This chapter offers a schematic account of William Empson’s approach to literary reading, noting that Empson’s first major interpretative project, the Cambridge long essay that became *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, was conceived after Empson read Laura Riding’s and Robert Graves’s analysis of the quarto version of Shakespeare’s sonnet 129. The chapter then treats two post-Empson readings of sonnet 35, a poem never discussed in detail by Empson, focusing both on the reading possibilities Empson opens up and on the ways two strong readers of the sonnets, Stephen Booth and Helen Vendler, have responded to the sonnets and to Empson’s example as a reader of them. The chapter closes with reflections on the relation between lyric and speculative biography.

Standing on the shoulders of theoretically inclined recent commentators on Empson like Christopher Norris and Paul Fry (Norris 1978; Fry 1991; Norris and Mapp 1993: 1–120), and profiting by the recent account of the first half of Empson’s life in John Haffenden’s new biography (Haffenden 2005: 2–5), it is possible to see William Empson’s career as following up the consequences of two broad claims about reading literature:

(a) complex and multiple meanings can be reasonably read out of particular textual moments by close attention to their details;
(b) these meanings must ultimately take shape in the reader’s mind as part of an author’s struggle to live well, often a struggle to understand, embrace, combat, or reconcile himself or herself to particular opportunities and cruelties of the social, moral, or natural order.

I’ll refer back to these as (a) and (b) below.

Before turning to the role of Shakespeare’s sonnets in the formation and elaboration of these claims or themes in Empson’s work, it may be helpful to reflect on what they demand in a reader who aspires to be Empsonian. To elaborate on claim (b): reading involves the reader in an effort to understand an author’s life, but the struggle to live
well must take place on the reader's side as well for process (b) to be complete, in part because no one who is not attempting to sort out the opportunities and cruelties of his or her own culture can sympathize effectively and imaginatively with such struggles on an author's part. As Empson remarked, "you can only understand people by having such a life in yourself to be their mirror" (Bevis 2904). Process (a) calls on the reader to develop an elastic, often playful, willingness to juggle options and enjoy the complexity of understandable expression, but also to exercise a rigorous belief that reading involves making sense of things as exactly as possible. Put more concisely, to do (a) the reader must combine exquisite sensitivity with belligerent rationality. Thus the fully equipped reader ("gear ed up," as Empson would say, to do both (a) and (b) at once) needs good cheer, moral sympathy, and an interest in resonance, as well as a highly developed faculty for logical and unsentimental exegesis.

It is evident that (a) and (b) pull in somewhat different directions, but it would be a mistake (though not an uncommon one) to imagine that Empson's career moves alphabetically from (a) to (b). I shall be demonstrating below that both strands are evident and well developed in Seven Types of Ambiguity, Empson's first book, published in 1930. It makes some sense to suggest that after The Structure of Complex Words (1937; first published in 1951) Empson largely sets aside (a), which he regarded as having been in many ways misappropriated by the New Critics, for (b). More (b) and less (a) allows the later Empson to polemicize vigorously, on the one hand against men academic explication that ignores the possibility of genuinely meaningful authorial intention, and on the other against historicist orthodoxies that rule out the possibility of genuinely surprising meaning; the latter polemic has been emphasized recently by Richard Strier (1995: 7–26). Nonetheless it remains true that all of Empson's later work from Milton's God through Using Biography involves passages of remarkably tight analysis, however far the general arguments are from theorizing local meaning.

The way (a) and (b) intertwine at the beginning of Empson's career can be seen, more or less symbolically, in a famous passage from the opening chapter of Seven Types of Ambiguity, perhaps the first passage in which new readers of that book become certain that they were dealing with a writer of genius. I quote at length:

Not unlike the use of a comparison which does not say in virtue of what the two things are to be compared is the use of a comparative adjective which does not say what its noun is to be compared with...I shall give an example from one of Mr. Waley's Chinese translations, to insist upon the profundity of feeling which such a device may enshrine.

Swiftly the years, beyond recall,
Solemn the stillness of this spring morning.

The human mind has two main scales on which to measure time. The large one takes the length of a human life as its unit, so that there is nothing to be done about life, it is of an animal dignity and simplicity, and must be regarded from a conceivable and fatalistic point of view. The small one takes as its unit the conscious moment, and it is from this that you consider the neighbouring space, an activity of the will, delicacies of social
tone, and your personality. The scales are so far apart as almost to give the effect of defining two dimensions; they do not come into contact because what is too large to be conceived by the one is still too small to be conceived by the other. Thus, taking the units as a century and the quarter of a second, their ratio is ten to the tenth and their mean is the standard working day, or taking the smaller one as five minutes, their mean is the whole of summer. The reprise and self-command given by the use of the first are contrasted with the speed at which it shows the years to be passing from you, and therefore with the fear of death; the fever and multiplicity of life, as known by the use of the second, are contrasted with the calm of the external space of which it gives consciousness, with the absolute or extra-temporal value attached to the brief moments of self-knowledge with which it is concerned, and with a sense of security in that it makes death so far off.

Both these time-scales and their contrasts are included by these two lines in a single act of apprehension, because of the words swift and still. Being contradictory as they stand, they demand to be conceived in different ways; we are enabled, therefore, to meet the open skier with answering stability of self-knowledge; to meet the brevity of human life with an ironical sense that it is morning and springtime, that there is a whole summer before winter, a whole day before night.

