The Asian Empson

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John Haffenden. 2005. *William Empson: Among the Mandarins*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press. 695 pp. + xxi. Illus.

Reading John Haffenden on poet-critic William Empson (as with P. N. Furbank on E. M. Forster) feels rather like sitting too close to the fire: one relishes the warmth of sustained conviction but also bears the minor anxiety of engaging a major authority—some inadvertent risk of getting burned.

Certainly, any review of *William Empson: Among the Mandarins* should not throw anything cold or brackish on Professor Haffenden's signal achievement. This official biography has been in the making for nearly thirty years, since well before Sir William's death in 1984, and its first volume is superbly researched and unquestionably insightful. Who better to write the life of Sheffield's most famous literary critic than Sheffield's most celebrated biographer?[1] An air of confidence, inevitability, and appropriateness pervades the whole undertaking. But, matching Haffenden's authority with one particular aspect of his subject, Empson's career iconoclasm, is at once constitutive and unsettling. It is unsettling because, if Empson's trademark contrariness in the face of the English literary tradition has been long established, so too has the role of dissent when weighing his achievements. And William Empson was, I believe, among the greatest dissenters of twentieth-century English literature. It is this

tone of dissent—to me, admirable—rather than the more comfortable airs of Empson as an establishment figure in Haffenden's biography, which informs my treatment of it.

Haffenden's first volume catalogues Empson's life from its gentry beginnings in Yorkshire through to his expulsion from Cambridge and on to his experiences teaching English literature abroad, first in fascist Japan and subsequently in free (unoccupied) China during the second Sino-Japanese war.[2] At nearly 700 pages, the biography (covering just under one half of Empson's life) ably shoulders its own heft. We learn that, whether in his capacity as literary editor of *Granta* while an undergraduate or as lecturer in the very bowels of the imperial Japanese state apparatus, the younger Empson advocated literary and ethical latitude despite, or perhaps because of, orthodoxy imposed from above. After arriving in Asia in 1931, clearly for Empson the teaching was the thing: what else but a single-minded purpose on behalf of his students' learning could make an irrelevance of the enemy's claims, regardless of the enemy? *Among the Mandarins* reminds us that Empson taught Japanese and Chinese students successively at a time when both were enemies in armed conflict.

Effectively avoiding caricature, Haffenden conveys Empson's resiliency in the face of severe physical challenges abroad that, for example, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood admitted to lacking. (Empson met both men in Hong Kong in January 1938.) Empson was oblivious to falling bombs and mosquito bites equally; in his classroom, the canon was made to seem—impossibly—bulletproof. Accounts persist in China today of that foreign lecturer who taught several terms' worth of the British canon virtually from memory when Peida (Peking, now Beijing) University fled the occupation and opened its classrooms in exile in Changsha, Yunnan province. It wasn't Empson's convincing (although hardly flawless) memorization of the Romantics or Milton in the absence of textbooks that rang true for his Chinese students; it was his matter-of-factness, his never being rattled when the windows were.

So, too, travels throughout the Chinese countryside offered many opportunities for Empson to display his almost reckless disregard of danger. Initially eschewing the option of residency in British Hong Kong (tea-cozied and antimacassared) or subsequently the insular comforts of European concessions in larger Chinese cities, Empson actively sought out the challenges of provincial life: the bloodied rural in the midst of an antifascist war. Quoting Graham Hough, another expatriate, who put Empson up in Singapore during the

summer of 1938, Haffenden offers ample evidence of Empson's having paid his dues to the profession:

> [M]y impression of Empson abroad is always of an uncompromisingly English figure—speech, manners and bearing quite unmodified, and somehow sailing through everything with an unconquerable air of slightly arrogant courtesy and extreme intelligence. I suspect this apparent self-possession was often hard-won. His lot was a lonely one. [. . .] His life in China did not give him all that much of a chance. I was often acutely aware that I was ensconced in a prosperous corner of the British Raj, with a fair sprinkling of people of my own sort, while he was going back to a refugee university, in a China being rapidly overrun, to write up what English literature he could remember on the blackboard because there were no books. (505)

In time, the independence of spirit Empson acquired in Asia (he privately preferred the governor of Yunnan to Chaing Kai Shek, but naturally preferred the Kuomintang to the Japanese invaders) would harden. As yet an "uncompromisingly English figure," Empson would nevertheless turn a critical eye back on the staid assumptions of home, a point Haffenden emphasizes by taking every opportunity to position Empson athwart naïve or celebratory representations of Englishness abroad: "What an ass I would have been if I had refused to leave England," Empson wrote to his mother in 1938 after his first six months in China (432). This is not to say he wasn't patriotic. Back in England and working for the BBC as a propagandist in the Chinese Section after February 1940, the only orthodoxy unquestioned by Empson would be that of dissent itself, the latter rapidly approaching (for his detractors, at least) dissension. But Empson was a natural at Broadcasting House where, Haffenden suggests, he could "fight for the Chinese interest just as resolutely as he would propagandize against Japan" (547).

