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Michael Wood. *On Empson*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2017. (£18.95 Hd.). Pp 212. ISBN 978-0-691-163-765.

In the Edward W. Said 2012 memorial lecture delivered at The American University of Cairo, literary critic Michael Wood, Professor Emeritus at Princeton University, evokes, if somewhat tentatively, quoting late Professor Said, the dismal prospect of a “world without literature,” implicitly, of a “world without criticism.” Sadly, in the radically changing landscape of digital literacy, the prospect of literature ceasing to exist, indeed of books not being read at all, loses the quality of a projection and becomes a bland, unexceptionable and ‘inoffensive’ expectation. For not only are literary modes these days no longer central to Western culture, but the new technologies and digital texts populating cyberspace have made the once intensely debated Western canon utterly redundant. A dying breed themselves, most literary critics will have probably given up on the mission of reviving the myth that narratives, writing and style can ‘change the world.’ Once the province of conceptual and textual frameworks and methodologies, philological and textual scholarship, of literary principles, techniques and theories of forms, criticism today has become a narrow specialism, a niche for *littérateurs*.

A leading literary critic, comparatist and biographer, Wood adopts a lighthearted, intuitive, albeit eclectic stance in his appraisal of Empson’s literary genius. His is an emulative, congenial approach, creative and empathetic, certainly one faithful to the rendition and replication of Empson’s style. Focusing on Empson’s views on descriptive versus analytic criticism and his perspective on the primacy of the ‘words on the page,’ the author makes a convincing case for Empson’s belief that literature cannot be studied outside the realm of the historical and social context in which it comes to life, and hence, for Empson’s problematical association with New Criticism. Revisiting Empson’s main output, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, *The Structure of Complex Words*, and *Milton’s God*), his *Collected Poems* and the posthumous *The Face of the Buddha* (2005), Wood engages in close

readings of a significant body of texts, in an attempt to capture the poet-critic dialogue in Empson's writing. The way in which the two dimensions of Empson's personality, his unique critical and creative flair inform each other offers by all means an inspiring interpretive angle, yielding to a revealing and productive type of poetic reasoning. While a marked, distinct ingredient of his greatness, being a writer in his own right, is not a defining quality of Empson's eminence, Wood concedes:

Not all critics are writers – perhaps, most of them are not – and some of them are better when they don't try to be. We can say what we mean in almost any number of ways, and Empson would still have been a great critic if he had written differently, or worse – if he had not been a writer at all in my last sense. But he would not have been the critic (and poet) that he was. If his Macbeth was not fumbling among the powers of darkness, he would not be Empson's Macbeth. (7)

Still, it is Empson's writerly craft, his conscious 'literariness' that Wood strives to illuminate from within the poetic logic of both the primary and secondary texts. And indeed, rather than conceptual and thematic areas, the organising principle of Wood's critical endeavour is linguistic awareness across genres and registers, as he tentatively indicates:

The Empson I would like to conjure up in this book is a *writer*, both as a critic and a poet, and I need to pause over some of the meanings of the term. We use it broadly to name a person who does writing of any kind – a screenwriter, a ghostwriter, an underwriter, even the kind of painter who is a sign writer. We use it rather obnoxiously to mean someone who makes plays or poems or novels, as distinct from a mere journalist or author of memos and memoirs. But there is another sense, one which involves no particular genre or form of writing, which signals only a long intimacy with language, a feeling that you have to care for it and can't go anywhere without it. (6)

Consequently, what may at first appear as a reading somewhat limited in scope, constative and loosely structured, indeed impressionistic at times, proves to be a generous undertaking. Wood's gentle touch, his gracious stylistic analyses possess a rare agreeability quality, more importantly, they are effective in accounting for Empson's poetic license:

For this and other reasons I see the Macbeth passage not as a model – who could follow it? – but as a spectacular instance of what criticism

can do, of how personal and imaginative it may be while remaining very close to the text. If it doesn't look like much of the criticism we know, it is because it isn't. (5)

Nor is Wood's critical methodology any 'ordinary,' familiar one. A genuinely close reader of Empson's canon, Wood favours miscellany over the systematic, conventional linear approach, considering a medley of texts. This type of enquiry creates the impression of a free-flowing continuum driven by an entirely intuitive motivating power, rather than the usual critical design. In all fairness, the volume does make this transparent from the outset, in the note of laconic reflexivity that the title betrays; clearly being envisaged as reflections on Empson, rather than a formal examination of his legacy.

If there is one particularly dissatisfying aspect which could turn into a demerit of this otherwise ingenious and inspiring work, it is the redundancy of some of Wood's value judgments, which, for all the refinement of the author's manner, cannot but appear repetitive, inconsequential and deceptively 'easy.' Thus, descriptive statements and generalisations of the kind: "Empson says" or "Empson writes," "Empson gives a wonderful example of how we understand others by seeing not only what they (or we) might or might not have done but that they (we) have stories ready for both options" (91), "this must be wonderfully offhand" (97), abound. In absence of an appropriate commentary, some of Wood's textual illustrations inevitably read as one long paraphrase or quote after another. And when the paraphrase follows a long quote, the redundancy effect is especially prominent. Reading of this kind may not elicit a cohesive holistic vision, as some would argue, yet it is certain to provide an insightful and highly perceptive sense of the compelling strength and uniqueness of the William Empson experience.

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