I call swift and still here ambiguous, though each is meant to be referred to one particular time-scale, because between them they put two time-scales into the reader's mind in a single act of apprehension. But these scales being both present, are in some degree used for each adjective, so that the words are ambiguous in a more direct sense; the years of a man's life seem swift even on the small scale, like the mist from the mountains which "gathers a moment, then scatters"; the morning seems still even on the large scale, so that this moment is apocalyptic and a type of heaven. (Empson 1947: 23-4)

These two scales parallel, though they are not identical to, the intensity of the textual moment and the understandability of the text as part of a whole life, itself in relation to yet larger structures of belief and custom, that I have identified above as (a) and (b). Moreover, we can see both (a) and (b) in this passage, though they are clearer in the full text. There is no invocation of authorial biography in Empson's treatment of a translation of a Chinese text that is not credited with either an author or a date. Nonetheless, something like an authorial intention is created by treating the poem as contemplating, and enabling its readers to contemplate, with the goal of making experience more bearable, a general or even universal biological contrast between a moment of perception and the whole lifetime of a human being. Moreover, the passage contrasts short and long time — creating us to some dazzling if obscure calculations in the process — while ignoring the intermediate time structures that, for people like Empson and us, stand between the conscious moment and the lifetime, whether we are looking back in memory or forward in anticipation. I have in mind such structures as projects, career phases, epochs of relationships, periods of institutional affiliation, etc. In ignoring such intermediate structures, Empson parallels in a rather uncanny way his general lack of interest in the larger formal and generic traditions — the inherited structures within which artists work — that might be seen as intermediate between particular passages and grand struggles in the life of the author. Empson pays relatively little attention to
most things that lie between (a) and (b) in the ways most literary critics approach literary texts.

Empson does comment wonderfully on form, but it tends to be local form, as can be seen in his discussion early in Seven Types of the predominant absence of ambiguity in *The Faerie Queene*. Meditating on "the dreamy repetition of the great stanza perpetually pausing at its close," Empson comments wistfully that "stanzas may ... be classified by the grammatical connections of the crucial fifth line, which must give a soft bump to the dying fall of the line: quinain, keep it in the air, and prevent it from falling apart from the rest of the stanza" (Empson 1947: 33). He goes on to perform such a classification in a meaty paragraph that anatomizes a number of the kinds of voice and pace to be found in Spenser's epic, and then adds the following observation:

The size, the possible variety, and the finery of this unit give something of the blankness that comes from fixing your eyes on a bright spot; you have to yield to it very completely to take in the variety of its movement, and, at the same time, there is no need to concentrate the elements of the situation into a judgment as if for action. As a result of this, when there are ambiguities of idea, it is whole civilisations rather than details of the moment which are their elements; can pour into the even dreamwork of his fairysland Christian, classical, and chivalrous materials with an air, not of ignoring their differences, but of holding all their systems of values floating as if at a distance, so as not to interfere with one another, in the prolonged and diffused energies of his mind. (Empson 1947: 34)

Here one can see Empson moving from (a) to (b) by way of trying to imagine the creative process of a great poet whose mind would be so untroubled as not to produce local ambiguities of diction. Empson returns to the matter in 1952 in a radio talk entitled "Edmund Spenser: Is He the 'Poet's Poet'?"; after again discussing Spenser's capacity to extend himself (often by placed self-contradiction) rather than concentrating his differences with himself in local complexity or ambiguity, he ends that talk by repeating, with evident admiration for his own youthful productions, this paragraph (Empson 1987: 247–9).

Empson's (a) and (b) premises, seen as a way to map lyric, may seem old-fashioned - though they seem less old-fashioned than they would have fifteen or twenty years ago, before books like Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* or Karolynne Duncan-Jones's *Urgent Shakespeare* reminded us all of the possibilities of speculatively reading authorial biography out of a mixture of facts and fictions. Nonetheless, it is premise (b) that may seem controversial; premise (a), as a habit of reading or thought, is not overly ideological. But premise (b), with its interest in the author as an imagined self, located in both an individual and a collective history, clearly is an ideological commitment, though a flexible one. On its basis Empson in his own time polemicized against formalist anti-intentionalism, and Empson now seems to weigh in from the grave on how we should go about imagining the subject's position in discourse. Given this, we might expect both poststructuralist readers and new historicist readers, or people who used
to identify themselves by those terms and have not yet shed the commitments the terms signal, to be uncomfortable with premise (b), specifically with its reliance on an idea of the author as a historically located individual whose intentions can be inferred.

Deconstructive readers of lyric often use (a) against (b) – that is, they mobilize very detailed descriptions of textual events to demonstrate the implausibility of stabilizing structures like the author's selfhood. That said, it should be noted that some foundational instances of deconstructive reading, for instance Paul de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality," offer readings that fit very tidily into an Empsonian pattern. De Man's description of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," after describing the shock of the death in the white space between the poem's two stanzas, states that "there is no real disjunction of the subject; the poem is written from the point of view of a unified self that fully recognizes a past condition as one of error and stands in a present that, however painful, sees things as they actually are... Wordsworth is one of the few poets who can... speak, as it were, from beyond their own graves" (de Man 1983: 224–5). Nonetheless, a great deal of poststructuralist writing depends precisely on the notion that one should not expect one's (a)-type analyses to lead to a (b)-type understanding of another person's relation to his or her world. Michel Foucault offers this as a kind of axiom of his moment in the history of writing toward the beginning of "What Is an Author?:

Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind. Thus the essential basis of this writing is not the excited emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of a subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears.
(Adams and Seadle 1986: 139)

Materialist readers of lyric, while stressing against deconstructors that it is important to come to grips with the cruelty of history rather than to philosophize about the nature of language, tend to avoid Empson's robust intentionalism in a variety of ways. One is to stress the social significance of genres. Thus there are helpful treatments of English Renaissance lyric as exchange items within literacies and as gifts (e.g. Marotti 1986; Furnerston 1991). Another is to stress the ways lyrics are shaped by some particular early modern discourse (e.g. Schonfeld 1999 on the sonnets and physiology). The historicizing projects are often linked to a more general Foucauldian or Althusserian stress on the idea that the subject is enmeshed in constitutive discourses that change over time, and that the real social power lies in the discourses rather than the subjects. In treating lyric, materialist readers subsume (a) within a version of (b) that stresses the social embeddedness of the versifying subject, his or her responsiveness to interpolation, etc.

