William Empson

The Complete Poems

THE COMPLETE POEMS

WILLIAM EMPSON

Edited with Introduction and Notes by
JOHN HAFFENDEN

PENGUIN BOOKS

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The Complete Poems of William Empson

'Haffenden's edition . . . lets us see the work entire and hear Empson's own surprising, modest, illuminating comments along the way' Sean O'Brien, *The Times Literary Supplement*

'These poems . . . dramatize discoveries about the world's strangeness, about how deep down the contradictions can go . . . There are no doctrinal safety nets . . . John Haffenden's notes give new information about the place of the poems in Empson's adventurous life, but they also show their sources in his learning and his mastery of English verse form'
Jon Cook, *Financial Times*

'Haffenden has done Empson proud; he offers an entertaining biographical introduction, discusses the texts and Empson's views on notes, gives us a timeline and scrupulously traces the allusions and references in the poems that Empson did not spell out himself. Given Empson's wide and eclectic reading, this is a formidable labour of scholarship; but rather than reducing the poet to unrevivable dryness, Haffenden brings him to life, showing us his personality, his foibles, his endearing modesties and concerns. He deserves every congratulation' Robert Potts, *Guardian*

'Immaculate and exemplary . . . by printing Empson's abrupt and arresting comments from many sources in the notes – and in bold – Haffenden greatly illuminates what the poems mean'
Jim McCue, *The Times*

Sir William Empson was born in Yorkshire in 1906 and educated at Winchester School and Cambridge University, where he studied first mathematics and then English literature. At university Empson began work for his tutor, I. A. Richards, on an undergraduate essay that was ultimately published as his first, and perhaps most influential, critical work, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). Other critical volumes include *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), *Milton's God* (1961) and *Using Biography* (1984). From the start, Empson was recognized as both a poet and a critic, and his poetry later exercised great technical influence over the group of poets known as 'the Movement'. His first volume, *Poems* (1935), is much influenced in subject and technique by the Metaphysical poets, particularly John Donne. It was followed by *The Gathering Storm* (1940), which draws vividly on his experiences in Japan and China, where he had been teaching in the 1930s. Returning to England in 1940 he worked for the BBC (alongside George Orwell) as Chinese Editor, 1942–6. He returned to a teaching post at Peking National University in 1947, where he remained throughout the civil war and Communist takeover. He married in 1941 and had two sons. From 1953 he was Professor of English Literature at the University of Sheffield, and Professor Emeritus from 1971 until his death in 1984. He was awarded honorary doctorates from Bristol, East Anglia and Cambridge universities. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1976, and in 1979 received a knighthood for services to English literature. Among the collections of miscellaneous pieces assembled after his death are *Argufying* and *The Royal Beasts*, and two volumes of critical essays entitled *Essays on Renaissance Literature: Donne and the New Philosophy* (1993) and *The Drama* (1994).

John Haffenden is Professor of English Literature at the University of Sheffield. His books include *The Life of John Berryman*, *W. H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* and *Interviews with Novelists*; and he has edited several collections by Empson. Haffenden has recently published *Berryman's Shakespeare* and is working on a biography of William Empson. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and has been a Leverhulme Research Fellow and a British Academy Research Reader.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A	*Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture* (London, 1987)
CP	*Collected Poems* (London, 1955)
CP 1949	*The Collected Poems of William Empson* (New York, 1949)
DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1917–22)
E in G	*Empson in Granta* (Tunbridge Wells, 1993)
Gill	Roma Gill (ed.), *William Empson: The Man and His Work* (London, 1974)
GS	*The Gathering Storm* (London, 1940)
Harvard	*Morris Gray Poetry Reading* (Harvard University, 1973)
Listen	*William Empson Reading Selected Poems* (Hull, 1959)
Morelli	Angelo Morelli, *La Poesia di William Empson* (Catania, 1959)
Norris	Christopher Norris, *William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (London, 1978)
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
P	*Poems* (London, 1935)
P 1934	*Poems* (Tokyo, 1934)
Pastoral	*Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935; 1966)
PL	John Milton, *Paradise Lost*
RB	*The Royal Beasts and Other Works* (London, 1986)
Ricks	Christopher Ricks, 'Empson's Poetry', in Gill
SCW	*The Structure of Complex Words* (London, 1951; 3rd edn., 1977)
ST	*Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; 3rd edn., 1953)
TGA	Philip and Averil Gardner, *The God Approached* (London, 1978)
Thurley	Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest* (London, 1974)
Ulysses	James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922), ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford, 1993)
Wain	John Wain, *Professing Poetry* (London, 1977)
WE	William Empson

Willis — J. H. Willis, Jr., 'The Poetry of William Empson' (Columbia University, New York, 1967)

For full bibliographical information, see Bibliography. Where possible, the Penguin edition is cited.

