Book Reviews

Comptes rendus

William Empson. *Essays on Renaissance Literature. Volume One: Donne and the New Philosophy*. Ed. John Haffenden. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xvi, 296.

"Easy grace," William Empson wrote of one of John Donne's love poems, "takes a lot of struggle. . ." (p. 173). He might have added, "So also does attentive critical reading."

Struggle, in the first instance, with other critics whose refusal to contextualize their readings beyond quite narrow limits permits a reimposition of orthodox pieties upon canonical texts that demand a much fuller range of responses; and struggle, as well, with textual critics and editors whose masking of ideological prejudice as bibliographical principle lends further authority to the effacing of textual and historical complexities.

As John Haffenden testifies, the easy grace of Empson's essays on Donne — their casually elegant turns of phrase, the manner in which a seemingly inconsequential accumulation of perceptions is suddenly revealed as adding up to an argument of almost syllogistic rigour — was the result of sustained hard labour, of pushing his thoughts, in many cases, through a dozen or more revisions. If the process by which Empson composed these essays was ceaselessly iterative, their cumulative impact is also, in another sense, iterative. Although the essays gathered here date from 1949 to the last decade of Empson's life (he died in 1984), they are recurrently concerned with defining ever more clearly his reasons for resisting the dominant tendencies of mid- to late-twentieth-century criticism and textual criticism of Donne.

Empson was determined to break what in his 1974 Clark Lectures he called "the iron rule of T. S. Eliot men" — those who followed Eliot in insisting that Donne was "no sceptic" (I, 4). He was equally opposed to Allen Tate's claim that Donne "knew nothing . . . of the later open conflict between the two world-views, science and religion" (p. 5), to Rosemund Tuve's reduction of Donne's astronomical conceits to a catalogue of tropes ("rather like," as Empson says, "spare parts of machinery" [p. 6]), to Frank Kermode's view that the "new philosophy" serves in Donne's love poems

merely to illustrate attitudes that have no bearing on what he might have thought or believed outside the realm of fiction, and to John Carey's interpretation of the love poetry as "almost pathological" in its "urge to impose power" (p. 11). And in two of the most closely-argued essays in this volume, Empson takes issue with the manner in which Helen Gardner's editorial work on Donne filtered the poems through the distorting screen of her own pious orthodoxy.

Empson's consistent position was that Donne was well aware of the radical implications of the theories of Copernicus and of Giordano Bruno, and that this awareness is evident in his willingness to confer the attributes of the Logos on mere mortals, in his representations of lovers as having entered a condition in which (like the putative inhabitants of other worlds) they are "beyond the claims of church and state" (p. 138), and in his eroticizing of religious language so that, "instead of dignifying the individual by comparison to the public institution, he treats the institution as only a pallid imitation of the individual" (p. 24). In these respects, as John Haffenden puts it in his excellent introduction to this book, Empson maintained that Donne's best poems, "far from being the fruits of waggishness . . . are seriously sceptical, rebellious, and indeed revolutionary" (p. 2).

Empson's reward for taking these positions was to be treated by most other critics either with silence or else with the dismissive contempt expressed by John Carey in a passing swipe at what he called Empson's "loopy seizures" (p. 1). In a letter written in 1973, Empson plaintively asked, "Why will nobody believe a word I say about Donne? The argument about the Songs and Sonnets looks to me so clear, and it does not get refuted, only treated with silent passive depression. . ." (p. 58). Recent studies of the ideological orientations of the academic institution of criticism like Michael Bristol's *America's Shakespeare, Shakespeare's America* may suggest that we are beginning to feel a need to respond to questions of this kind, at least when they are posed by critics of such obvious distinction.

I believe that this book has an importance far beyond its undoubted value to Donne scholars. Given Empson's importance as an exemplary close reader of literary texts, and in that sense a precursor of the New Criticism, these essays may help to remind historians of literary scholarship that the link forged by that movement between close reading and socio-cultural conservatism and moral stodginess was a contingent rather than a necessary one. Moreover, practitioners of textual criticism can benefit from the example of Empson's incisive critiques of Helen Gardner's editorial work. Like A. E. Housman two generations earlier, Empson entertains the reader with flashes of coruscating wit — as when he allows that Donne's editor "has some skill . . . in imitating Donne at his worst, when he is struggling to obscure the obvious" (p. 138), or tweaks her for "breaking one of the rules of scholarly editors — the final text authorized by a poet must be printed, even if he changed the original draft under threat of torture" (p. 165). But he is more interesting for his skill in conjecturally reconstructing the processes through which manuscript variants may have arisen. Empson can at times be faulted for too confidently conflating his own habits of mind with those of

Donne. However, his insistence on an alert contextualizing of the concerns evident in the primary texts, in relation especially to the institutions and the ideological forces that can plausibly be said to have shaped the paths of textual transmission, seems to me exemplary.

John Haffenden's editorial documentation is unfailingly helpful, and his substantial introduction is particularly useful in demonstrating the extent to which subsequent scholarship has confirmed Empson's view of the radical implications of Donne's early poetry. Even one of Empson's most *outré* suggestions — that of an analogy between ideas expressed in Donne's love poetry and the heresies of religious radicals like the Family of Love — can draw support from the work of scholars like Nigel Smith. Haffenden remarks that Donne need have gone no further than Giordano Bruno for access to such heresies. But as is being increasingly recognized, the Hermetic currents upon which Bruno drew had a pronounced impact upon sixteenth-century religious radicalism, from Caspar Schwenkfeld in the 1520s to Servetus at mid-century and Valentin Weigel a decade or two later.

Empson's work on Donne has, finally, a moral as well as intellectual astringency that I find invigorating. In "Rescuing Donne," first published in 1972, he writes:

I am anxious not to give too feeble an impression of the loathing with which I regard the present image of [Donne]. The habitual mean-mindedness of modern academic criticism, its moral emptiness combined with incessant moral nagging, its scrubbed prison-like isolation, are particularly misleading in the case of Donne; in fact, we are the ones who need rescuing, not the poet (p. 159).

It might be comforting to read this as an attack upon a kind of criticism that has been happily superseded. I would prefer to take these words as a warning against habits of mind that remain a permanent temptation.

MICHAEL KEEFER, *University of Guelph*