Again, this need not lie outside the parameters of Empson's very flexible account of (b), nor is an Empsonian critical path, alternating between mediation on the local logic of lyrics and very wide-ranging accounts of them as manifestations of the author's struggles, one that materialist critics avoid, though they tend to spend a good deal of time discussing the sets of constraints with which the author struggles as general historical
phenomena, and to manifest skepticism about anyone who tries to roose directly from (a) to (b) simply on the basis of shared experience. To cite (as I have with de Man and Foucault) a central figure in the evolution of contemporary historicist literary criticism, consider the version of (b) in Stephen Greenblatt’s summing-up of his chapter on Sir Thomas Wyatt in Renaissance Self-Fashioning, which follows on a fine local account of Wyatt’s “They flee from me that sometime did me seek” that in itself moves fluently between (a) and (b) (Greenblatt 1980: 150–4):

We are now prepared to grasp how the gap between discourse and intention opens up in Wyatt and hence how it is possible for his greatest poems to engage in complex reflections upon the system of values that has generated them. The skillful merger of madness, realism, individuality, and inwardness succeeds in making Wyatt’s poetry, at its best, distinctly more convincing, more deeply moving, than any written not only in his generation but in the preceding century. But his achievement is dialectical: if, through the logic of its development, courtly self-fashioning seizes upon inwardness to heighten its histrionic power, inwardness turns upon self-fashioning and exposes its underlying motives, its origins in aggression, bad faith, self-interest, and frustrated longing... The result is the complex response evoked by a poem like “They Flee from Me”: on the one hand, acceptance of the speaker’s claim to injured merit, admiration for his mastery of experience, complicity in his “many” contempt for women’s bestial faithlessness; on the other hand, recognition of the speaker’s implication in his own betrayal, acknowledgement of the link between the other’s imputed bad faith and his own, perception of an interior distance in the ideology so passionately espoused. (Greenblatt 1980: 156)

Certainly Greenblatt sees Wyatt’s lyric as part of an author’s struggle to live well—a struggle in which the author is, at least in part, failing because he has been fashioned by a courtly system that programs him for failure, but one in which he is also partly succeeding by including intense awareness of this fact in his lyric. Examples from Empson’s sonnet criticism will show the frequency with which his own moves to imputed biography end in the imputation of a dialectical or ambivalent selfhood to his author.

I now turn to Shakespeare’s sonnets. As is well known, the sonnets bear a privileged historical role in Empson’s formation as a literary critic. He got the idea for what became Seven Types of Ambiguity from a 1928 essay by Laura Riding and Robert Graves that explored the punctuation, syntax, and meaning of sonnet 129 by reading an unedited version of that poem (Wellek 1986: 273, for the full, rather complicated story see Haffenden 2003: 216–26).

The first part of Empson’s book to appear in print was an essay on sonnet 16 that pursued their method. A number of the analyses in Seven Types focus on sonnets, though commentators note that the book’s treatment of the sonnets is fairly weak by comparison with its handling of other lyrics or of passages from Shakespeare’s plays (Sale 1973: 126; Fry 1991: 89). Empson’s central treatment of the sonnets comes in the chapter on sonnet 94, “They that have power to hurt,” in Some Versions of Pastoral, and there are recurrent
references to the sonnets in Empson’s discussion of the plays and narrative poems ever after, notably in the chapter on “sense” in Measure for Measure in Complex Words and in the essay introducing the Signet edition of the narrative poems, now reprinted in Essays on Shakespeare.

I want to suggest, however, that Empson may have been drawn to the sonnets not merely because they are luminous beacons for any interpreter drawn to complex utterance. For it is in relation to the sonnets that Empson could be said to discover how to join (a) with (b), extremely close textual analysis with speculative authorial biography. And the reason for this is fairly obvious, so that it must long since have been clear where I am headed. After all, the sonnets are to a pre-eminent degree both formally complex and biographically suggestive. More crucially, without large-scale biographical inferences local ingenuity has a great deal of difficulty making sense of them (witness the debate over whether Stephen Booth’s attempts to have a lot of (a) without much (b) produce satisfaction [see e.g. Vendler 1997: 2–4]). For Empson, as at any rate, it is evidently both impossible and undesirable to do much type-(a) analysis of the sonnets without involving himself in a good deal of type-(b) hypothesizing about the life of the author. Empson moves from one to the other in the first two pages of Seven Types, citing line 4 of sonnet 73.

To take a famous example, there is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling in,

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,

but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots, and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and Narcissistic charm suggested by choir-boys fits well with Shakespeare’s feeling for the object of the Sonnets, and for various sociological and historical reasons (the protestant destruction of monasteries; fear of puritanism), which it would be hard now to trace out in their proportions; these reasons, and many more relating the similar to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of antiquity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind. Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry. (Empson 1947: 2–3)

(The final sentence in the passage shows that Empson feels that his (b)-drenched exploration of (a) gets at something central about the nature of lyric.)

This is a baroque passage, richer and more startling than most of the later treatments of whole sonnets in Seven Types, and it encapsulates an Empsonian movement from specific words through the mind of the author (Shakespeare’s feeling for the young man) to various aspects of the author’s culture that may have pressed on the author’s consciousness. These include Shakespearean ambivalence about the destruction of English
Catholicism, possibly an historically prescient awareness that religious intolerance in England is always part of a struggle for power and property between one group and another, and a “fear of puritanism” that seems to involve both a professional wariness of the consequences of Puritan anti-theatricalism and a more personal fear that puritanical resistance to the pursuit of bodily pleasure will not only oppress him but also possibly infect him, as it seems to be doing in some of the dark lady sonnets (cf. Empson 1967: 272).