INTRODUCTION

And, if I publish a volume of verse with notes longer than the text, as I want to do, will that be a prose work or a verse one? I ask out of curiosity, you understand...

– William Empson in a letter to his publisher, *c.* 1930

I can always offer some verses if that's any good.

– letter to Michael Roberts, 7 December 1932

The first or only reason for writing verse is to clear your own mind and fix your own feelings, and for this purpose it would be stupid to borrow from people, and for this purpose you 'wanted' to be as concentrated as possible. Mr Eliot said somewhere that a poet ought to practice his art at least once a week, and some years ago I was able to ask the oracle whether he thought this really necessary, a question on which much seemed to hang. After brooding and avoiding traffic for a while he answered with the full weight of his impressiveness, and I am sure without irony, that he had been thinking of someone else when he wrote that, and in such a case as my own the great effort of the poet must be to write as little as possible.

– 'A London Letter', *Poetry* 49 (January 1937)

A profound enough criticism could extract an entire cultural history from a simple lyric.

– 'The Verbal Analysis', *Kenyon Review* 12 (1950)

... dark texts need notes

– John Donne, 'To the Countess of Bedford' ('You have refined me'), l. 11

William Empson became known to the literary world as the precocious author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), which he began drafting in his fourth year as an undergraduate (his final year, as things turned out) and published at the age of twenty-four. But he had started as a playwright and poet some time before he ever wrote a serious word of criticism. Indeed, in 1929 his chief ambition was to publish a volume of poetry.

As his publisher arranged things, however, his first collection of poems appeared only in 1935, nearly six years after he was made to quit Cambridge.

He had been publishing poems in Cambridge periodicals, especially in the *Cambridge Review* and in *Experiment* (a progressive literary magazine which he co-edited) since June 1927, and his prominence as a poet received its national annunciation with the appearance of *Cambridge Poetry 1929*, published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press. A sampler of pieces by twenty-three Cambridge undergraduates, the Hogarth Press volume gathered together work by Julian Bell, Ronald Bottrall, Richard Eberhart, John Lehmann, Michael Redgrave, James Reeves, Hugh Sykes Davies, Basil Wright and, not forgetting the only woman to be represented in the anthology, E. E. Phare – later better known as the literary scholar Elsie Duncan-Jones. In terms of proportional representation, the three student editors of the volume – Christopher 'Kit' Saltmarshe, John Davenport, Basil Wright – recognized that Empson and T. H. White deserved the largest share, with six poems each. Accordingly, of Empson's fairly modest published output – just twenty poems by the end of 1928 – they generously reprinted nearly a third: 'Part of Mandevil's Travels', 'To an Old Lady', 'Villanelle', 'Letter' (later called 'Letter II'), 'Legal Fiction' and 'Arachne'.

Empson was singled out for praise in a review by F. R. Leavis:

> He is an original poet who has studied the right poets (the right ones for him) in the right way. His poems have a tough intellectual content (his interest in the ideas and the sciences, and his way of using his erudition, remind us of Donne – safely), and they evince an intense preoccupation with technique. These characteristics result sometimes in what seems to me an unprofitable obscurity, in faults like those common in the Metaphysicals . . . But Mr Empson commands respect. Three of his poems, *To an Old Lady*, *Villanelle*, and *Arachne*, raise no doubts at all in me: there is a compelling drive behind them.[1]

Three years later, in the 'Epilogue' to his influential *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), Leavis was to place Empson's 'remarkable' poems in the choice tradition of John Donne and T. S. Eliot:

> Mr Empson's poetry is quite unlike Mr Eliot's, but without the creative stir and the reorientation produced by Mr Eliot it would not have been written . . . he has

