



WILLIAM EMPSON

*Jane Brown*

## WILLIAM EMPSON

1906–1984

WILLIAM EMPSON, poet and critic, died on 15 April 1984, in his seventy-eighth year. Like another poet-critic of supreme inaugurative and consolidatory powers, Samuel Johnson, William Empson was at once—without any untoward friction—a great man and a great Englishman.

William Empson was born on 27 September 1906, at Yokefleet Hall in Yorkshire, the youngest of the five children of Arthur Reginald Empson and his wife Laura. The world of the landed gentry, with its decorum and tension, was to be deeply respected by Empson, though his independence of being and of mind permitted no world to trammel him. Class questions were always to provoke him, in his poetry and in his criticism, not only to active concern but also to unsentimental comedy. ('The English no less than the Americans cling to a touching belief that social distinctions in modern England are more bitter than elsewhere', he remarked in 1937.)

Though he was not to write at any length autobiographically, there are throughout his essays some lovely evocations of experiences grim and gleeful, evocations which are always endearingly germane (in the discriminating and loving intelligence with which they comprehend feeling and memory) to their particular critical enterprise. A late essay on W. B. Yeats enshrines, with awe and affectionate humour, two early memories. First, apropos of Yeats's 'bobbin': '*The Princess and the Goblins* was published when Yeats was 7 years old, and became part of the equipment of every respectable Victorian nursery. One of my earliest memories is of clutching a candle in my shaking hand and climbing over heaps of coal as I wound up the thread left by my sister across the vasty and labyrinthine cellars of Yokefleet Hall. If the child Yeats had not played this game too, it is hard to see why the grotesque conceit rang a bell in him.' Second, on Yeats's golden bird:

When I was small (born 1906) I was sometimes taken to visit a venerable great-aunt, and after tea she would bring out exquisitely preserved toys of an antiquity rivalling her own. Chief among them was the bird of Yeats in its great cage, wound up to sing by a massive key; a darkish green tree, as I remember, occupied most of the cage, and a quite small shimmering bird, whose beak would open and shut while the

musical box in the basement was playing, perched carelessly upon a branch at one side. The whole affair glittered, but I cannot claim to have seen the Golden Bough; it was prettier than a gilt tree would have been; and of course the bird was not plumb on top of it, like Satan in Paradise. I remember being struck to hear my mother say, by way of praising the great age of the toy, that she remembered being shown it herself when she was a child after such a tea; and she and Yeats were born in the same year, 1865.

Family feeling was always strong in Empson, and it was to find grand and chastened expression in the poem about his mother, 'To an Old Lady' (1928), a poem which he delighted to find that she supposed to be about his grandmother. What has become trivialized as 'the generation gap' is contemplated as more mysteriously vista'd:

Stars how much further from me fill my night.  
Strange that she too should be inaccessible,  
Who shares my sun. He curtains her from sight,  
And but in darkness is she visible.

Empson entered Winchester College as a Scholar in 1920. He was to make his mark there as a debater, and his debating was later to leave its mark upon his poems and his criticism. His poems exult in 'argufying' (his homely respectful term for such serious non-philosophical daily arguing as most concerns most of us most of the time), and his criticism thrives upon a feeling for the stylized combative courtesies within which passionate conviction may boisterously or rudely play. Debate was the thing for a critic who would combine the persuasive force of strong beliefs with the complementarily persuasive acknowledgement that it is not given to even the most large-minded to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Empson the Wykehamist already manifested that he was of the independent left, or was at least such a liberal as should expect to be described as on the left. He argued that Britain should recognize the Soviet Government, he hoped that the Public Schools would become less class-bound, he opposed corporal punishment, and he jeered genially at games. In 1924 he won the Richardson prize for mathematics, and a scholarship in mathematics to Magdalene College, Cambridge. At Winchester he acted a couple of minor parts in a play which was always to fascinate him, *Doctor Faustus*; he was runner-up for the Warden and Fellows' English Essay prize; and he wrote some poems but published none. 'I had written some poems before going to Cambridge but feel sure that I destroyed them all' (1964).

