Personally Speaking

Sir William Empson (1906-1984): A Memoir

By M. C. Bradbrook

FROM the rosy brick of the small first court at Magdalene College, Cambridge, a door surmounted with the arms of the founder and the motto *Garde Ta Foy* leads to the cloisters where Empson once slept out; they form an arcade below the library of Mr. Samuel Pepys.

In this very small but exclusive society, formed by a Tudor peer out of a friary, Empson spent his Cambridge years of 1925-1931; first reading mathematics; graduating; Senior Optime (Second Class Honors). He switched to English under the young Ivor Richards, who has recorded that the first 30,000 words of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* appeared in the autumn of 1928 after a fortnight's intense activity. Empson thought, lived, worked with speed and intensity beyond all parallel.

Cambridge still feels small, but a good place from which to survey the galaxies—the radio telescope at Gamlingay—was built immediately after World War II by volunteer student labor. Cosmic and local scenes interact in "Sleeping Out in College Cloister":

> Stevenson says they wake at two o'clock
> Who lie with Earth, when the birds wake, and sigh;
> Turn over, as does she, once in the night. . . .
> But it's about then one stamped on someone
> And chose an animate basis for one's mattress,
> It must be later you look round and notice
> The ground plan has been narrowed and moved up;
> How much more foliage appears by star-light;
> That Hall shelters at night under the trees.
>
> Earth at a decent distance is the Globe
> (One has seen them smaller); within a hundred miles
> She's *terra firma,* you look down to her.

This appeared in the decade of the first hazardous flights across the Atlantic. Another poem, "Earth has Shrunk in the Wash," compares the future state of a dead and airless Globe with "civilized refinement cutting one off from other people and scientific discovery making a strange world in which man has dangerous powers" (note). Should man survive on another planet, he would face hazards created by his own dominance.

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They pass too fast. Ships, and there's time for
  sighing;
Express and motor, Doug can jump between.
Only dry earth now asteroid her flying
Mates, if they miss her, must flick past unseen. . . .

Victorian "ships that pass in the night," the early exploits of Fairbanks contrast with astronautic views now familiar, but which at that date remained below the horizon for most visionaries. Anxiety about human relationships sprang from the philosophic puzzle of relations between unknown objects "out there" and internal recording—Empson once remarked "One of the damned things is ample." Another poem on the outdoors begins:

And now she cleans her teeth into the lake:
Gives it (God's grace) for her own bounty's sake
What morning's pale and the crisp mist debars. . . .
Milks between rocks a straddled sky of stars.

"Bliss was it in that Cambridge dawn to be alive": as in the Old Cavendish Laboratory Rutherford prepared to split the atom, while in Trinity, a few hundred yards south of Magdalene, Wittgenstein darkly expounded; he heard Empson's poems from Leavis, and furnished an ironic joke for "This Last Pain." The poet Kathleen Raine has described a lunch party in Empson's rooms, the meal parked on his windowsill.

. . . . the impression of a perpetual self-consuming, self-generating intensity that produced a kind of shock; through no intention or will to impress, for William was simply himself at all times. . . . Never I think had he any wish to excel, lead, dominate, involve or otherwise exert power.

(*William Empson,* ed. Roma Gill, London: Routledge, 1974, p. 15)

Another poet, George Fraser, celebrating Empson's fiftieth birthday, was later to acknowledge:

He is an electric eel
From whom our soft flat flounder thoughts rebound.
He stirs up in his own air his own sea
Of lithe prehensile ambiguity. . . .
He taught us thinking is a kind of feel. . . .

Empson discarded his own views as easily as he accepted paradox, with the lightness of one conceding points in a game, as in the second edition of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: "It seems no good trying now to improve this paragraph but I still think the last sentence summing it up is sufficiently true" (p. 21) or "I now think this example a mare's nest" (p. 171). A *sprezzatura* like Philip Sidney's blows through criticism and poems, for Empson was writing for his friends, and all flowed from good talk in little college courts, where new ideas were seeded. The startling alteration of scale continues in "Legal Fiction," and "Letter I":

You were amused to find you too could fear
'The eternal silence of the infinite spaces'. . . .
I approve, myself, dark spaces between stars. . . .