> clearly learnt a great deal from Donne. And his debt to Donne is at the same time a debt to Mr Eliot . . . Mr Empson's importance is that he is a very intelligent man with an intense interest, not only in emotions and words, but also in ideas and the sciences, and that he has acquired enough mastery of technique to write poetry in which all this is apparent . . .
>
> But it will not do to let this reference to Donne imply a misleading account of Mr Empson. He is very original: not only his ideas but his attitude towards them and his treatment of them are modern. The wit for which his poetry is remarkable is modern, and highly characteristic . . . all Mr Empson's poems are worth attention. He is often difficult, and sometimes, I think, unjustifiably so; but his verse always has a rich and strongly characteristic life, for he is as intensely interested in his technique as in his ideas.[2]

Perhaps that encomium does not really say all that much; in truth, it says just one thing two or three times: that Empson was strong on both ideas and technique (though Leavis presents no analytical detail to show quite what he meant). Yet Leavis says it with warm conviction; and the Leavis *imprimatur* was worth having in 1932, even though *New Bearings* goes on to give many more pages of enthusiastic description to the work of Ronald Bottrall. (In 1950, Leavis would assert that both Empson and Bottrall had failed 'to develop, or to develop satisfactorily'.)[3] But there is no doubt that Leavis felt sincerely enthusiastic for Empson's poetry in the early years, and acknowledged its brilliant originality – whatever the influences the young poet had absorbed. He began to cite Empson's poetry in his classes.[4] He was just as enthusiastic – at the beginning of the 1930s – about Empson's prose (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*), which he saluted on a number of occasions – as in 'Criticism of the Year' (1931), where he praised the volume as 'the most important critical book of the year . . . one of the most important . . . in the language; written by a first-class mind'.[5] In a 1931 letter outlining his then prospective book *New Bearings* to Ian Parsons (Empson's friend and publisher at Chatto & Windus), Leavis choicely wound up with congratulations for publishing Empson's 'magnificent' book and with the candid hope that his own volume would presently be listed alongside it: 'It's a book that I confess (I'm afraid this is not modest) I should like to be in company with.'[6]

In 1929 the buzz of interest in Empson's poetry extended beyond the school of English at Cambridge. Even Ludwig Wittgenstein, who had returned that autumn, was tipped off about Empson – or had perhaps

met him, there seems to be no way of knowing for sure – and was eager to learn about his poetry. In a later year Leavis was to tell a story that seems to have been meant to emphasize what he called 'something like an antipathy of temperament' between himself and Wittgenstein (whose interest in English literature 'had remained rudimentary,' Leavis alleged). Yet this anecdote assuredly redounds to the credit both of Wittgenstein and of Empson:

> He said to me once (it must have been soon after his return to Cambridge): 'Do you know a man called Empson?' I replied: 'No, but I've just come on him in *Cambridge Poetry 1929*, which I've reviewed for *The Cambridge Review*.' 'Is he any good?' 'It's surprising,' I said, 'but there are six poems of his in the book, and they are all poems [*sic*] and very distinctive.' 'What are they like?' asked Wittgenstein. I replied that there was little point in my describing them, since he didn't know enough about English poetry. 'If you like them,' he said, 'you can describe them.' So I started: 'You know Donne?' No, he didn't know Donne. I had been going to say that Empson, I had heard, had come up from Winchester with an award in mathematics and for his Second Part had gone over to English [Empson had in fact taken Part II of the mathematical Tripos before going over to English] and, working for the Tripos, had read closely Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, which was a set text. Baulked, I made a few lame observations about the nature of the conceit, and gave up. 'I should like to see his poems,' said Wittgenstein. 'You can,' I answered; 'I'll bring you the book.' 'I'll come round to yours,' he said. He did soon after, and went to the point at once: 'Where's that anthology? Read me his best poem.' The book was handy; opening it, I said, with 'Legal Fictions' ['Legal Fiction'] before my eyes: 'I don't know whether this is his best poem, but it will do.' When I had read it, Wittgenstein said, 'Explain it!' So I began to do so, taking the first line first. 'Oh! I understand that,' he interrupted, and, looking over my arm at the text, 'But what does this mean?' He pointed two or three lines on. At the third or fourth interruption of the same kind I shut the book, and said, 'I'm not playing.' 'It's perfectly plain that you don't understand the poem in the least,' he said. 'Give me the book.' I complied, and sure enough, without any difficulty, he went through the poem, explaining the analogical structure that I should have explained myself, if he had allowed me.[7]

If Leavis momentarily collapsed when Wittgenstein put him through his critical paces, there is a further fine irony underlying the fact that Wittgenstein could so readily appreciate Empson's poetry. Earlier,