Such speculative unpacking of Empson’s own formulations is, surely, encouraged by Empson’s general way of going about things. Moreover, Empson’s biography supports the speculation. When he published Seven Types Empson himself was, we now know, a recent victim of what he clearly regarded as hypocritical puritanism. After his outstanding undergraduate results at Cambridge, Empson was, unsurprisingly, elected to a research fellowship at Magdalene and seemed headed for a career in the Cambridge English school. But servants found condoms in his luggage when helping him move into college rooms to take up his fellowship, and his testimony at an inquiry by the College Governing Board made it clear that he had, indeed, used them (see Haffenden in Empson 1986a: 11; see also Empson’s poem “Warning to Undergraduates” in Empson 1986b: 115–17 and, for the full story, Haffenden 2005: 230–59). As a result of this shocking discovery, Magdalen College withdrew Empson’s research fellowship and expelled him, and the university made it clear that he was not welcome in Cambridge. Thus Empson’s biographical projection of a Shakespeare haunted by Puritanism and the casting-off of bad influences on the young—a projection that informs his close readings of the Henriad and Measure for Measure—seems linked to Empson’s own biography from the start.

Empson’s extended discussion of sonnet 83 in Seven Types furthers such reflections. The discussion comes at the beginning of his chapter on ambiguities of the fourth type: “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” (Empson 1947: 133). Thus Empson abstractly states one of the major relations between (a) and (b) in his criticism: a problem encountered in type-(a) local exegesis leads to, and is then retroactively fixed or transcended by, an advance in type-(b) impure biography. The full sonnet, with punctuation and capitalization (though not spelling) according to the 1609 quarto, as quoted by Empson, is as follows:

I never saw that you did painting need,
And therefore to your fair no painting set,
I found (or thought I found) you did exceed,
The barren tender of a Poet’s debt:
And therefore have I slept in your report,
That you yourself being extant well might show,
How far a modern quill doth come too short.
Speaking of worth, what worth in you doth grow,
This silence for my sin you did impure,
Which shall be most my glory being dumb,
Empson comments of the whole:

One must pause before shadowing with irony this noble compound of eulogy and apology. But one may notice its position in the sequence (Shakespeare seems to have been taunted for his inferiority, and is being abandoned for the rival poet); the mixture of extraordinary claims and bitter humility with which it is surrounded; and that the two adjacent Sonnets say: "Thou truly fair wert truly sympathised in true plain words by thy truth-telling friend," and "You to your beauteous blessings add a curse. Being fond on praise, which makes your praises worse." It is not true that the feeling must be simple because it is deep; irony is similar to this kind of lyrical self-abandonment, or they relieve similar situations; by the energy with which such an adoration springs forward one can measure the objections which it is overriding, by the sharpness of what is treated as an ecstasy one may guess that it would otherwise have been pain. (Empson 1947: 134)

Here Empson moves to a direct declaration, "it is not true that the feeling must be simple because it is deep," that seems, in its generality, to be grounded in Empson's own mind mirroring the imputed experience of Shakespeare as well as in his reading of this particular sonnet. The claim makes Shakespearean ambiguity (at least as manifested in this sonnet) into the expression of Shakespeare's (and, perhaps, everyone's) ambivalence, an ambivalence that can find "relief" in either lyric idealization or irony or an ambiguous combination of the two. The particular biographical construction Empson has in mind becomes clearer in his discussion of the final quatrains.

It too involves the characteristic movement from (a) to (b). Unlike modern editors, who almost without exception insert a comma after "beauty" in line 11, thus making it seem almost necessary to read line 12 as meaning: "When the other poets who are now writing about you intend to give you life but in fact give you a tomb," Empson, reading the quarto punctuation, considers at length the possibility that lines 11 and 12 should rather be paraphrased together to allow the possibility that it is Shakespeare who "bring[s] a tomb":

It would be possible to regard line 12, which clinches the third quatrains, as an antithesis: "when others would bring life, I in fact bring a tomb." This might be Shakespeare's tomb; "I do not flatter you but I bring you the devotion of a lifetime." More probably it is W. H.'s: "I do not attempt to flatter you at the moment; I bring you the sad and reserved gift of an eternal praise." We may extract from this some such meaning as: "I do not describe your beauty or your faithfulness, but my love for you." However, there are two other ways of taking the syntax which destroy this antithesis: "When others would bring life, I, if I wrote about you, would bring a tomb," and "When others would try to write about you, would try to give you life, and thereby bring you a tomb;" for both of these
the tomb must imply some action which would impair beauty. The normal meaning is given by Sonnet xvii:

Who will believe my verse in time to come
If it were ftd with your most high deserts?
Though yet Heaven knows it is but as a tomb
Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts.