In *The God Approached*, a commentary on the poems, Philip and Averil Gardner shrewdly note the likely influence of various lectures at Winchester in 1924 and 1925, especially on astronomy, geography, and biology. The poems, like much of the prose, are continuous with the impulse that Empson voiced in a debate at Winchester, that 'Science had a distinctly ennobling effect in teaching us the greatness of the universe'.

Empson had a brilliant career at Cambridge, beginning there in 1925. The Cambridge of Rutherford, Eddington, and I. A. Richards was diversely yet coherently congenial to him. He gained a First in Part I of the Mathematics Tripos; changed to English; and in 1929 gained a starred First in Part I of the English Tripos. This went with an undergraduate life of vivid energy, including debating at the Union and writing. His first published poem, 'Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth Century', was in his college magazine in 1927. He became literary editor, 'Skipper', of the undergraduate magazine *Granta*, to which he contributed reviews of books, of films, and of plays, as well as sharp whimsies. Philip and Averil Gardner give appropriate salience to two of Empson's *Granta* reviews, as not only prophetic of but constitutive of his own choice of life. First, on E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*:

An attempt, successful or not, to include all possible attitudes, to turn upon a given situation every tool, however irrelevant or disconnected, of the contemporary mind, would be far too strenuous and metaphysical an exertion.

Second, on Maeterlinck's *The Life of the White Ant*: 'M. Maeterlinck has taken upon himself one of the artist's new, important, and honourable functions, that of digesting the discoveries of the scientist into an emotionally available form.' Empson was to live up to, and live out, such high hopes. He knew too much science to be tempted into scientism as a critic.

'Great things are expected of Mr Empson by many of our professional expectors', said *Granta*. In 1928 he published twenty poems, fifteen of which were to be in his *Collected Poems*. Some appeared in the *Cambridge Review*, others in the magazine, much influenced by Richards, which Empson edited with Jacob Bronowski and Hugh Sykes Davies, *Experiment*. In 1929 there appeared what may well be the best anthology ever of student poetry, *Cambridge Poetry, 1929*; Empson contributed six poems of powerful unmistakability. F. R. Leavis knew and said as much:

When we come to William Empson we find something that we must take very seriously. There is nothing parasitic about his work. But

although he does not borrow from Mr Eliot, it is clear that he knows Mr Eliot's criticism, or, at any rate, has profited by the ideas that Mr Eliot has put into currency . . . His poems have a tough intellectual content (his interest in ideas and the sciences, and his way of using his erudition, remind us of Donne—safely), and they evince an intense preoccupation with technique.

The preoccupation with technique and with much else precipitated in 1930 *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. It drew upon brief articles which Empson had published in 1929. I. A. Richards unforgettably recalled its genesis ten years later:

As he was at Magdalene this made me his Director of Studies. He seemed to have read more English Literature and to have read it more recently and better, so our rôles were soon in danger of being reversed. At about his third visit, he brought up the games of interpretation which Laura Riding and Robert Graves had been playing with the unpunctuated form of 'The expense of spirit in a waste of shame'. Taking the sonnet as a conjuror takes his hat he produced an endless stream of lively rabbits from it and ended by 'You could do that with any poetry, couldn't you?' This was a Godsend to a Director of Studies, so I said 'You'd better go and do it, hadn't you?' A week later he was still slapping away at it on his typewriter. Would I mind if he just went on with that? Not a bit. The following week there he was with a thick wad of very illegible typescript under his arm—the central 30,000 words or so of the book.

The book was brilliantly fecund and fecundating. For F. R. Leavis, it boded the demise of belletrism:

This book is highly disturbing. Here is a man using his intelligence on poetry as seriously as if it were mathematics or one of the sciences. And Mr Empson's is clearly a mind qualified for distinction in fields of thought where serious standards hold. He seems to think that such standards will be tolerated in the field of criticism. How, then, shall the amateur of belles-lettres defend the Muses and himself?

But it is characteristic of the width and generosity of Empson's work that it does not lend itself to the fiercely polemical pedagogical politics of Leavis or of the absolutisms that have succeeded Leavis's. Thus one amateur of *belles-lettres* had not felt it necessary to defend the Muses and himself: Lascelles Abercrombie, whose acute and sympathetic review rejoiced in the book, 'as mature in its prudence and patience as its analysis is vivid and courageous'. Abercrombie would have had no difficulty in happily concurring with Leavis's words: '*Seven Types of Ambiguity* is that rare thing, a critical work of the first order.'