At Cambridge during the years of his apprenticeship as poet and critic, however, Empson's trademark contrariness was not fully formed. His early poetry owed much to Donne, and his criticism leaned heavily on the style of mentors with whom he subsequently disagreed. As against Leavis's pugnacity and Eliot's magisterial air, Empson betrayed little anxiety of influence and, in a spirit of lively debate, became known for a willingness to entertain all comers politely, if firmly. Reviewing Forster's Clark Lectures (subsequently published as *Aspects of the Novel*) for *Granta* in October 1927,

Empson, just a second-year undergraduate, wrote that in Forster's achievement of style, one perceives

> the little soft pat of butter that surely, on second thoughts, has been doped with brandy. [. . .] 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. (145)

Reading this passage, it is not entirely clear whether the methodology identified here is Forster's alone or, possibly, that of an emerging critical consciousness learning how to take measure of its own considerable powers. Empson continues, "Within the clearly stated limitations of [Forster's] treatment, and the common-sense limitations of his sympathy, his judgement is excellent and his critical criteria most handy; you feel you want to apply them to things at once." Applying Forster's literary "criteria" to a linguistic framework inherited from I. A. Richards after 1928, Empson's critical handiwork—with its inherent respect for limits and a common-sense, everyday application—proceeded apace, culminating in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), which made him famous at the ripe age of twenty-four.

By illustrating the youthful formation of Empson's later attitudes, Haffenden's first volume becomes required reading, if we are to gain further understanding of the poet's emergence after the war as an "oppositional critic," to use William Cain's term. *Among the Mandarins* expertly backfills sorely needed context: the existence, for example, of Empson's personal catalogue of impressions forming the basis for a now-lost manuscript, "The Many Faces of Buddha." Haffenden carefully reassembles these impressions through biographical reverse-engineering, mapping Empson's later recollections, apocrypha, and writings back onto the more securely moored itinerary of his hiking and camping trips throughout south and east Asia en route to a host of Buddhist temples—Mount Asama, Sendai, Nara, Kyoto, Yungang, Bodh Gaya, and Kamakura.

The picture of Empson that emerges from Haffenden's account is both willful and whimsical. He is curious, despite the usual bothers and annoyances of money, highway banditry, and short-term privation; yet even the very unusual facts of internecine war, strangely, come to appear usual to him. He apparently regards all eventualities, however dire or mundane, as of the same magnitude. Several of Haffenden's unearthed anecdotes likewise confirm the suspicion that,

in the fullness of his own hunger for new intellectual experience, Empson occasionally forgot to eat. His categorical aloofness from his own bodily needs and present danger is at once admirable and "disturbing" (to borrow a term from Leavis's review of *Seven Types*). That we know about Empson's comprehensive survey of southeast Asian Buddhist temples at all speaks directly to the quality and thoroughness of Haffenden's research, which everywhere strengthens our perhaps otherwise vague grasp of Empson's subsequent stature as the best poet of his generation (Auden excepted), and its best practitioner of literary criticism as an ethical pursuit (Orwell aside).

These are grand claims. Yet even with the crystalline hindsight Haffenden provides, one greets Empson's decision to travel safely beyond the English orbit with a surprise not unlike that which many of his contemporaries voiced. The biographical detail Haffenden provides is therefore arresting and clarifying: through the autumn of 1929, Empson couldn't find work, a fact at least partly attributable to Magdelene College, Cambridge, having stripped him of his fellowship for possession of birth control. By our contemporary lights, this may seem truly a condom-in-a-teacup, but it was a tremendous flap at the time and probably influenced Empson's decision to leave England. (To his credit, this event seems not to have ruffled much after the initial shock.) And depart for meaningful employment Empson did, with his acceptance of the post of Professor of English at the Tokyo University of Literature and Science in August 1931. One is not entirely sure that Empson, who was still referred to as "the student of I. A. Richards," fully understood the enormity of impact his Asian journey would have upon him personally, nor that of his little book (*Seven Types*) upon the critical establishment back in England while he was out cataloguing the Buddha's many faces.