Some anxieties from World War I still shuddered and refracted in the talk. The two brightest stars of the English Faculty, Ivor Richards and Manny Forbes, like our great exemplar T. S. Eliot, had been rejected for military service, had stood by to see a generation slaughtered. All three in 1920 suffered nervous breakdowns from which creative work eventually came. Empson, like Isherwood and others of our generation, felt they had missed this initiation (Charles Empson, William's elder brother by eight years, had served in the Middle East and was now in the Foreign Service); but William's views were fiercely antimilitarist, if not antimilitary. He wrote a squib for the comic magazine *Granta* —of which he was editor—as well as editing, with others, the avant-garde *Experiment*, where his poems and extracts from *Seven Types* appeared. In this squib, the Saint Vitus School Contingent of the Officers' Training Corps is addressed by a general "Well, you young fellows, this has been a very decent show" and—noting dust on their boots—"Can't expect you all to take taxis (Ha!) but if you'd just spat on them and wiped them up with your sleeve at the last minute . . ."

He goes on to warn them of their responsibilities in the next war ("and mind you, it's going to come very soon"); all those "who have taken Certificate A" will be given charge of thirty men.

Now that's a very great honour and privilege. And I'll tell you why: it's true the actual cost of a man to this country, the cost of training him and throwing him into the field, that's not very much; it may not come to more than thirty pounds, all told; and you may set that against the cost of a machine gun, which may be a hundred pounds. . . . But what you've got to remember is, the question of reserves. It takes twenty years to grow a man to fight for his country and they can turn out a machine gun in a week. It won't be a question of money, when this country's in a life and death struggle; it'll be a question of manpower. You'll find you come to the end of the men long before you come to the end of the machine guns. . . . we're putting on you a great trust, a great responsibility. File out by the right. Quietly, please.

This irony, published in the week of November 2, 1928, just before the national commemoration, the Two Minutes' Silence on November 11, 1928, seemed to me something to produce for Empson's own commemoration if given with an Irish brogue.

What was bred in the bone supported and permitted the footloose intellectual gyrations, the speculative games by which Empson dazzled us in his Cambridge years. Anthony Blunt was recruiting his celebrated spy ring at King's and Trinity, through the "Apostles" in part. Empson was president of the "Heretics," whose title marked its claims to be anti-Establishment; yet *Garde Ta Foy* might have served for Empson's motto—or his school's motto: *Manners makyth man.* His deeply secure roots in East Yorkshire at the family home, Yokefleet Hall, gained their place in his verses "To an Old Lady"; his

mother, his original, thought he was writing about his grandmother! A film about Empson made in the early 1970s by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was shot at Yokefleet.

In the late summer of 1931, the withdrawal of his bye-fellowship—an act tantamount to ejection—took him as far as Tokyo. On this, Ronald Bottrall commented:

> Betrayed by the head porter, ostracized by dons,
> Lacking the pros, he was sentenced by the cons,
> A lamentable case of academic *mores*,
> Promoted by Puritan envy and trumped-up stories.

Ivor Richards was far away, in China; another friend tried to place Empson at Birmingham, but he wrecked his chances by airily citing some recent iconoclastic work to an influential person.

Those who knew said Empson's relations with women went wrong all the time, but as a junior fellow at Magdalene, he suffered under an unusually authoritarian constitution, and a Master (President) who was Nonconformist, (Puritan), of a joylessness that offered a very ready target for the barbed wit of Queenie Leavis and others. When, a few years earlier, Empson's friend J. B. S. Haldane was asked to resign his university post on appearing as correspondent on a divorce case, he successfully brought an action in the civil courts.