The book was at once seen to be what it is: a work that (for all its

slips and eccentricities) showed critical genius, in its fertility both of wide ideas and of detailed analyses, and above all in the way it formulated a general principle that became available for all to use—or abuse.

Much poetry is beautiful, interesting, and rich, because of the number and variety of its meanings and suggestions—and it is worth trying to work out in detail what they are. To say this, and to show it with such ingenuity, was to give the world something ripe with mischief as well as with usefulness, and Empson never pretended otherwise. ('I don't deny that the method could lead to a shocking amount of nonsense; in fact, as a teacher of English literature in foreign countries I have always tried to warn my students off the book.')

The reception of *Seven Types* is a heartening fact; the misconceptions seem to have swollen later. That Empson is a coldly 'scientific' critic—a suggestion explicitly repudiated by the original reviewers, who were impressed by his fire and fervour. Or that he is interested only in the minutiae—when in fact few critics have shown themselves more keen to use both the telescope and the microscope. What was new in *Seven Types* was not, of course, the observation that ambiguity exists but the idea that it was often a good thing. Lord Kames in the eighteenth century had spoken tartly of some unnamed proto-Empsons who praised ambiguity: 'by suggesting various meanings at once, it is admired by others as concise and comprehensive.' It took nearly two hundred years before that belittled insight was fully recovered. The other new emphasis lay in using verbal analysis to praise rather than condemn a poem. When Dryden set upon Settle's verse, or Johnson scrutinized Addison's, it was, indeed, with the aim of 'taking it apart'—in the hostile sense. The bad habit natural to verbal analysis was not that the meddling intellect misshaped the beauteous forms of things ('We murder to dissect'), but that it so often had only a hostile intent—it dissected to murder. Whereas *Seven Types* (which dealt in poems it liked) never murdered any poems, even if it did occasionally misquote them.

It succeeded in extending the sovereignty of reason, in establishing one principle by which the critic may—in Johnson's noble phrase—'improve opinion into knowledge'. It showed that to think hard, to use intelligence, is a necessary, albeit not a sufficient, aim for a critic. How can such qualities date? Or how can such work be said to have been definitively 'done'? As Bonamy Dobrée said in 1930, the great thing about Empson is that 'you are

moved to quarrel with him in detail on nearly every page'. Of how many can as much be said?

Did the young Empson hope, or wish, to stay in Cambridge? In a *Granta* book-review in 1928 he had comically scouted the matter: 'One's future in Cambridge is regarded much as the future life is in other societies; no doubt something will come, and many people have an idea it will suit them very well; but the subject, though not actually improper, of course, must be introduced with delicacy if at all.' Empson's future life, in other societies, was to suit him very well. From 1931 to 1934, he taught in Tokyo as Professor of English Literature at the University of Literature and Science (Bunrika Daigaku), a post for which Richards had recommended him; he lectured too at Tokyo Imperial University. Reminiscences of these years of Empson's have been set down by Rintaro Fukuhara; the picture is of Empson's personal vivacity and vitality, professional conscience, and largeness of cultural sympathies.

Empson's respect for Japan was perhaps to be outshone by his respect for China, but he never descended to easy oppositions. Even at the height of the war, he was eager in 1942 to describe Japan to the BBC's overseas listeners with comedy's large truthfulness:

It would be foolish to try to work up general hatred of the Japanese and all their works; they are not all going to kill themselves after this war, and what we have to aim at is a working relationship between the peoples of this planet.

No English poet, critic, professor did more than Empson to create a working relationship between the peoples of this planet: in Japan and China, in Ghana and the United States, and in England.

Empson's return to England in 1934 was soon followed by two very important books. *Poems* (1935), slim, weighty and unignorable, met a reception that was to become a familiar field of force. *Scrutiny* indurated Leavis's later line, deploring Empson's 'pleasure in subtlety for its own sake'. Louis MacNeice was a bit torn, but patched it up with the concessive words 'to put it sentimentally': 'On the whole I admire his tricks; he is a great hand at words, his syntax arrests, and he can manage the significant pun. What I complain of is that he is merely inhuman. To put it sentimentally, there is not enough blood and sweat in him.' Richards added, to MacNeice's missing blood and sweat, the presence of tears, sometimes poignant, often of laughter. The reader 'will have been made to laugh repeatedly in a healthy, intellectual, obscure, and

satisfying fashion. Little modern poetry—only the best—makes us laugh so.'