This first use of the word has no doubt that it is elegy; the Sonnet is glowing and dancing with its certitude. But when the metaphor is repeated, this time without being explained, it has grown dark with an incipient double meaning; “I should fail you, now that you have beheld so badly to me, if I tried to express you in poetry; I should give you myself, and draw from my readers, a cold and limited judgment, praise you without sincerity, or blame you without thinking of the living man.” (Erison 1947: 137–8)

This is something new. What is Erison doing when he, as Shakespeare, says to “W.H.” “now that you have beheld so badly to me, if I tried to express you in poetry... I should... blame you without thinking of the living man?” Surely we must call this a kind of performance of the sonnet (this is well within our ideal of what one does with lyric); but it is also a kind of impersonation of the poet (and this stretches our normal thinking). Having followed premise (a) and explored the varieties of possible meaning in the quatrains, Erison takes premise (b) so far that he in effect becomes the speaker/poet who voices the complex of feelings within it. Like a Stanislavskian actor, Erison constructs both a biography for the lyric speaker (mostly out of the adjacent sonnets in the sequence and his general sense of it), and what he voices is a kind of through line for the sonnet—a set of declarations in his own distinctive prose. His incisive paraphrase picks up the aspect of Shakespeare’s relation to the young man that most interests Erison by giving what most readers find the least probable construction of lines 11–12. This “incipient double meaning” lets Erison, having temporarily become Shakespeare, return and tell us what Shakespeare feels as he writes, quoting Paralles’s most famous line from All’s Well that Ends Well in the process:

“I should... blame you without thinking of the living man.” (“Simply the thing I am Shall make me live”; Shakespeare continually draws on a generosity of this kind. It is not “tou comprende,” in his view, it is merely to feel how a man comes to be a working system, which necessarily excites a degree of sympathy.) (Erison 1947: 138)

The idea that one of the goals of lyric is to anatomize the excitation of sympathy by showing Shakespeare “feeling how a man comes to be a working system” is quite close, it seems to me, to the way that Greenblatt suggests that our response to Wyatt involves both sympathetic admiration for Wyatt’s expression of loss and awareness that in his lyric Wyatt is worked by the system that he is working. And all this plausible and powerful Erisonian generalization about Shakespeare emerges from a type (a) problem in reading that most modern editions, by repunctuating, render invisible.
Let me close this part of the essay by briefly discussing the chapter on sonnet 94 in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, which offers a kind of exercise in moving through (a) to (b) and fully displays Empson's technique of Shakespeare impersonation. Following Graves and Riding, Empson quotes the Q version:

They that have pow're to hurt, and will doe none,
That doe not do the thing, they most do showe,
Who mousing others are themselves as stone,
Vnmoosed, could, and to temptation slow:
They rigthy do inherit heavens graces,
And husband natures riches from expence,
They are the Lords and owners of their faces,
Others, but stewards of their excellence:
The sommers flower is to the sommer sweet,
Though to itselfe, it onely live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meete,
The basest weed out-braves his dignity:
For sweetest things turne sourwet by their deeds,
Lilies that fester, smell far worse then weeds.

(Empson 1974: 88)

Empson begins by setting up the basic problem of interpretation posed by the unspecified terms that need to be placed in comparison with one another in the sonnet: 'you can work through all the notes in the Variorum without finding out whether flower, lily, 'owner,' and person addressed are alike or opposed...the simplest view (that any two may be alike in some one property)...yields 4096 possible movements of thought.' He concludes that 'the nigglers is routed here; one has honestly to consider what seems important' (Empson 1974: 89). There is no "person addressed" in 94 proper (just as line 4 of 73 is not a "simile"), but Empson will not be inhibited from biography by such minor matters of form, and, as he points out later, the idea of address is carried over from 95 and continues through 95, both sonnets on related themes. Empson's calculation of the number of possible movements of thought is famously wrong, incidentally.

Empson's treatment of the sonnet includes many of the kinds of meditation joining (a) and (b) I have talked about above. One occurs as Empson reflects on what kind of mental tool sonnet 94 turns out to be. It is both a map on which one can trace many routes, and an instrument on which the reader and the author are both imagined as performers. The mind of the reader and the mind of the author meet here in much the way they met in Empson's discussion of the Spenserian stanza in *Seven Types*.

The vague and generalized language of the descriptions [in sonnet 94], which might be talking about so many sorts of people as well as feeling so many things about them, somehow makes a unity like a crossroads, which analysis does not deal with by exploring
down the road; makes a solid flute on which you can play a multitude of tunes, whose solidity no list of all possible tunes would go far to explain. The balance of feeling is both very complex and very fertile; experiences are recorded, and metaphors invented, in the Sonnets, which he went on “applying” as a dramatist, taking particular cases of them as if they were wide generalisations, for the rest of his life. (Empson 1974: 90).

After an illuminating discussion of the passage (and as part of a generous and helpful discussion of Empson’s brilliant contribution to studies of pastoral), Paul Alpers comments oddly in What Is Pastoral? that “the unity of a crossroads (such as it is) is a fact of social existence, with no grounding in nature or analogy to the human individual; the solid flute suggests the limits of the minds that write and interpret, for of course no tune can be played on it” (Alpers 1996: 37–8). But surely Empson means that the sonnet is fluid in that many various meanings can pass through it, yet solid in that it remains the singular and unchanging instrument on which such meanings are “played” by the author or by readers? I do not think, pace Alpers, that Empson intends the idea of a flute that has no hollow passage through which to blow air.

At any rate, this idea of the lyric as crossroads or instrument serves as Empson’s segue to a wide-ranging account of links among this sonnet, all the sonnets, and a number of the plays. As he notes, “it is hard not to go off down one of the roads at the crossing, and get one plain meaning for the poem from that, because Shakespeare himself did that so very effectively afterwards; a part of the situation of the Sonnets, the actual phrases designed for it, are given to Prince Henry, to Angelo, to Troilus, to the Greek army; getting further from the original as time went on” (Empson 1974: 102). After exploring these, Empson concludes with a tendentious paraphrase that is both his own final attempt to read sonnet 94 and Shakespeare’s final attempt to sum up his relation to the young man:

It is not surprising that this sentiment [Bassanio] awareness that he is loved for his own success and superficial qualities should make Shakespeare’s mind bark back to the Sonnets, because it was there so essential; these poems of idealisation of a patron and careerist depend upon it for their strength and dignity. “Man is so placed that the sort of thing you do is in degree all that any one can do; success does not come from mere virtue, and without some external success a virtue is not real even to itself. One must not look elsewhere; success of the same nature as yours is all that the dignity, whether of life or poetry, can be based upon.” This queer sort of realism, indeed, is one of the main things he had to say.

The feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home with most versions of pastoral . . . (Empson 1974: 114–15).

Thus in his type (b) criticism of Shakespeare, Empson is preoccupied with, and vocalises from the inside, a quasi-biographical question about Shakespeare that was probably at times an autobiographical question for Empson as well: how could someone so unimaginably successful in literary creation be so unhappy — or, to put it another way,
how could someone with such extraordinary analytical gifts make such self-destructive object choices? Empson's answer comes here, in the idea that literary creation can come out of the acceptance that "life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so." This intellectually enabling though not personally reassuring attitude, a kind of negative humanism, informs much of Empson's Shakespeare criticism.

Empson's example has had a considerable effect on later critics of the sonnets, most explicitly in their embrace of the (a) position outlined above. As Empson says in defense of his (a) premise at the end of Seven Types of Ambiguity,

an advance in the machinery of description makes a reader feel stronger about his appreciations, more reliably able to distinguish the private or accidental from the critically important or repeatable, more confident of the reality (that is, the transferability) of his experiences; adds, in short, in the mind of the reader to the things there to be described, whether or not it makes those particular things more describable. (Empson 1947: 254)

Both Stephen Booth and Helen Vendler, in their sonnet-by-sonnet commentaries, seek to "advance the machinery of description" through precise elucidation of local semantic and aesthetic effects.

In the preface to his edition of the sonnets, Stephen Booth takes Empson's pioneering discussion of sonnet 66—the first piece of criticism Empson published, subsequently included in Seven Types—as an example of how to admit and celebrate the extraordinary wealth of overlapping meanings in Shakespearean language (Empson 1947: 54–7; Shakespeare 1977: xiii–xvi). He also devotes a substantial segment of his 1969 *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* to a detailed demonstration (with much citation of other critics responding to Empson) that in his treatment of sonnet 94 in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, Empson has sacrificed (a) to (b) by subordinating much of the play of signification in the poem to his beliefs about what the speaker means to say to the (non-)addressee—that is, the young man whom Empson sees as the target as well as the topic of the poem (Booth 1969: 152–68; for a recent critique that partly takes issue with Booth see Schoenfeldt 1999: 83–95). Like Empson, Booth is concerned to argue that extremely precise type (a) description—which brings out areas of puzzlement—need not and should not detract from the appreciation of beauty:

My notes are as much occupied with investigating the sources of the greatness, the beauty, and, often, the obvious substantive meaning of Shakespeare's sentences as with reviving and revealing that meaning; the notes analyze the processes by which the relevant meanings of Shakespeare's words and phrases and the contexts they bring with them combine, intertwine, fuse, and conflict in the potentially dizzying complexity from which a reader's sense of straightforward simplicity emerges. It is the complexity, I think, that gives the sonnets what critics of eras less ambitious than this one for the clinical precision of natural science called the magic of the sonnets, the sense they gave of effortless control of the uncontrollable. The notes to this edition investigate the particulars of the complexity. Any reader superstitiously fearful that the magic of a poem will vanish with knowledge...
of its sources need not worry any more than a student of zoology need worry that gazelles will slow down if he investigates the reasons why they can run so fast. (Shakespeare 1977: xii–xiii)

As we have seen, then, Booth takes Empson as something of a model for the kind of registration of line-by-line complexity undertaken in his own commentary. But if he follows the (a) premise I've attributed to Empson, Booth is an overt foe of what he calls "inferential biography" and thus would seem to be at least wary of the (b) premise discussed throughout this chapter (see Shakespeare 1977: 543). His hostility to biographical imputation is suggested by a well-known comment in his Appendix I: "HOMOSEXUALITY: Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter" (Shakespeare 1977: 548). Although Booth might phrase the comment differently now, in light of arguments that the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" are anachronistic descriptors for early modern subjects, I doubt that the scholarship on the sonnets since 1977 would change his mind about the central claim that on this topic as others the sonnets are not biographically informative.

Helen Vendler sees Booth, almost alone among the critics she takes seriously, as offering (a) wish too little (b), while other critics err by having far too much (b) with very little (a): that is, she credits Booth with appropriately stressing the variety and complexity of what goes on inside a lyric, but believes that he gives up too easily on the task of describing its fundamental or unifying shape (she avoids the idea that it is "meaning" one should be after). "Booth's critical stance — that the critic, helpless before the plurisignification of language and overlapping of multiple structures visible in a Shakespearean sonnet, must be satisfied with irresolution with respect to its fundamental gesture — seems to me too readily a surrender to hermeneutic suspicion" (Vendler 1997: 13). She sees Empson as a pioneer of type (a) criticism, citing "brilliant beginnings" in the description of "what ideational and structural and linguistic acts by a poet result in a successful poem . . . by William Empson (on individual words and images)" (pp. 12–13). Empson does not seem to count for Vendler as a constructor of explanatory biographical imputations. Her own critical practice is declaredly anti-thematic, but she does put emphasis on the way lyrics invite personalization when she writes that "the poet's duty is to create aesthetically convincing representations of feelings felt and thoughts thought" (p. 16), and she herself engages in something like speculative biography in such comments as "the infatuation of the speaker with the young man is so entirely an infatuation of the eye — which makes a fetish of the beloved's countenance rather than of his entire body — that gazing is this infatuation's chief (and perhaps best and only) form of intercourse" (p. 15). The difference from Empson here is that Vendler draws a sharp and consistent distinction between the speaker and the author, evidently seeing it as appropriate that we admire the author's amazing mastery even as we experience and reproduce the speaker's occasional abjection: "a formidabile intellectual command . . . in the person of their invisible author . . . accounts for the Sonnets' serene and unflattering air of poetic resource, even (or perhaps especially) in the moments of
the speaker's greatest psychological distraction" (p. 32). Empson fervently embraces the "intentional fallacy," a phrase for which he never forgave William Wimsatt (see e.g., Empson 1986a: 158); Vendler avoids it, at least with respect to this set of lyrics. Vendler also, unlike Empson, rarely seems to be puzzling her way through a poem; rather she presents herself as utterly sure she has the tone and stance of every line just right. In this, she avoids the kind of interpretative autobiographical provisionality that is such a feature of Empson's criticism (Strier 2006).