Empson arrived in Japan in time for the "Manchuria incident," the start of Japanese campaigns on the mainland, and was received in the Bunrika Daigaku with enthusiasm:

> The garden house being in the western part of Tokyo, it was a long journey for Mr. Empson to come from there to the University; it was Empson's good idea that he got a motor bike by which he was free to run about the big city; and I am glad there occurred no accident even if Tokyo forty years ago may have been a little less crowded in the streets. We sent an applause every time when the explosive sound of the full speed wheels told us that the poet was come to his classes.
>
> (R. Fukuhara in *William Empson*, Gill, p. 22)

On his return to England, after publishing his first book of poems and *Some Versions of Pastoral*, he took a yet longer journey to teach exiled Chinese university students in a long march through the interior. Lecturing from memory, he relied heavily on Housman and Shakespeare. The darkening political scene brought Lord Rochester's line to serve as epigraph to new verses, "But wretched man is still in arms for fear." The refrain of another poem was "The heart of standing is you cannot fly," which catches an idea from Dryden: "Charge, charge, 'tis too late to retreat."

> . . . . entirely rousing and single-hearted. Evidently the thought that it is no good running away is an important ingredient in military enthusiasm . . . . Horses in a way very like this display mettle by a continual expression of timidity.
>
> (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, New York: New Directions, 1947, p. 252)

In "Flighting for Duck," set in his own Yorkshire countryside, Empson used the blandness of eighteenth-century pastiche to reinforce the joining of political menace with a familiar landscape; by contrast, in "Just a Smack at Auden" he came skimming down from a great height, like the practiced skier he was, to meet the fashionable and self-righteous gloom of the left-wing poets with a practiced brush-off, to be justified by the event.

The poems, eventually collected in *The Gathering Storm* (1940), showed Empson truly engaged, but with a cool sardonic wit, of the kind that fighting men develop in the face of the enemy.

> It is more hopeful on the spot.
> The 'News', the conferences that leer,
> The creeping fog, the civil traps,
> These are what force you into fear.

His accents vary from the Wykehamist "Hark at these Germans, hopeful chaps" into Yorkshire dialect and back again:

> Besides, you aren't quite good for nowt
> Or clinging wholly as a burr
> Replacing men who must get out
> Nor is it shameful to aver
> A vague desire to be about
> Where the important things occur . . . .
>
> ("Autumn on Nan Yueh")

So he made a beeline for London, working in the Eastern section of the BBC to such effect that one of the top German propagandists (to his gratification) termed him "a curly-headed Jew." One may transpose for England what he said on China, "I felt that while I was trying to help China I need not be solemn about her."

During World War II Empson had said in a broadcast:

> What the Japanese cannot stand is surprises. The Chinese guerillas are extremely powerful against the Japanese mind, because they continually give the Japanese subordinate a problem which his superiors have not seen. So what we must plan to give them is surprises.
>
> (Gill, p. 45)

It might be retorted that Pearl Harbor and the fall of Singapore had shown the Japanese not devoid of this primary military equipment, but the surprise given at Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, left Empson, the "pygmy," with no more to say on military topics. Underlying his antimilitarist campaigns of early days was an assumption that he was tilting against a secure and established order. There would always be an army; therefore, it was a legitimate target. The argument, though passionate, could use ironically the accents of the opponent—which by training were part of Empson's makeup, as his own actions demonstrated. "Double irony," he said later, needs "a show of lightness and

carelessness"; some Americans think every upper class English voice does this, however unintentionally: Empson thinks every tough American voice does it too (*Using Biography*,London: Chatto & Windus, Hogarth Press, 1984, p. 132).