Also in 1935 Empson's second critical book, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, was published. These essays constitute a profound re-interpretation of pastoral not simply and solely as a literary genre but as an impulse and organizing spirit. If the central impulse of pastoral is understood to be a meeting in which each side manifests at once a superiority and an inferiority (as with country and town, but also with many another enactment of innocence's meeting with experience), then Empson's gathering of essays has the unifying force which comes with a superb seizing of the essentials. The page on Gray's 'Elegy' is to my mind the greatest illumination that there is of literature understood politically, assisted not impeded by a respect for what is true in Marxism, a perfect combination of the antithetical claims of political conscience and tragic consciousness.

A humane engagement with Marxism, respectful and wary, informs this essay on 'Proletarian Literature'; a similar engagement with Freud, the essay on *Alice in Wonderland*. Double plots in plays; double meanings in sonnets; double feelings in idyllic gardens; double accountings in the *felix culpa* of the Fall; double judgements of low life and high life in *The Beggar's Opera*: these come together as the deepest and most radiating comprehension of a literary kind, with particular instances seen unexpectedly to be indeed pastorals, and with any one of the habitations or embodiments of the pastoral impulse (the country, the child, the worker . . .) apprehended as an avatar, not as The Incarnation. Praising and illuminating Empson's 'sense of the strength, fullness, and human reality of our ordinary gestures and expressions', Paul Alpers re-affirmed in 1978 the greatness of *Some Versions of Pastoral*: 'No answer is more powerful than his to the misconception that pastoral is escapist. No writer knows better that one must often simply face life and accept its dilemmas—neither running away nor imagining that we can always find a decisive battle or course of action.'

Empson's principled repudiation of Christianity did not make him embrace other religions but it did help to further a respectful curiosity about systems of belief remote from those of England. In Japan he began writing a book on Buddhist sculpture, and he finished a study, *The Faces of Buddha*, which was lost during the war; what survives is a fascinating radio-talk, of the same title, to be found in *The Listener*, 5 February 1936. The *Collected Poems* offered part of *The Fire Sermon* as an epigraph, and Empson was



subsequently saltily keen not to be misunderstood:

Of course I think Buddhism much better than Christianity, because it managed to get away from the neolithic craving to gloat over human sacrifice; but even so I feel it should be applied cautiously, like the new wonder-drugs.

In 1937 Empson went to China, to be professor at Peking National University; but the Sino-Japanese war, with the fall of Peking, necessitated the evacuation of three universities and their coming together at Changsha, a thousand miles away. Empson joined them, teaching first in the mountain-village of Nan-Yueh, and—bookless—relying upon his prodigious memory, which sometimes played him false in details but was a truly huge resource, itself still prodigiously remembered in China to this day. The courage, excitement, and gaiety of these years with the ‘South-Western Combined Universities’ are alive in one of Empson’s essays of reminiscence, ‘A Chinese University’ (1940).

Empson returned to England in 1939, via Los Angeles and New York, where W. H. Auden lent him the boat-fare back to England, Empson having been robbed in Chicago. Next year he joined the Monitoring Department of the BBC, and in 1941 the Far Eastern Section, where he became Chinese Editor. It was in 1941 that he married Hester Henrietta Crouse, by whom he was to have two sons. Empson, who had ‘come back from China voluntarily for the war’, earned the grumpy respect of George Orwell, then at the BBC too. Empson later wrote:

I had returned feeling that the defeat of Hitler was of immense importance, to be sure, but also feeling reasonably confident that I would be allowed an interesting war by being let into the propaganda machine; then again, I was protected by my obscurity, unlike the poet Auden, who, I still think, was right in refusing to become the laureate of Churchill. For that matter, my Chinese university had simply assumed that I would require indefinite wartime leave (the Chinese were already regarding our war as a part of their war), so it would have been embarrassing to act otherwise.