Despite this, she can, like Empson, sometimes seem intimately aware of the creative process of her author. As Empson does in his description of the Spenserian stanza, Vendler discusses the form of a Shakespearean sonnet as it might be experienced in the process of repetitive composition:

The sonnets stand as the record of a mind working out positions without the help of any pantheon or systematic doctrine. Shakespeare's speaker often considers, in rapid succession, any number of intellectual or ideological positions, but he does not move among them at random. To the contrary: in the first quatrain of any given sonnet he has a wide epistemological field in which to play, but in the second quatrain he generally queries or contradicts or subverts his first position (together with its discourse-field). By the third quatrain he must (usually) advance to his subllest or most comprehensive or most truthful position (Q); therefore taking on, in the Shakespearean sonnet, the role of the sestet in the Petrarchan sonnet. And the couplet — placed not as resolution (which is the function of Q) but as coda — can then stand in any number of relations (summarizing, ironic, expansive) to the preceding argument. The gradually straitened possibilities as the speaker advances in his considerations give the Shakespearean sonnet a funnel-shaped, narrowing in Q, to a vortex of condensed perceptual and intellectual force, and either constricting or expanding that vortex via the couplet. (Vendler 1997: 25)

Vendler ties her commitment to the endeavor of describing the mechanisms of the sonnet to a comment by W. H. Auden that nearly summarizes (and is, I think, at least somewhat indebted to) Empson's commitments to (a) and (b) in his earlier criticism:

The questions which interest me most when reading a poem are two. The first is technical: "Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?" The second is, in the broadest sense, moral: "What kind of guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good place? His notion of the Evil One? What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?" (Vendler 1997: 10–11, citing Auden 1968: 55)

Vendler links her own descriptions of the sonnets, which she represents as dealing with technical poetic issues that are thereby prior to thematic interpretation, specifically to the discourse of mechanism in Auden: "[b]ecause many essays on the sonnets attempt moral and ethical discussion without any close understanding of how the poems are put together, I have emphasized in this Commentary the total 'contraptionness' as the first necessary level of understanding" (1997: 11). And she clearly believes that Auden's interest in imputed biography, the Empsonian premise (b) interest in "What kind of
No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mad,
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
Andloathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.
All men make faults, and even I in this,
Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
Myself corrupting salving thy amiss,
Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are;
For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense—
Thy adverse party is thy advocate—
And gainst myself a lawful plea commence.
Such civil war is in my love and hate,
That I an accessory must be
To that sweet thief which soely robs from me.
(Shakespeare 1977: 32)

Booth begins his commentary with line-by-line glosses – including some of the registration of semantic static for which his edition is famous: "make faults Shakespeare’s contemporaries may have heard a pun here on ‘make farts’ (a pun that would have given cogency to a complementary pun on in sense in line nine)" (Shakespeare 1977: 190). But he ends (as he often does in glossing sonnets he thinks particularly exemplary or important) with a summary note on the sonnet as a whole. It begins "This sonnet is a variation of Shakespeare’s habits of damming with fulsome praise (as in 87. 1) and of making flattering accusations (as in 53)" (Shakespeare 1977: 191). Booth then characterizes the first quatrains apparently "a loving effort to relieve the beloved’s sense of guilt,"
it is undermined by "the unsiness of its not-quite-appropriate platitudes" so that it "advertises the speaker's earnest benevolence rather than the justice of the defense he offers" (p. 191). The next quatrains "develops a competition in guilt between the speaker and the beloved," which Booth details with short tendentious paraphrases of an Empsonian kind: "you are no more guilty than other mortals," "I am guilty too; I am in the act of sinning now," "I am more guilty than you," "I have become so for your sake." (p. 91). A glance back at the second quatrains will show that these impressed statements, though highly suggestive, and nicely capturing the accelerating rhythm of accusation and self-accusation, are paraphrases only in a very extended (and, again, very Empsonian) sense of the word "paraphrase." The speaker in 35 never says, for instance, that he is "more guilty" than the addressee (or at any rate I would not so construe "more than thy sins are") in quite this way, despite the proverb "a fault once excused is twice committed" that Booth aptly cites in his line-by-line commentary: p. 190). Like Empson, Booth here reveals creatively in the experience of being Shakespeare. Having established the rhythm with these short quotations, Booth's description picks up further speed: "From there the speaker goes on to belittle the beloved (ll. 8 and 9), to call attention to his own superiority as both sinner and sacrificer (ll. 9–11), and to reassert the beloved's wrongdoing" (p. 191). It is clear by this time that the close attention to the multiplicity and undecidability of sonnet meaning for which Booth is well known has given way to an excited and attractive conviction that he knows just what is going on and can rival the vigor of its presentation:

The poem leaves the beloved diminished and under a new guilt — the guilt of being beneficiary of the speaker's ostentation sacrifice. All in all, the manner of this poem is that of a long-suffering and relentlessly selfless wife. The facts the poem reports should make the speaker seem admirable in a reader's eyes; the speaker's manner, however, gives conviction to the idea that he is worthy of the contempt he says he deserves. Everything about the poem — its substance, its structure, its syntax, its effect — suggests civil war (courageous, legalistic, and inextreme). (Shakespeare 1997: 191–2)

We see Booth driven by the power of the sonnet (to some extent against his own declared resistance to single story-lines) into a strongly Empsonian reading that moves from promise (a), registration of verbal complexity, to promise (b), speculative recreation of a recognizable human situation fraught with pain and ambivalence.