In *Seven Types*, Empson published both argument and typology for a decentered, layered, and practical literary criticism, the unity of which inveighs against any one Absolute Interpretation. But he doesn't throw out the dishes with the soap-water: think post-structuralism *avant la lettre* but without killing off the author/poet or taking Derrida's sledgehammer to meaning and referentiality that, thankfully, Empson cradles carefully within what he believes is the safe haven of individual creativity. He values artistic intention highly, as both unique and ennobling, and it always serves to anchor whatever reasonable plurality of meanings any subsequent community of readers might attach to the text. Empson's position on authorship is not unlike a modernist, skeptical version of Shelley's poet as

"legislator of mankind": a poet or writer can be counted on, rather more than less, to know what he or she is crafting in a given historical moment, regardless of whether or not the surrounding critical zeitgeist possesses the same certainty. Empson's favorite poets advance into history boldly; they never react to it. For instance, an influential 1950s essay, written during the height of the U.S.–Soviet space race, is entitled "Donne the Space-Man." And, within a certain identifiable and definable field of analysis—say, "seven" types or versions of "ambiguity" or complexity—the responsible critic can delimit a reasonable plurality of meanings without running the risk of having too many possible interpretations, resulting in interpretive anarchy and moral relativism, or too few, resulting in the hardening of any one reading into a reactionary orthodoxy. Empson likes to reduce the meanings of texts usefully, and in his best work he is seldom reductive when applying an interpretive lens to the literary field so constituted.

It doesn't take literary rocket science, however, to ascertain that Empson, if ever he came back from Asia at all, was destined to run afoul not only of Eliot and C. S. Lewis's Christian-centered interpretations, but also the emerging New Critical orthodoxy rising in the American South. To risk considerable oversimplification, both of these movements sought to diminish biographical and individual determinations of a given text, replacing them with Eliot's tradition and, to cite just one among many varieties, Cleanth Brooks's hermetic, self-referencing vocabulary. For his part, Empson preferred individual talent to tradition, and the metaphysical poets to metaphysics, respectively. Yet by staying in Asia for the time being—apart from the important interval during and just after the European war (1939–1947) alluded to above, he remained in China until 1952—Empson defaulted on his own critical legacy back in England and, it seems, wasn't particularly bothered by having done so. And despite the brilliance and audacity of *Seven Types*, its author's critical position was not yet established in Anglo-American letters, and Empson's long absence from England deferred its arrival.

Yet having already anticipated the harvest of Empson's mature work, Haffenden's readers will enjoy learning where and when the precocious young scholar first sowed the seeds of his insight. In the spring of 1931, for example, we find Empson in the British Museum modeling what would become a life-long critique after one of John Milton's earliest Whig critics, Richard Bentley (1662–1742). Empson was copying Bentley's manuscripts in order to bolster his own creeping conviction that, according to Haffenden,

> an ambivalence [existed] in Milton's attitude in *Paradise Lost* toward the figure of Satan. So far from contriving a straight epic of the simple clash between good and evil [. . .] Milton had so turned the story as to manifest a "curious" and "secret" parallel between Satan and Jesus Christ [. . .] not unambiguously rigged in favor of the latter. (380)

Haffenden here leads us directly to the germ (thirty years prior to the publication of *Milton's God* in 1961) of Empson's later ideas complicating traditional views of the great epic. Anachronistically applying William Blake's complementary contraries to the characterization of *Paradise Lost*, Empson in his Satan-Christ construct also attributes a literary dialecticism to Milton. In his own time, Empson's insights would develop into a full-blown critique of Christian dogma on the ethical and rationalist ground that ambiguity is a positive value. As early as 1931, therefore, we see the linking of a formalist approach (as in *Seven Types*) to the broader purchase that an ethical analysis provides, as it does in Empson's treatment of pastoral as "proletarian literature" in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) and again in *Milton's God*.

Ultimately, the younger Empson's particular quality as a discerning and dissenting poet (never ranting, never derivative) deserves even more of Haffenden's attention and ours. Haffenden rightly grounds much of his historical work in the criticism, interleaving references and specific contexts, such as Empson's important contributions to the Basic English and Mass Observation movements, for example. Yet from the vantage point of Haffenden's broad, historical purview, the direct address and elegance of Empson's poetry suffers at times under the mass of too much history. By contrast, Empson's poetic voice is thoughtful and never shrill:

> You are still kind whom the shape immures.
> Kind and beyond adieu. We miss our cue.
> It is the pain, it is the pain, endures.
> Poise of my hands reminded me of yours. "Villanelle"

Personally, I would rank Empson's poetry even higher than his criticism as evidence of literary achievement, especially prior to 1940. My point is not to prefer the poetry to the criticism categorically, across a lifetime as such—Empson's was a comprehensive genius—but that the poems become, in the exhaustive treatment of

Haffenden's biography, too deeply embedded. I found myself wanting more line-by-line analysis of specific poems and less contextualization.

Yet it is precisely its meticulous ascertaining of origins—helping to explain how and why Empson subsequently chose specific vocabularies, debates, and antagonists—that makes Haffenden's first volume so welcome. A careful reading of *Among the Mandarins* reminds us, after all, that dissenting has remained an integral part of the English literary tradition, with Empson belonging, in the twentieth century, to a lineage extending as far back as Wilberforce, Burke, and Carlyle. The second and concluding volume of the biography, *William Empson: Against the Christians*, was published in 2006.

Notes

1. Haffenden has also written the authoritative biography of John Berryman.
2. The volume concludes with Empson returning to England just at the outbreak of the European war.