Empson’s experiences in what he robustly called the Liars’ School of the BBC were to give him an idiosyncratic insight into Milton when he came to write *Milton’s God*. ‘The stories about Milton when he was a propaganda chief amount to saying that he behaved as George [Orwell] wanted to do—very charitably, in a way—so I won’t believe that they are merely libels, as is always assumed by critics with no propaganda experience.’

*The Gathering Storm*, Empson's second book of poems, appeared in 1941; it consisted of twenty-one poems, ten published for the first time. A new accessibility and simplicity informed some of the poems; others, though still difficult, were differently so, less in the manner of Donne. After *The Gathering Storm*, Empson wrote and published few poems: three appeared between 1941 and 1947, and one in 1952: the superbly immediate and deep poem-translation, 'Chinese Ballad'. For the Queen's visit in 1954 to Sheffield University, where Empson was then professor, he wrote a brief masque, 'The Birth of Steel', comical and unmocking. In 1955, six years after a similar collection had appeared in the USA, Empson published his *Collected Poems* in England. Empson was, it seems, to write no more poems, though till the end of his life he delighted in giving readings and in annotating the poems with modesty and bravura. He was, in an interview in 1963, characteristically direct about having stopped writing:

I just found in Peking I was writing some and it struck me they were bad, I didn't want to print them. I hope that when I'm made to retire, I'll be able to start writing again. If you look at the collected edition of a nineteenth-century poet, you'll find that the middle bit is frightfully bad—he begins well and he often gets alright again at the end, but all that long middle bit you might just as well leave out, I think. When I found I didn't want to print, I said O.K., I'll leave it alone. The motives which made me want to write had I suppose largely disappeared.

But the more we praise the good sense of Empson, the more I feel how clever I've been, how right I was to stop writing. If I'd gone on it would have got appallingly boring. It's only because I stopped in time that you still think it's poetry.

Empson returned to China in 1947, teaching at Peking National University. His love of China was to be manifest, years later, in a beautifully appreciative account of the Chinese Exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1973. His resilience enabled him to see the comic side even of some effects of civil war, as in his memories of buying a ticket to fly to Kenyon College for the Summer School:

One could not give a cheque for the ticket, because that would take a day to pass through the bank, and then be worth much less. We carried to the air-line office a military duffle-bag full of the highest denomination of paper money, and four men counted it all day; towards the fall of eve, with patient triumph, they said: 'You're two million short', but I was just in time to get this extra sop out of the bank, and the ticket was won. Typing paper cost a little more than its own area of paper money.

Empson's political sympathies were clear and unsentimental: 'The "liberation" of the city when it came was very widely given that name, even by Europeans, though in Europe of course liberating a hen had come to mean stealing it for dinner. Some of these people may have come since then to feel that they were deluded; for that matter, it would be rather unnatural if the students of Peita remained enthusiastic about a government in power; but I was there for the honeymoon between the universities and the Communists, which was scarcely over when I left in 1952.'

In 1952 Empson applied for the Chair at Sheffield University; he held it from 1953 until his retirement in 1971, and was greatly loved and esteemed for his unique voice and for his conscientious commitment to the undertaking which he informally gave when seeking the appointment: 'It may be felt that my published work has been rather specialized, but I would try to provide what was wanted in the post and not merely indulge my specialities.'

His appointment at Sheffield followed upon the publication in 1951 of what is indeed his most specialized book, *The Structure of Complex Words*. As early as 1936, the year after *Some Versions of Pastoral*, he had published early versions of what were to be chapters of *Complex Words*, and the scale and ambition of the consummate book are titanic. Empson himself saw the book as a culmination—not at all a superseding—of his earlier thinking:

Of the prose books, *Ambiguity* examines the complexity of meaning in poetry; *Pastoral* examines the way a form for reflecting a social background without obvious reference to it is used in a historical series of literary works, and *Complex Words* is on both those topics; it offers a general theory about the interaction of a word's meaning and takes examples which cover rather the same historical ground as *Pastoral*. Roughly, the moral is that a developing society decides practical questions more by the way it interprets words it thinks obvious and traditional than by its official statements of current dogma.

