

Trees, Woods and Literature

NOTE ON LOCAL FLORA

*There is a tree native in Turkestan,
Or further east towards the Tree of Heaven,
Whose hard cold cones, not being warts to time
Will leave their mother only for good cause;
Will ripen only in a forest fire;
Wait, to be fathered as was Bacchus once,
Through men's long lives, that image of time's end.
I knew the Phoenix was a vegetable.
So Semele desired her deity
As this in Kew thirsts for the Red Dawn.*

Note. That image : the forest fire is like the final burning of the world.

From *Collected Poems*, by William Empson, reprinted by kind permission of Chatto and Windus Ltd.

William Empson was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1906. He studied mathematics at Cambridge, and after teaching for some years in the Far East returned to England as a Professor of English Literature. His poetry is sometimes regarded as "difficult" which may partly explain why he supplied his own notes.

The tree of the poem (Turkestan is partly in Russia and partly in China), with its serotinous cones, resembles our familiar *Pinus contorta* which also depends on fire to open its cones in its natural habitat.