In 1941 he married Hester Henrietta Crouse (Hetta), a handsome South African whose affiliations were of the extreme left and whose life style was Bohemian. This was probably more of a shock to the elder members of his family than the loss of his fellowship. A son was named Mogador, because when he was born that Moroccan city was in the news; another son received the Biblical name Jacob. After the war, Empson briefly returned to Peking, but regularly visited Kenyon College, where he felt very much at home. Robert Lowell wrote a parody of his verse. Soon after he had published *The Structure of Complex Words*, in 1951, he was elected to a Chair of English at Sheffield in his native county. He commuted, while Hetta remained in London. Empson never became a really committed academic, but he found universities agreeable places to be. Moreover, his sons were now of an age to be educated. He faithfully tried to conform to academic "mores," engaging with contemporary figures—E. E. Stoll, Hugh Kenner, or W. K. Wimsatt—but he talked as if in a club, and did not bother to give clues for the eavesdropping reader. The mathematician in him led to close examination of minutiae, when he would run rings round his opponent in the most good-natured and even respectful way. Great politeness or great plainness were equally at his command, as they had been at the command of I. A. Richards. I remember a scene in the 1930s at Cambridge where Empson was being subjected to interruption about some passages in his book on pastoral. He endured with exemplary courtesy, but Richards lost patience and, turning around, hurled at the interrupter "And if a sunstroke hit you on the back of the neck you'd be dead!" This variation on a familiar wish was uttered with such force that it proved a knockout.

Empson could be generous in concessions—"Oh, to be sure, to be sure! Now that you mention it . . ." while equally ready to give the brush-off. He was exactly on Eliot's wavelength here, but found Leavis's mode of "insisting" repugnant. When moving against any form of pretentiousness and especially when defending an impossible position, he relied much on that Chinese aspect of meaning which Richards had imparted as "tone." (Chinese tones mark attitudes of authority or deference; mock deference in English suggests authority.) Writing on Richards in a celebratory volume, he declared that the English language, being so complex:

> positively likes to purge itself and act simple. If you heard Charles II talking to a Bishop, you felt not merely that he showed the man up as a fool and a pedant but that this was the right man to be king because he spoke in such an absolutely plain man way. If you felt so you were deluded, and I do not say that the political effects were good, only that the effects on the language were.

("The Hammer's Ring" in *I. A. Richards*, ed. Reuben Brower *et al.*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 79)

With this anticipation of "The Great Communicator" on television, we reach the new target which for Empson replaced the military — the "Neo-Christians." These ranged from Rosemond Tuve and Hugh Kenner to C. S. Lewis and Dorothy Sayers. Empson, who as Christopher Ricks said in his memorial notice (*The Sunday Times*, April 22, 1984) found his energy not in repudiation but in welcome turned to Charles II's subjugated enemy, and in *Milton's God* (1961), elegantly, with an air of innocent unpretentiousness (though well informed), he released the heroic poet, who finally mastered the horrible God he had created. The existence of God is as firmly assumed as the persistence of the British Army had been earlier; only He turns out to be the Devil. In Milton's fictions, the Father and the Son are human figures enlarged; the Atonement in its legal and substitutionary form is the evil Empson gets his teeth into. An angry judge demanding human sacrifice, and the ejection from Paradise for a noble motive were monstrous! What preachers term "the Application" is not omitted, "No one when I was at school believed this stuff." In its Voltairean tone, *Milton's God* can be lighthearted and very funny:

> When composing, he felt like a defending Counsel . . . he does not feel personally disgraced if his client still loses after he has gone as far as he can. Adding a little human interest to the admittedly tricky client God, by emphasizing his care to recover the reputation of his son, and giving a glimpse of the deeper side of his nature which makes him prepare for his latter end [i.e., his demise, or transformation to the Absolute] is about all that can be done to swing the jury when the facts of the case are so little in dispute.
>
> (p. 209)

A chapter defending Delilah opens "Her case is easier even to defend than Adam's — it is a pushover" (p. 211) although "This picture of her as a hospital nurse will no doubt be resisted" (p. 224). The final chapter "On Christianity," however, rises to a scream that this religion worships torture, the doctrine of the Trinity is evil double-talk by which Christians hide from themselves the wickedness of their God (p. 245). After touching on such modern issues as abortion, tolerance of homosexuality, the infamous habits of the police, by way of confession of faith it ends with the theory of Bentham, "which was in favour when I was a student at Cambridge" (p. 259) but not before the squire's son has surfaced to tell how Father warned the local parson he would walk out if asked to recite the Athanasian creed, but failed to do so because he had fallen asleep!