'Life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis; e.g. those of philosophy, which apply to all creatures, and the religious one about man being both animal and divine.' Empson's note to 'Bacchus' is well known, and known to widen out to take in a great many of his other poems; among them 'Arachne', which sets out life's contradictions with gruesome neatness; 'Aubade', with its antithetical refrains; and 'Let it go', where 'The contradictions cover such a range'. Empson was always explicit about contradiction as the foundation of his poems, and, wider yet, of all poems because of what life is. 'To take real pleasure in verse' is to feel 'so straddling a commotion

and so broad a calm.' This is what we value in poems: 'That all these good qualities should be brought together is a normal part of a good poem; indeed, it is a main part of the value of a poem, because they are so hard to bring together in life.' It is what we value in myths, where 'incompatibles are joined'. And in goddesses: Venus in Shakespeare's poem remains somehow cool and calmly good, and 'the suggestion that the rowdy and lustful Venus keeps all these qualities makes her a goddess because she resolves the contradictions of normal life'.

Such is the *raison d'être* of ambiguity, Empson's first critical book; of pastoral and irony, his second; and of complex words, his third, where, for instance, 'the honest man in achieving normality reconciles a contradiction'.

*The Structure of Complex Words* has a technicality and a density which can be daunting, but it is a work of sustained, diverse, and penetrating thinking about language and literature unique in the century, indeed unique *tout court*. Bad jokes were defensively made about its being, surely, meant as some kind of joke or jape; this was the line taken by a Leavisite in *Mandrake*, and Empson was obliged to reply with a transcendent blend of majesty and comedy:

What I feel about the book, if there is any doubt, is easily told. I think it is wonderful; I think it goes up like a great aeroplane. A certain amount of noisy taxi-ing round the field at the start may be admitted, and the landing at the end is bumpy though I think without causing damage; but the power of the thing and the view during its flight I consider magnificent. When after long struggle it began to 'come out' I was astonished at its unity, at the way so many lines of effort which had felt somehow significant really did fit in (this must be what my critic takes to be its dreary paucity of ideas). When it was done I felt *Nunc Dimittis*; I was free, I was ready to die. I was to fly with the text from Peking to Ohio, where some final checking in libraries might well be done, and it was reasonable to leave at Peking a fully corrected spare text in case of accident. There was little reason for alarm, but having to do this made me notice the firmness of my sentiments; I did not care about anything as long as the book got printed. This is disagreeably like writing an advertisement for myself, but consider how much more disagreeable it is for me to be told that I was cooking up a fatuously tiresome mass of spoofo, licking my lips over the hope of jeering at anybody who was fool enough to take it seriously. The meanmindedness of anybody who can believe I did that feels to me quite sickening.

Such large scorn, truly modest, is the more moving because Empson was always (the more unusually for a literary critic) willing to heed adverse criticism; his second thoughts on *Seven*

*Types*, both in the introduction to the second edition and in various changes, are evidence of this very unLeavisite ability not just to change his mind (Leavis did that) but to acknowledge it. *Complex Words* itself was to include important comments for both the second and the third editions, where the accents are those of a brave and clear-eyed controversialist, aware that controversy, when properly conducted, is an act of imagination. 'Controversy demands imagination; you must try to understand your opponent's position, so that you can select the things worth talking about; so that you can find the root of his errors, or of your disagreement with him.'

*Milton's God* (1961) was to prove Empson's most controversial book, partly because it is a book in one sense in which his others are not: that is, it is one sustained argument bent upon a single work. Controversial, also, because it seemed to some doubly blasphemous, as to both Milton and Christianity. Helen Gardner, in a magnanimous review, observed that the effect was very like that of Milton himself in controversy. The traditional view of Milton's God was that Milton failed, and inadvertently portrayed, not divinity, but a 'school-divine'—Pope's word pinpointed a long time ago the lordliness, aridity and narrow sadism which most readers find at times in Milton's God. Empson's query is piercingly simple: why so sure that this is altogether inadvertent? Why is it out of the question that the poem might wish to show us these things about its God? 'The reason why the poem is so good is that it makes God so bad.' In other words, the critics have all been right in their description of what Milton's God feels like, but wrong in deducing that Milton had simply botched his job. Yet the tension for Empson's reader is that the book, like many a good book, straddles two fronts. From one point of view, it praises Milton for having consciously cleared his mind of cant, for having understood that a belief in the story of the Fall necessitated showing that there are many things about God which make the blood run cold. Empson's praise here is for a certain bleakness or unsentimentality which does not gloss over the price that has to be paid for worshipping this God. On the other hand, he also claims the opposite: that the poem 'is so startlingly innocent compared to the religion it claims to describe'—that is, it reduces almost to insignificance the Crucifixion, and it does its best to eliminate as much as possible of the torture inherent in the system. In other words, the praise of the moral qualities of the poem, its generosity and breadth (moral qualities which in the greatest literature are inseparable from literary qualities) must face in two quite different

