unsupported, we do not know whether to fall upwards or downwards, / Nor when the water will come through our shoes."

Empson's "Extasie" is a poem deeply and cheerfully indebted to Donne's, but it is, at the same time, something entirely new: not an

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[65] Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 12.

imitation so much as a rethinking inside out of its premises, Ricks' act of criticism as "subsequent creation."[66] As so much of his other verse, it is serious about the predicament it considers, as well as the figurative means by which it does so: the poem makes an argument with learning, ingenuity and considerable rhetorical facility, responding at once to the conditions of existence, the promptings of the heart, and a literary past which seemed, in the 1920s, excitingly close at hand. Empson's modernist metaphysics are less well-known than Eliot's, but they are a deeper and more scrupulous attempt to bridge the separating centuries, even if some difficulties remain. "His philosophy cannot unify these experiences. It represents the reaction of his restless and acute mind on the intense experience of the moment." What Grierson wrote in 1921 of Donne might stand as well as a comment on his truest acolyte; "Passionate thinking is always apt to become metaphysical."[67]

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[66] Ricks, "William Empson and the Loony Hooters," p. 341.
[67] Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems*, p. xxviii, xvi.