This book is dedicated to Hetta. The next twenty years saw a series of biographical studies of poets and novelists, every one treating some contemporary issue. A posthumously published collection, *Using Biography,* 1984, explains that the uses of biography are to combat "Wimsatt's Law."[1] "A student of literature ought to be trying all the time to empathize with his author (and of course the assumptions and conventions by which the author felt him-

[1]"Wimsatt's Law" was Empson's term for "The Intentional Fallacy." W. K. Wimsatt's well-known article with this title was printed in his book *The Verbal Icon* in 1952.

self bound)" (p. viii). Inverting this, the uses of biography are seen to be obliquely autobiographical. Empson's traumas dominate his later criticism as they had formerly shaped his poetry, of which he said "No grit; no pearl!"

Empson told Ricks he hoped to write more poetry when he retired but thought with most poets "the middle bit is frightfully bad!" I would gladly exchange *Milton's God*, entertaining as its Voltairean wit may be, for *The Faces of the Buddha*, which Empson thought his best book. He sent the manuscript home from the Far East; John Davenport lost it. Kathleen Raine, who had read it, reports:

> One of the contrasts made between the figures of the Christ and those of the Buddha was that, whereas it demanded supreme artistry to capture the Christ-like aspect, the Buddha's face itself (not some symbol comparable to the Cross) was the Icon of the Buddhist world; an aspect capturable in its mysterious vacancy even by some ignorant village woodcarver. That expression, written upon the void itself, exerted its power upon the poet of the new void of our world of photons. The sense of the relative, the impermanence, the unreality of the appearances, opened by the scientific universe, was old in Buddhism before our civilization was born.
>
> (Gill, pp. 16-17)

Here, it seems, was an important bridge from the poetry to the prose. The indirect autobiography of *Using Biography*, inimitably Empsonian in its darting intelligence, its arresting ironic phrasing, and its high eccentricity—the important remarks come in asides or subordinate clauses—offers as its most generous and most useful piece the earliest, the essay on "Tom Jones" from *The Kenyon Review* (vol. xx, No. 2, Spring 1958). Empson asserts that Fielding set out with high moral intent, putting forward his story with double irony, conceding so much to the object of admonition that both moralists and dissidents are satisfied. Tom, who is good but always being rebuked, is "a better Adam." His generosity to the gamekeeper, to the highwayman, and to Nightingale not only refutes Hobbes on the inevitability of egoism, it also matches Empson's own doctrine of empathy exposed in *Using Biography*:

> The novel is glowing with the noble beauty of its gospel . . . when Fielding goes really high in *Tom Jones*, his prose is like an archangel brooding over mankind and I suppose is actually imitating similar effects in Handel . . . If good by nature, you can imagine other people's feelings so directly that you have an impulse to act on them as if they were your own; and this is the source of your greatest pleasures as well as of your only genuinely unselfish actions.
>
> (pp. 135-137)

Fielding, who sympathetically understands rival moral codes, believes in humanism, liberalism, materialism and happiness on earth (p. 134): the sense of alternative points of view does not preclude judgment but confers insight. Empson accepts his aristocratic view that "Well brought up persons do not need to keep prying into their motives as these Nonconformist types do"; however, "The outstanding moral of *Tom Jones* is that when a young man leaves home, he is much more in a goldfish bowl than he thinks" (pp. 136, 144).

Using Biography presents three writers from the Restoration and Augustan times (Marvell, Dryden, and Fielding) with three Modernists (Eliot, Yeats and Joyce); each permits a bash or two at God. "Yeats probably set off from the Christian horrors but drove them steadily into the background of his world picture" (p. 137). There is a continual concern with the minutiae of *Byzantium*: he thought Yeats, when a boy, must have seen a toy golden bird, as Empson himself had done. "The poem feels much better if one takes a waking interest in its story" (p. 186). One essay on Marvell (among the last to be written) offers the substance of Empson's Clark Lecture at Cambridge in the late 1970s, on "Marvell's Marriage." We saw him mount the rostrum at Mill Lane, and then with a cry of "The wrong spectacles!" dash off again. We thought it might be a ruse to get away, but no, he was back again, pulling many small pieces of paper out of his pockets, helping himself liberally to the erudition of Elsie Duncan-Jones, whose name he had forgotten—she was sitting in the audience.