directions: an honesty which presents as almost intolerably severe what other men varnish over, and a sensitivity which struggles to minimize or remove the characteristic vices of the religion.

Empson was to add forty pages of Notes and Appendix in 1965, and a further comment in 1981. His incandescent book is the most powerful exemplification of his sustained opposition to Christianity, especially to the 'neo-Christianity' which he saw as dominating literary criticism and teaching. His anti-Christian crusade was to move him to a radical consideration not only of another spirit than that of Christianity but also to other spirits: middle spirits, fairies, and the forms of supernatural life which Christianity or orthodox literary history had expelled. Such is the impulse behind his work on 'The Ancient Mariner' and behind much of his late writing on Shakespeare, Marlowe and Yeats as well as on Joyce.

The protection of Joyce against posthumous Christianizing is the moving force of the substantial essay collected, itself with sad posthumousness, in Empson's last book, *Using Biography* (1984). *Using Biography* is devoted to six authors: Marvell, Dryden, Fielding, Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce. Three related principles unify the book, all argued for and all good-naturedly shocked at the pretty pass to which things have come. First, that the knowledge of what a writer had in mind may be of unique use in understanding the art. Second, that therefore 'the intentional fallacy' is itself a fallacy and moreover beckons, not into the ascetic desert of disattending to intentions, but into the oily swamp of imputing wrong intentions. Third, that in our time the most prevalent misimputation of an intention has been Christian. *Using Biography*, then, is unified by an educative mission and an anti-crusade. But the argumentative unification of the book matters less than its unity of spirit. It has the supreme integrative virtue, magnanimity. Empson, granted, was exquisitely unsentimental as a writer and as a man (too full of courage to be sentimental), but this, far from marring his magnanimity, is what makes it something.

*Using Biography* is itself a reminder of the immense riches of uncollected essays by Empson. Cambridge University Press is to collect, with the concurrence given by Empson a few years ago, the essays on Shakespeare which Empson had always hoped to revise (most notable are those on *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, on *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Winter's Tale*); and there will be a further collection of his essays on poetry (Donne here being one recurrent focus of his imaginative attention). To the end Empson retained

his sweetly startling comedy, a power which he had praised in 1928 in *Granta*, when he ended his review of R. H. Platt with the words: 'I know no modern English that gives this continual shock of pleasure. Give it me back, I can find some much funnier ones in a minute.'

He earned love and respect. Institutions did honour to themselves in recognizing his genius. He received honorary doctorates from the universities of East Anglia (1968), Bristol (1971), Sheffield (1974), and Cambridge (1977). It is a far better thing, late than never. Magdalene College elected him to an Honorary Fellowship in 1979; he became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1976. Among the unusual features of his claim to such honours was the supremely unusual one, his being a genius. In 1979 he was knighted.

How could one possibly sum up this myriad-minded man, inimitably alive as poet and critic? Empson himself delighted in praising, and the world could gratefully retort upon him the great sentence (no verb, but what a statement) with which he began his essay in honour of I. A. Richards: 'A splendid career, long and various, which has brought help and enlightenment wherever it has turned.' When Empson died, his death mattered not only to an important few but to the important many; it is to be hoped, then, that it will not be inappropriate to do what is not usual, and to end this memoir with an earlier tribute, in this case the one which the present writer paid to this great man in the *Sunday Times* of 22 April 1984, a week after Empson's death, a tribute which is necessarily inadequate but is less so than would be any needless fretful reconsideration of our unhesitating and enduring gratitude to William Empson.

