



WILLIAM EMPSON

VOLUME II: AGAINST *the* CHRISTIANS

JOHN HAFFENDEN

WILLIAM
EMPSON



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JOHN HAFFENDEN

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I am particularly grateful to Empson's literary executors for granting me permission to print in this volume, for the first time and exclusively, the verses entitled 'The Wife is Praised' (first drafted in 1948). The Estate of William Empson declined to include the poem in *Complete Poems* (2000) on a number of grounds: these included the judgement that it is an unfinished 'private' poem; that it is not of the same quality as the published poetry; and that Empson could have published it during his lifetime if he had so wished. My own view is that it is an ingenious and witty, as well as astonishingly frank, manifesto, albeit unpolished, and I had proposed to publish it in the collected volume of poetry (among various reasons) because I knew that Empson himself was averse to keeping any literary remains 'under wraps' (as he put it in a review). Empson further claimed in a related context: 'I stubbornly won't hide anything.' Notwithstanding, it has to be said that his Estate was faced with a genuine dilemma (since Empson did not apparently try to publish the poem, and did not leave testamentary directions about it) and acted in good faith. More recently, however, the executors have come to the view that the poem is yet an important autobiographical record in verse, and on that basis they believe it is now appropriate to publish the work in the context of this biography. I am grateful to them for their generosity and faith.

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2. Recording the poetry magazine *Voice*. Standing: George Orwell, Nancy Barratt, Empson. Sitting: Venu Chitale, J. M. Tambimuttu, T. S. Eliot, Una Marson, Mulk Raj Anand. BBC.
3. Hetta Empson: two studies.
4. Portrait of Empson by Rupert Shephard, c.1944. National Portrait Gallery.
5. Severe, suited and bearded, in Peking.
6. Empson in his study at 11 Tung Kao Fang, near Peking National University, late 1940s.
7. Group portrait: taking tea in the Summer Palace at Peking. Seated from the left: David Kidd, Walter Brown, Hetta Empson, John Blofeld. Empson looks on, and smiles.
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14. Bright-eyed boys: Jacob and Mogador Empson in the 1950s.

15. The Empsons and younger son, Jacob (aged 12), in a tent erected within the cold cavern of the studio at Studio House, 28 December 1956. Photograph by Irie Yukio.
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20. Portrait of the old sage looking mischievous, by John Deakin.
21. British Museum: the portico. This atmospheric photograph by Eric de Maré happened to catch Empson shuffling in to work in the Reading Room; it was featured for many years on a British Museum postcard. Gordon Fraser Gallery.
22. Empson enjoying a drink and perusing an offprint at the Rosslyn Arms pub.
23. William and Hetta Empson sharing a joke. Photo by Judith Aronson.
24. The aged eagle, by Christopher Barker.

ABBREVIATIONS

A	Empson, <i>Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987)
BBC WAC	BBC Written Archives Centre
BL	British Library
Brotherton	Brotherton Library, Leeds University
CCBA	Chinese Central Broadcasting Administration
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Constable	John Constable (ed.), <i>Critical Essays on William Empson</i> (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993)
CV	Empson, <i>Coleridge's Verse: A Selection</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1972; with David Pirie)
<i>Complete Poems</i>	<i>Complete Poems of William Empson</i> , ed. J. Haffenden (London: Allen Lane, 2000)
EG	<i>Empson in Granta</i> (Tunbridge Wells: Foundling Press, 1993)
ESD	Eastern Service Director (of the BBC)
FO	Foreign Office
GS	Empson, <i>The Gathering Storm</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1940)
Gill	R. Gill (ed.), <i>William Empson: The Man and His Work</i> (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974)
HE	Hetta Empson
Houghton	William Empson Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University
IAR	I. A. Richards
JH	John Haffenden
KMT	Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalists)
Magdalene	I. A. Richards Papers, Old Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge
MG	Empson, <i>Milton's God</i> (rev. edn.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)
MOI	Ministry of Information
Peita	Peking National University

PLA	People's Liberation Army
<i>Poems 1934</i>	Empson, <i>Poems</i> (Tokyo, 1934)
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRO	Public Record Office
PWE	Political Warfare Executive
<i>RB</i>	Empson, <i>The Royal Beasts and Other Works</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1986)
Rodensky	Prefatory Note to <i>Some Versions of Pastoral</i> (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995)
<i>SCW</i>	Empson, <i>The Structure of Complex Words</i> (London: Chatto & Windus 1951; 3rd edn., 1977)
(Sheffield)	Sheffield University Library, Special Collections
<i>SL</i>	<i>Selected Letters of William Empson</i> , ed. J. Haffenden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
<i>SSS</i>	Empson, <i>The Strengths of Shakespeare's Shrew</i> (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996)
<i>STA</i>	Empson, <i>Seven Types of Ambiguity</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987)
<i>SVP</i>	Empson, <i>Some Versions of Pastoral</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935)
<i>TLS</i>	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WE	William Empson