I did not hear "Natural Magic and Popularism" given at Hull in 1978, but Ray Brett told me that when he asked for the script, he was told there was no script. After many proddings, Empson produced that which, with a postscript of "Other people's views," is reprinted in *Using Biography*. It tells that Marvell was employed as a London agent by various Hull merchants, who paid well; he refused to join his brother-in-law's wine firm. His career had been determined by the marriages of his elder sisters in Hull. His own London marriage was kept secret, but leaked out. He died as a result of his last visit to Hull, where he had quarrelled with the burgesses about the forthcoming Titus Oates Plot, of which he had early warning—and then walked about the marshes all night, catching malaria, which killed him soon after he returned to London. Empson goes on expanding this story of his own invention, as he does also with Dryden. Marvell's *sprezzatura* gave models to Empson as poet, but now it is the Yorkshire M.P. (Member of Parliament) that interests him. The Yorkshire countryside, Cambridge, and the Far East were Empson's sources of power. London, Eliot's theme in *The Waste Land,* he thinks "has just escaped from the First World War, but it is certain to be destroyed by the next one, because it is in the hands of international financiers" (p. 191). Empson ends with *The Confidential Clark* and "just a smack" at Eliot's Christian worship of torture. But he was always courteous personally, as when he discussed points in Marvell's poetry with me. For the Founder of Christianity he revered: "Jesus, yes; the Church, no" is not at all uncommon today. The Voltairean Empson may be used by Jonathan Culler in *The Times Literary Supplement* (November 23, 1984) or by the dour Christopher Norris in *Essays in Criticism* to have a bash at some of their own Christian enemies, but the Empson they make use of was twinned with another, whose loyalties were unwavering and unexamined.

When the Queen visited Sheffield, Empson wrote a masque, *The Birth of Steel,* which attributed to her personally the entire invention of processing the

metal, and he was pleased when she asked, "Mr. Empson, why don't they laugh?" He celebrated his dubbing as a knight, but one of his last recorded remarks was a disrespectful adaptation of a text; "Isn't it *awful* about ______'s knighthood! It takes the point out of mine. Ah, well; 'put not your trust in princes!' " (His brother Charles, a former ambassador, took precedence as Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George.)

For the occasion of his honorary degree at Cambridge, Empson appeared as a country gentleman, a reformed Tom Jones in a canary yellow sporting waistcoat. The proctors would have removed it from anyone taking a degree by examination, and fined the presenter, in this case the Public Orator, a bottle of port; but they could no more object to this sartorial impropriety than to the Queen Mother's hatpin, with which she firmly skewered her doctoral bonnet in place. Empson's introduction to *Using Biography* returns to his early preoccupation with Lord Rochester who "wrote smart poems in favour of drunkenness and promiscuity; they are often exquisitely graceful, though one may reflect that his ladies were probably disagreeable."

> But in his surviving letters and a few late poems, it becomes clear that he remained deeply in love with his wife, with whom he had eloped and hated his iron duties at court as a leader of fashion, which were plainly dragging him down to an early death. He had some conversations with Bishop Burnet shortly before he died, which were interpreted as a complete betrayal of his previous enlightened views, in the hope of escaping from Hell; but in fact they are reasonable, responsible, and unafraid. He need not be claimed as a profound thinker, but his apparently careless verses undoubtedly proceeded from an inner conflict. Whether his life and work are tragic or ridiculous or positively good after all, only the individual reader can decide.
>
> (p. viii)

Empson too is elusive, a quicksilver Quixote always ready to couch a lance, whether at dragons or windmills.