#### GENIUS OF THE IMAGINATION

Sir William Empson, who died on April 15 at the age of 77, was a genius of the imagination. In his poetry, his criticism and his life, he achieved what Coleridge knew was the supreme feat: the balance and reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.

So a more than usually stringent intelligence would meet a more than usually impassioned impulse; and, thanks to Empson, the world would be graced by this new-linking, a poem as searing as 'Missing Dates' or as soaring as 'Legal Fiction'. Empson used to purr at the fact that 'Legal Fiction' had been found thrillingly apt by Russians and Americans, by astronauts and space-lawyers.

'The contradictions cover such a range', concedes a poignant poem. 'Life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis', insists the resilient prose. But Empson's glory was to

fuse such opposites so that 'contradictions' was no longer the right word. There is no *contradiction* between his being so untiringly nimble and so rootedly principled—it is just that practically nobody ever manages it. And no contradiction between his being such a patriot and so strict a critic of our governments' policies and of our social injustices.

This intelligence was not the enemy but the needed ally of deep feeling in his poems, whether the feeling was comic affection ('Just A Smack At Auden') or tragic loss ('Aubade'). So the suggestive subtleties of detail would accommodate, not resist, their strong story-line or their robust argument.

The paradoxes abound. Empson met all the criteria of genius, including the hardest one: that it is the thing for which there is no criterion. He knew intimately every dismay and despair, and yet wrote and lived in high-spirited hopes. He once offered in passing a beautifully hopeful definition of intelligence. Copernicus had anticipated a possible objection, and this showed that Copernicus was more intelligent, less at the mercy of his own notions, than had been said. It is a penetrating idea of intelligence, and there is something very sweet and touching about its confidence that we all have our own notions and the only problem is not being at their mercy.

Each of his books has a good claim to be his best. His *Collected Poems*, because such poems matter most, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, for revolutionising the reading of poetry by its vigilance about how words work. *Some Versions of Pastoral*, as the deepest book ever about the impulse of a whole kind of literature. *The Structure of Complex Words*, so humane as scarcely to be called linguistics. *Milton's God*, his crusade to rescue Milton from Christianity.

Empson was quintessentially English while of global sympathies. He was the fine flower of a particular education (Winchester and Cambridge), and he dedicated his life to the universities of Tokyo, Peking, and Sheffield. He was the least snobbish of men, and he did not disdain a knighthood. 'We're having a boasting party after the dubbing': who else would begin an invitation so? I once asked him if his knighthood had brought him deference in the pubs of Hampstead. No, he said, but someone had asked, 'What did they make *you* a knight for?'

He was at once the heir to a long line of poet-critics and the first poet-critic of genius to thrive from within the universities. (Eliot was no professor, and Leavis no poet.) He was profoundly radical, and yet he rejoiced to concur with the common reader: he really did believe that the great writers are those who have commanded an enduring loyalty. He was urgently discriminating, and yet he wrote always from love. He did not find his energies where it is easiest to find them, in repudiation, but in welcome, and the characteristic Empson criticism is one which sees and shows new reasons for the greatness of something which has long been felt to be great.

With a tragic sensibility he matched a comic exhilaration, and he could wring triumph even from the grimmest occasion. Such as the



letter of reference. Mr X 'would make a valuable member of your Department', he ended one paragraph—only to begin the next: 'Unless you have one already, I am tempted to add'.

For all his intricacies of mind and his perturbations of heart, his central propositions always had a sublime simplicity. He never narrowed his mind or his eyes. Asked to contribute in praise of T. S. Eliot, he wrote that he found it difficult because he was not certain how much of his own mind Eliot had invented. Most people don't like the thought of their minds' being invented by someone else. But Empson, comic and benign, liked it perfectly well, because he knew what literature is, and a mind, and gratitude. His epitaph for himself, they say, was laconically rich: 'No more bother'. English life will miss his incomparable mind, his candid heart, his straight gaze.

CHRISTOPHER RICKS

*Note.* These pages have profited from the introduction to *The God Approached: A Commentary on the Poems of William Empson*, by Philip and Averil Gardner (1978), and from the kindness of John Haffenden, who is writing the life of Empson. Frank Day has edited *Sir William Empson: An Annotated Bibliography* (1984). Empson is celebrated in *William Empson: The Man and His Work*, edited by Roma Gill (1974).