CHRONOLOGY

- 1906 27 September: born at Yokefleet Hall, Howden, near Goole, Yorkshire; youngest child of Arthur Reginald Empson (landowner and squire) and his wife Laura Micklethwait; his siblings were John ('Jack', born 1891), Arthur (1892), Charles (1898), Maria ('Molly') Eleanor Katharine, (1902).
- 1914 16 May: death of eldest brother, a lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps, in an aeroplane crash.
- 1914 Enrols at a preparatory school, Praetoria House School, near Folkestone, Kent, where mathematics becomes his forte.
- 1916 15 March: death of father, aged 63.
- 1920 Wins an entrance scholarship to Winchester College; specializes in mathematics and science; falls under 'the drug of Swinburne'. Writes first known poem, 'Mother, saying Anne good night', by 29 June, *aetate* 13.
- 1924 December: wins Milner Scholarship to Magdalene College, Cambridge.
- 1925 Wins English literature prize at Winchester; comes second (*proxime accessit*) to the future Labour MP Richard Crossman in competition for the Warden and Fellows' Prize for an English Essay (John Sparrow, future Warden of All Souls College, Oxford, is third).
October: goes up to Cambridge, where his tutor for mathematics is A. S. Ramsey, father of the mathematical prodigy Frank Ramsey and the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey. Joins humanist discussion society, The Heretics.
- 1926 February–March: T. S. Eliot delivers his Clark Lectures, 'The Metaphysical Poets of the Seventeenth Century', at Trinity College, Cambridge. Although Empson does not attend all the lectures, he benefits from informal conversations with Eliot. Participates in debates at the Union.
- 1926 12 June: publishes his first literary notice in *The Granta*.

- 1926 June: gains 1st class in Part I of the mathematical Tripos; awarded college prize.
- 1927 5 February: acts in a production at the Cambridge ADC of his one-act play, *Three Stories*, a melodrama.
- 1927 Begins reviewing film and theatre, as well as books, for *The Granta* and the *Cambridge Review*. For 1927–8, while still a student of mathematics, becomes ‘Skipper’ (literary editor) of *The Granta*.
June: publishes first poem at Cambridge, ‘Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth Century’; he is influenced by seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, especially John Donne.
- 1928 June: Senior Optime (Upper Second) in Part II of the mathematical Tripos: a disappointing result.
October: registers for the English Tripos; tutored by I. A. Richards at Magdalene College; attends Richards’s lectures on ‘Practical Criticism’; begins work towards *Seven Types of Ambiguity*; becomes president of The Heretics.
November: launches avant-garde magazine, *Experiment*, co-edited with Jacob Bronowski, Humphrey Jennings, and Hugh Sykes Davies (it runs for seven issues, the last in May 1931).
- 1929 20 January: gives a talk at Cambridge on ambiguity in literature.
February: publishes ‘Ambiguity in Shakespeare: Sonnet XVI’ in *Experiment* (the essay will in due course form part of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*).
March: takes title role in *The Tragedy of Tragedies: or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* by Henry Fielding, in a production by the Cambridge Mummers.
June: gains first class with ‘special distinction’ in English Tripos; awarded a Magdalene college prize; elected to a Charles Kingsley Bye-Fellowship for 1929–30.
July: discovered by college porters to be in possession of contraceptives; an extraordinary meeting of the Governing Body of Magdalene College resolves to deprive Empson of his Bye-Fellowship and remove his name from the college books. Empson removes himself to 65 Marchmont Street, London, where he lives as a freelance writer for the next two years; he is cultivated by literary figures including T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Harold Monro, and Sylvia Townsend Warner.
October: *Letter IV* published by Heffer’s of Cambridge. Six of the eighteen poems he has written to date feature in *Cambridge Poetry*

- 1929, published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press.
- November: publishes 'Some Notes on Mr Eliot' (a further preview of *Ambiguity*) in *Experiment*.
- 1930 November: *Seven Types of Ambiguity* published.
- 1931 29 August: begins three-year contract as a professor of English at Tokyo University of Literature and Science (Bunrika Daigaku); teaches also at Tokyo Imperial University.
- 1932 February: six poems are included in anthology, *New Signatures*, published by the Hogarth Press.
- 1934 *Poems*, in an edition of 100 copies, privately printed by The Fox & Daffodil Press, Kinuta-mura, near Tokyo
- 8 July: returns to London, where he spends the next three years as a freelance writer.
- 1935 May: *Poems* published in London.
- October: *Some Versions of Pastoral* published.
- Publishes translations into Basic English of two works by J. B. S. Haldane, *The Outlook of Science* and *Science and Well-Being*.
- Gains MA, University of Cambridge.
- 1936 W. B. Yeats includes an Empson poem in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*; Michael Roberts picks six for *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*.
- 1937–8 August: takes up appointment at National Peking University, arriving just as the Japanese invade China; journeys through China with I. A. Richards and his wife; works with the exiled Peking universities—amalgamated as the Temporary University—from November 1937 to February 1938 on a mountain at Nan-Yueh, Hunan Province; journeys to Hong Kong.
- 1938–9 Continues university teaching with the National South-west Associated University in remote exile, first in the town of Mengtzu and then in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, near the Indo-China (Vietnam) border. In the autumn of 1939, sets off to return home by way of the USA, where he spends a period in Cambridge, Mass. (broadcasting on Basic English).
- 1939 28 January: arrives back in England.
- 1940 26 June: joins the Monitoring Service of the BBC at Wood Norton Hall, near Evesham in Worcestershire, working as a sub-editor.
- September: *The Gathering Storm* published in London.
- 1941 Transfers to the BBC Overseas Service in London, where he becomes a Talks Assistant and then Chinese Editor, organising