Helen Vendler's handling of sonnet 35 is more elaborate: among other things, it persuasively bears out her description of the general funnel-shaped logical pattern in the sequence. A key paragraph lays out the relations between the first two quatrains, seen in the light of the superior analytic clarity achieved in the third:

The disembodement by which the speaker now bitterly scrutinizes his past exculpatory commonplace (metes with thorns, fountains with mud, suns with eclipses, canker in buds) is visible chiefly in the violent departure from those Q commonplace in the knotted language of Q. The "same person" cannot speak both the first quatrains and the second: the speaker of the first was misguided, and even corrupt, according to the speaker of the
second. Therefore, the speaker resorts to the subsequent analytic metaphor of civil war: the first quatrains were spoken (according to subsequent analysis) by love (not besottedness or moral futility) and the second by hate (a far cry from clear moral logic). But although the closing judgment will name Q1, love and Q2, hate, as we actually encounter the poem, we hear the sentences of Q1, as quoted by the present speaker of Q2; the sentences are therefore given in a foolish, flat, and deadened form, which would not convince a flea, and which in fact amount (so cunningly is hate arranging them) to a progressive indictment of the friend ("You are a rose with thorns, you are a fountain with mud, you are a stained sun, you have a loathsome worm living in you"). One imagines that when these excuses were made in the true voice of love (rather than the voice of love summarized by hate), they sounded passionate and convinced. (Vendler 1997: 186)

Unlike Booth, Vendler does not believe that the sonnet's ending presents a speaker "worthy of the contempt he says he deserves" (Shakespeare 1977: 192). Though she employs tendentious declarative paraphrase in moving from logical detail to human situation in an Empsonian way, she does not follow Booth in continuing to paraphrase the poem according to the human situation of the speaker excusing, berating, and guilt-tripping the beloved. Instead, she works with the opposed voices of love and hate she has identified as formally present in quatrains one and two:

"I have corrupted myself" is a statement that presupposes a true "higher" self which has, by a "lower" self, been corrupted, and which should once again take control. Even the metaphor of lawsuits implies that one side, in each suit, is "lawful" and should win. In the close, love and hate have equal civil voices, and the robbed plaintiff (feeling hate) is at the same time the willing criminal accessory (feeling love). Though this expressed dualism cannot be called self-integration, it is an epistemological advance over the attempt by the voice of hate to suppress, in lines 1–8, the voice of love (which, so long as it speaks from a feeling that still exists, cannot in poetry be suppressed without formal crime). (Vendler 1997: 189)

Vendler's commitment to the idea that the sonnets are the work of an artist who stands well above the emotional turbulence of his speaker doubtless contributes to the sort of balance her description of the action of the poem achieves. Booth, though in general less prone than Empson to throwing himself into the speaker's situation and imagining it as the author's, offers a reading of sonnet 35 that dramatizes the poem as a gesture in an ongoing human struggle rather than seeing it, as Vendler does, as a progressive meditation on such gestures. But Vendler ends her comment on this sonnet with a quite Empsonian glance at the sequence as a whole, seen as an ongoing human crisis in which, at the end, fulfillment is rather magnificently forgone in favor of art:

The difficulty of maintaining love for an unpredictably unfaithful beloved will henceforth preoccupy the sonnets to the friend. The speaker's final solution will be, in 124, to separate completely the act of love from its object, and to make it absolute in its own grandeur, without respect to the worth of the beloved. It is a drastic but sublime (and also tragic) solution. (Vendler 1997: 189)
At this point, though she sticks to the term “speaker,” Vendler is talking about the architecture and curve of feeling of the sequence as a whole — something we would normally attribute to the poet rather than the speaker: she here comes as close as she ever does to an Empsonian biographical imputation.

I have chosen Stephen Booth and Helen Vendler for detailed comparison with Empson because I regard them highly, not because I regard them as uniquely Empsonian in their ways of moving between precise formal analysis and resonant generalization. Indeed, my point is that the sonnets impose this Empsonian oscillation on many readers, including these two very strong and theoretically self-aware ones, neither of whom would accept Empson’s premise (b) in the form stated at the opening of this chapter. I do not claim to have caught Booth or Vendler channeling Empson and losing their resistance to intentionalism. But I have shown how each of them, at the end of a wonderfully revealing close analysis of a great sonnet, moves along paths Empson has marked: ventriloquizing the variety of different lines of lyric thought as tendentious addressed statement, and then moving yet further (as Vendler does) to general description of the preoccupations and strategies of a larger poetic project that involves drastic, sublime, and tragic personal relations.

If my description of Empson is persuasive — both as an account of Empson and as an approach to the sonnets — it may contribute to readings of the sonnets by linking them to a general account of the power of lyric that is, as we have seen, partly derived from reading the sonnets. Precisely because the (a) and (b) premises I have attributed to Empson seem so obvious and (though disputable) innocuous, they may sort uneasily with the professional critic’s imperative to say something new. But the examples I have explored, both in Empson’s own work and in that of Booth and Vendler, show howigglingly precise exegesis (involving logical mastery and apparent detachment) and openness to the performance of lyric intentionality (involving emotional vulnerability and evident attachment) combine in some exemplary sonnet readers.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

My thanks to David Goldstein, Holly Laird, and Richard Sterier for commentary. An earlier version of the essay was composed for an MLA session at the invitation of David Mikics and Jenn Lewin and expanded for an SAA seminar led by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells.

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