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probably in 1926, Empson had reflected on the apathetic contemporary response to what he called 'the closing tautology of Wittgenstein [in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*]; "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent." The detachment of that phrase from its context is the weakness of our generation. Could not Romeo be written? Were the Songs and Sonets what cannot be said? What philosophy cannot state, art lays open. But philosophy has only just found out that it cannot state, all that we have no art to lay open.'[8] Those words perhaps mark the moment at which Empson determined to write poetry. Imaginative literature has to encompass more than the philosophers dream of expounding; a complex art must reach the parts that conceptual thought falls short of. In that sense, Empson's poetry stands for an attempt to meet the challenge of Wittgenstein's aphorism, the philosopher's ruling on the limits of language. (Three years later, Empson was to quote Wittgenstein in 'This Last Pain'.)

As for the repute Empson enjoyed among his contemporaries, Richard Eberhart, who would remember Empson as 'brisk, quick-moving, florid', may have been somewhat sentimental when he eulogized Empson's poetry in 1944; but this bouquet still says a great deal for the state of Empson's standing in 1929:

> In Cambridge everybody talked about Empson's poetry. His poems challenged the mind, seemed to defy the understanding; they amused and they enchanted; and even then they afforded a kind of parlor game, whiling away lively hours of puzzlement at many a dinner party. The shock and impact of this new kind of poetry were so considerable that people at that time had no way to measure its contemporary or timeless value. They were amazed by it. Eliot was already enthroned. The 'Oxford Group' [W. H. Auden and his Oxford contemporaries] had not yet got fully under way. And Cambridge was buzzing with activity.[9]

To be sure, Eberhart was not cheering the poems merely with the benefit of hindsight: in the early 1930s he had very enthusiastically corresponded with I. A. Richards on the subject of Empson's most exacting – least enticing? – poem, 'Bacchus'.[10] Other contemporaries have borne witness to the astonishment of Empson's poetry: Jacob Bronowski, John Davenport, Humphrey Jennings, John Marks, E. E. Phare, Kathleen Raine, Kit Saltmarshe, Hugh Sykes Davies, Edward M. Wilson, Basil Wright.

The year 1929 also saw Empson's first solo appearance. *Letter IV*, which was written by May and published that autumn by W. Heffer &

Sons of Cambridge, was the first in a series of booklets – 'single, hitherto unpublished poems by Cambridge poets of established reputation' – called *Songs for Sixpence*, edited by Bronowski and J. M. Reeves.[11] The print run was a generous 1,000 copies; and while it is not known how many were sold, a quantity were definitely pulped in the 1930s. But Empson may well have felt relieved that the poem attracted so little attention at the time, for he presently became dissatisfied with it and decided to reissue it only in 1949, in revised form, for the American edition of *Collected Poems*.

Empson had gone up to Magdalene College with a scholarship to study mathematics, and he gained a First in Part I of the Mathematical Tripos in 1926 (this achievement, it has to be said, was not in the least exceptional: the majority of mathematicians got Firsts at this initial stage); and he was one of a mathematical threesome to receive a college prize: 'books to the amount of £2.12s.6d'.[12] All the same, during his second year Empson committed more and more of his energies to literature, including the writing of his own poetry, where he exerted vast intellectual initiative, though the process did not involve any wholesale transference of interest from the sciences to the arts.

He broke surface first as a playwright. On 4 March 1926, he wrote in his journal: 'I have had in mind, for a week or so . . . the idea of a play'; but that entry goes on, disappointingly, 'I shall take the easier step of describing it here' – though it does include a full outline of the play he would never write.[13] He essayed several dramatic pieces, and one of the unfinished efforts features lengthy passages of dull blank verse, but he brought only a single short play to a satisfactory completion. *Three Stories*, a one-act melodrama topped and tailed in verse, was performed on 5 February 1927 in a season of 'Nursery' productions at the Amateur Dramatic Company. It was part of a triple bill, though only one of the other plays was an original piece: *Dragons: A Symbolic Play in Three Scenes* was by Basil Wright – the future film director, Governor of the British Film Institute and President of the International Association of Documentary Film Producers – who acted alongside Humphrey Jennings personating 'A Man in a Bowler Hat'. But *Dragons* was not much liked, so *Granta* was happy to report:

Mr Empson of Magdalene's play, *Three Stories*, was quite another thing. He had achieved an almost complete mastery of his Oedipus complex, and used it for very

intelligent purposes. A theme of the rebellion of an idealist young man led from excellent Shavian comedy to plain, honest melodrama, and was framed within romantic scenes in heroic couplets and contrasted with a scientific disquisition fathered on to Dracula. It sounds very complicated, but, if we interpreted it rightly, it amounted to something like this: that the ethical problems of life differ from the scientific problems only if one conceives them romantically, and even then, the apparent romanticism achieved, they become scientific again. The last line of the play, in which the hero, having slain his business-like ogre, is compelled to proclaim himself a 'managing young man', we thought a triumph.[14]

A witty skit, *Three Stories* (which is now available in the posthumous *The Royal Beasts and Other Works*) delighted a young and like-minded audience, and it was salted with enough social criticism to satisfy a deep need in Empson's carelessly (consistently) rebellious nature. As *Granta* opined with pomp: 'It was pleasant to find a new dramatist experimenting with a complicated technique, with one, too, which seems admirably suited for the production of a modern play; and perhaps still more so to find him at the same time not unskilful of dialogue and repartée, to keep the audience attentive and bemused.' It also gave Empson an opportunity to besport himself in public, and it marked the début of a Winchester contemporary, Parsons, who took the part of the young idealist, Gerald. The *Cambridge Review* observed: 'Mr Empson gave a very competent performance as the novelist in his own play. Mr I. M. Parsons shows distinct promise as a juvenile.'[15] *Granta* wholly agreed: '*Three Stories* also pleased us, because it proved to the world the merits of Mr I. M. Parsons as an actor' – though it omitted (perhaps tellingly?) to offer any opinion of Empson's turn on the boards.

It was probably as a direct result of writing and acting in his own play that Empson felt ready and willing to review theatre and cinema for both *Granta* and the *Cambridge Review*: starting with the movies in 1927, he was reviewing both by 1928–9. In addition, for the session 1927–8, when he was still in his third year as a student of mathematics, he was the 'Skipper' (or literary editor) of *Granta*. His output was quite remarkable, a tribute to his powers of assimilation and quick-witted responsiveness. James Jensen has provided this helpful précis:

The bulk of Empson's contributions to *Granta* consists of about sixty book reviews of widely varying interest and length – only a few run to much more than five

hundred words and a good many are only one or two sentences long. In addition . . . there are about fifteen movie and drama reviews, also uneven in character, but occasionally quite provocative, plus some clowning and riddling material of no particular consequence. Though books of literary or esthetic value predominate among those he reviewed, they by no means constitute a monopoly; the list includes such titles as *British Farmers in Denmark*, *Sex Relations without Marriage*, and *ABC of Adler's Psychology*. Indeed, extended examples of close verbal analysis, at least in the serious way we now think of it, would be an absurd anomaly in the hearty, gamesome pages of *Granta*. The atmosphere of the magazine is highly precocious but unstable, wavering between formidable gravity and witty or impudent lightheartedness which does not always escape silliness, nor always try to. Yet nearly all Empson's reviews exhibit an air of alert knowledgeableness, an easy habituation to the critical context . . .[16]

(The total of Empson's book reviews is now reckoned to be seventy.)[17]

The character of the criticism that swiftly emerged, culminating in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, was by no means an accidental achievement, for Empson had set out what amounted to a programme even during his second year as an undergraduate. The goal of the new criticism, as he formulated it in his review of Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* in October 1927, was to make 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'.[18] In due course, the same manifesto would apply in all respects to his own criticism and poetry: for Empson, those tools included the lessons of Marx, J. G. Frazer and Freud.

Empson may be said to have come of age as a critic within six months of drafting that ambitious and intoxicating brief, with a review of *Blue Trousers*, the classic novel by Lady Murasaki (in a translation by Arthur Waley). The rich comedy of the fiction, and its 'architectural qualities', excited him to rehearse its success with a virtuoso critical performance: it is by far the fullest book review he wrote at Cambridge, a cascade of ideas and insights. The piece is fully Empsonian, and is worth quoting at some length, from the helter-skelter inventory of the second paragraph (which is a single 300-word sentence) right to the end:

The critic, in giving way to boundless superlatives, might seem to be led astray by accidental qualities; by the romantic fantasy gratification in a hero of matchless beauty, charm which (we are told) had never been seen in the world before, rich

with imperial scents (the privilege of his house), master of palaces four hundred yards square, of vast gardens adorned with forgotten cunning, and pathways of finely powdered jade, of numberless concubines, each of whom, when going on a journey as unostentatiously as possible, takes twenty coaches (and the number of outriders is extremely small), of uncounted mysterious and guilty secrets, such as the paternity of the Emperor, and of endless details of polite versifying; by the Wordsworthian air of simple truth, with which all this Vathek detail is carried off, and without which, even from so courtly an authoress, it would be too crude to please; by the curiosity continually excited as to what exactly the customs were, and how they worked, the shock of being reminded that these witty and cultivated women were entirely secluded, and the difficulty of finding out, for instance, Genji's methods of governing, or the nature of the Labour troubles so often hinted at; by the mingled sense of our civilization's inferiority in these extremes of delicacy, and of the practical Westerners' superiority to so 'quaint' and flower-chattering a people, from which we are startled back into fantasy identification with Genji when (filling an awkward pause) he embarks on a discourse about plum-blossom or novel-writing, or the limitations of their social love-poetry, making criticisms that seem so naturally one's own; indeed, by the modernity of the conversation of all the characters; one is continually thinking 'Waley *must* have made that up,' and then finding it woven incidentally into the next paragraph.

It may be such factors as these, superimposed on the original novel, that make it such a continual delight to read, and so liable to be rated too highly. But there are in this volume three or four comedies of situation; between Genji, his new child wife, and his chief concubine (what gross farce it sounds); about Yugiri, the faithful lover, now in domestication; and about the marrying off of Tamakatsura, who was prevented by a sad accident from entering the Emperor's household; in each of these one is dizzy with the subtlety of the writing, with each clause, each placidly given detail, there is a new twist to the dialogue, a different construction is put upon the relations of these always charming people. There is nothing exotic about it, it is what the western novel has done continually, but it is done supremely here.[19]

James Jensen has perceptively remarked:

Perhaps the only reason this is not an even more obvious example of Empsonian analysis is that it is concerned not with the so-called 'accidental qualities' of particular words and phrases in lyric poetry but with these qualities as they are produced by the broader structural components of the novel – setting, characteriz-

ation, tone. Nonetheless, the basic technique is sufficiently recognizable: within the unity of a single sentence [the first paragraph quoted above] he lists five main sources of the novel's appeal (romantic gratification, Wordsworthian tone, cultural exoticism, tension between superiority and inferiority, sophisticated dialogue), amassing under each source varied but illustrative specimens of response designed to reproduce in concentrated form something of the actual sentient texture of the entire novel.[20]

To borrow Empson's own words from another context, he looks at the novel from enough points of view to make one feel that something in the real world is being considered.

And yet probably the most astonishing thing of all is that Empson had not even started officially to read English literature when he wrote that piece in 1928: he was just a week away from tackling Part II of the Mathematical Tripos (for which the legendary Frank Ramsey, brother of the future Archbishop of Canterbury, was one of his examiners). Perhaps it is not surprising that he got to be only Senior Optime (Upper Second), and not a Wrangler (First).[21] There was no prize that time round.

The next academic session, 1928–9, turned out to be a splendidly busy one for him, the start of a brilliant career. Magdalene allowed him to stay on for a second degree despite the fact that his final result in Maths had fallen short of stardom.[22] His fame as a poet, and Richards's reports of his amazing work on literary ambiguity, must have reassured the Governing Body that they had done well to let him proceed with his studies. He also busied himself with numerous other activities; among them, he found time in March 1929 to take the title role in a three-night run of *The Tragedy of Tragedies: or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great*, by Henry Fielding; this was the first production (with Empson sporting a 'creation of sack-cloth' by no less an artist than Humphrey Jennings) of a group called the Mummers, which was founded by the gangling young Alistair Cooke (the future journalist and world-renowned broadcaster) as the first mixed ('co-ed') dramatic society at Cambridge. *Granta* remarked with a suitably indulgent double edge that *Tom Thumb* 'is a burlesque directed against the heroic tragedies popular in [Fielding's] time. The whole cast recognized the burlesque, Mr Empson particularly its direction. Only those who know Mr Empson, or share his particular sense of the quaint, could enjoy his acting; but his interpretation was by far the most intelligent.'[23]

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