- talks to China and propaganda programmes for the Home Service; for two years, works alongside George Orwell.
- 1941 2 December: marries Hester Henrietta Crouse ('Hetta'), a South African artist, at St Stephen's Church, Hampstead, London.
- 1942 9 November: birth of first son, William Hendrik Mogador
- 1944 30 September: birth of second son, Jacob Arthur Calais.
- 1947–52 Teaches at National Peking University, his post being subsidized by the British Council; witnesses the civil war and the six-week siege of Peking late in 1948; the Communist takeover and the inauguration of the People's Republic of China, including the beginnings of reform and 'thought control'.
- 1948 24 March: *The Collected Poems of William Empson* published in New York.
July–August: teaches at Kenyon College Summer School, Gambier, Ohio, USA, on leave from Peking.
- 1950 Further summer visit to the Kenyon College Summer School.
- 1951 July: *The Structure of Complex Words* published in London.
- 1952 Summer: returns with family from China to England.
15 December: *The Poems of William Empson* broadcast by BBC.
- 1953 October: takes up Chair of English Literature at the University of Sheffield, where he works for the next 18 years, with occasional sabbaticals at American and Canadian universities.
- 1954 May: Gresham Professor in Rhetoric, Gresham College, London, lecturing on 'The last Plays of Shakespeare and their Relation to the Elizabethan Theatre'.
June–July: Fellow of the School of Letters, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
27 October: *The Birth of Steel: A Light Masque* performed for Queen Elizabeth II at the University of Sheffield.
- 1955 29 September: *Collected Poems* published in London.
- 1956 6 December: birth of Hetta Empson's third child, Simon Peter Duval Smith.
- 1961 February: *The Collected Poems of William Empson* (New York) issued in paperback.
- 1961 *Milton's God* published.
William Empson Reading Selected Poems (Listen LPV3) issued.
- 1964 Autumn: Visiting Professor, English Department, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, Ghana.
- 1968 Hon. D. Litt, University of East Anglia, Norwich.
Ingram Merrill Foundation Award.

- June–August: Visiting Professor, Department of English, State University of New York at Buffalo.
- 1971 Hon. D. Litt, University of Bristol.
Summer: retires from University of Sheffield.
- 1972 January–February: gives Waynflete Lectures on ‘The editorial choice of the text of a poem’, at Magdalen College, Oxford.
Publishes *Coleridge’s Verse: A Selection* (with David B. Pirie).
- 1973 Visiting Professor, York University, Toronto
- 1974 Lent Term: delivers Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, on ‘The Progress of Criticism’.
Hon. D. Litt., University of Sheffield.
Honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters/The National Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1974–5 Visiting Professor of English, Pennsylvania State University.
- 1976 Autumn: Visiting Professor, Department of English, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware.
Fellow of the British Academy.
Honorary Fellow of the Modern Language Association of America.
- 1977 10 June: Hon. Litt. D., University of Cambridge.
- 1979 Knighted in New Year Honours for ‘services to English literature’.
Elected Honorary Fellow, Magdalene College, Cambridge.
- 1982 January–April: Visiting Professor, University of Miami.
- 1984 15 April: dies in London.
Collected Poems reissued; *Using Biography* published.
- 1986 *The Royal Beasts and Other Works* and *Essays on Shakespeare* published.
- 1987 *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture* and *Faustus and the Censor: The English Faust-Book and Marlowe’s ‘Doctor Faustus’* published.
- 1993 *Essays on Renaissance Literature*, vol. 1: *Donne and the New Astronomy*.
- 1994 *Essays on Renaissance Literature*, vol. 2: *The Drama*.
- 1996 *The Strengths of Shakespeare’s Shrew: Essays, Memoirs and Reviews*.
- 2000 *Complete Poems of William Empson*.
- 2006 *Selected Letters of William Empson*.

1



The BBC War

People keep writing for propaganda, which I can't do, but I hope to cash in a little on pretending to know about China when I get home.

Letter to mother, 2 June 1939

I gave up writing for ten years because I really thought allied propaganda important . . .

Letter to *Kenyon Review*, Autumn 1949

I dropped all my literary interests . . . because I got absorbed in the war; I thought the defeat of Hitler so important that I could do nothing else (it was a time of great happiness, looking back, and anyway of considerable pleasure, but I have just a steady trickle of mental productiveness, and it was then all directed into propaganda). I still think the war was quite important enough for that, and a good deal of my previous poetry had been concerned to say so . . .

Letter to Christopher Ricks, 19 January 1975

I had come back from China voluntarily for the war . . . 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; and 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.⁷¹ Like Cyril Connolly, William Empson believed that the best artists of the age should be entitled and enabled to retain the purity of their work. He was modest about his own standing—he thought himself merely a ‘minor’ poet—but

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