Chapter 1

William Empson
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This essay begins by posing three questions: what characterizes great critics? Who was William Empson? What makes Empson special, both as a critic and more specifically as a Shakespeare critic? Having attempted to answer these questions, it moves on to argue that William Empson is a great Shakespearean and a model critic generally. His famous eccentricities should not distract readers from central consistent features of his criticism that continue to have both exemplary and corrective force. But he is, in many ways, an odd kind of great critic, and that oddness comes into focus if one asks what in general we mean by the honorific ‘great’ when applied to the oeuvre of a literary critic.

Great Critics

What characterizes the greatness of great critics? I propose two answers to this question: one that sees great critics as extreme instances of success in the endeavour to impress and influence their peers (a task that all critics and scholars engage in all the time); and a second, and in my view better, answer, that looks at what we in our own struggles for the attention of others want great critics to do for us.

The first answer looks at the short term, and works from a contemporary academic critic’s awareness of what critics do. According to this answer, great critics open up new ground, pioneer new vocabularies of description or evaluation, inspire imitators and found a new normal science in the Kuhnian sense. The greatness of such critics can be measured quickly, during their working lifetimes, by the consequences their work generates. In a modern academic setting, where generations of aspirant scholars hunger for tools for self-establishment, such critics provide new tools.

The short-term sociological understanding of critical greatness so defined would resemble Max Weber’s and Clifford Geertz’s accounts of charisma as
well as Thomas Kuhn's and Richard Rorty's descriptions of intellectual originality: great critics, like charismatic individuals in any social network, establish themselves at the centres of exchange and evaluation where their impact on affairs will be both immediate and visible to others, even while (as Weber stresses) they possess a special individual attractiveness, derived from access to something beyond ordinary experience, that distinguishes them from others so placed and increases their impact. This special attractiveness may involve learning, or confidence, or style, and it often derives partly from literary activity that is not confined to criticism. But on this view, greatness as a critic involves cultural centrality — a kind of power — and is likely to be achieved by critics who seek such centrality. Thus T. S. Eliot and Dr Johnson, paradigmatically great non-academic critics, gravitate toward the metropolitan literary scene and come to dominate it. Their greatness can be mapped as a journey toward the centre of intellectual power: London calling.

This paradigm more or less fits many great academic critics. In a way similar to Eliot or Johnson, though less consequential in terms of the larger institution of literature, the most influential academic critics are often central figures in major academic programs that train new academic generations, and these critics often help their institutions establish a kind of magnetic institutional celebrity for critical innovation ('Cambridge English', 'The Chicago School'). Paul de Man's move from Cornell to Johns Hopkins to Yale, for instance, to join Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman and be joined by J. Hillis Miller, helped establish him in the last decade of his life as a great living critic by this description.

This sociological view of what makes a great critic also explains why, particularly in the academy, critics so often pay a large middle-term price for being consequential or charismatic in their prime. Academic literary critics engage in a ceaseless struggle for rhetorical advantage that often moves toward new ground by salting the fields it leaves behind. Their need to innovate, and to distinguish themselves from their immediate predecessors (who have often been their teachers), accelerates a process of change that is both vital for intellectual progress, and in danger of seeming like change for change's sake. While this observation is prompted by my experience of life in the current academy, it can find support in many past reflections on the permutations of literary taste. As Samuel Johnson remarks in his 'Preface to Shakespeare':

The chief desire of him that comments an author, is to shew how much other commentators have corrupted and obscured him. The opinions prevalent in one age, as truths above the reach of controversy, are
confuted and rejected in another, and rise again to reception in remoter times. Thus the human mind is kept in motion without progress. Thus sometimes truth and errour, and sometimes contrarieties of errour, take each other’s place by reciprocal invasion.²

In our own critical scene, these invasions are to some degree generational. Critical generations are hard on their immediate precursors, and the critics who model innovation for one generation tend to provide an equally cogent model of error, emptiness or, at best, old-fashionedness for the next. The curve of Paul de Man’s posthumous reputation, though clearly a complex special case, may partly have to do with the reaction that sets in when something that seemed very new starts seeming old. The widespread familiarity among contemporary critics, as a practical feature of academic behaviour if not a necessary stage of human psychological development, of a Bloomian/Freudian model of parricidal intellectual relations, dovetailing with a widespread interest among younger critics in making sure that they are in the vanguard of the latest paradigm shift rather than eating its dust, speeds up these shifts in our own academic scene by naturalizing them. To put it luridly for effect, ignoring many humane exceptions, and setting aside the ways academic tenure promotes a countervailing institutional gerontocracy, younger critical generations think it only proper to tread down the old. Often the old, rather than kicking back in the name of established tradition, are likely to keep on adopting new intellectual positions in an effort to avoid superannuation and all-oblivious enmity.

Sketching dire middle-term consequences of intellectual prominence and career success in this way, we might wish to offer a second answer to the question, ‘what is a great critic?’ A great critic, whatever his or her relation to generational strife, survives it to be found useful afterwards. Furthering this line of definition, we might say that great critics, when time has separated them from the immediate context in which they worked, retain both exemplary and corrective force. That is, they continue to provide us with charismatic or contagious examples of good reading. Or, better, of good writing about literature, since some great critics like Samuel Johnson or Mikhail Bakhtin provide more in the way of enduringly dazzling generalizations than of enduringly dazzling local commentary. But we not only find them helpful in showing us how to read, we also find them helpful in our quarrels with other readers. They have corrective force in helping us see, and say, what is wrong with various kinds of bad reading or bad criticism.

I shall claim both exemplary and corrective force for William Empson below, while also pointing out that he never was an institutionally central
critic in his own lifetime: that is, I'll suggest that he is a great critic according to my second definition but did not behave in the ways sketched in my first. F. R. Leavis, a slightly older contemporary of Empson's, provides an instructive contrasting case. Leavis was, in his lifetime, a hugely consequential critic who provided both an evaluative vocabulary and a sense of urgent mission to literary critics in British and Commonwealth universities for a long generation that came of age from the late 1920s through the 1950s, but who, as a partial result of this institutional success, became a systematically neglected critic for a generation following. Will Leavis return? Is he returning? Or will his intensities forever seem somewhat parochial when separated by time from their local provocations? Perhaps his 'greatness' as a critic depends on the answers to these questions.

A taste for Empson in a contemporary student of criticism might also be thought of as a distinctive sign of interest in the not-directly-appropriate. John Ashbery describes Elizabeth Bishop as a 'writer's writer' – meaning that she was and is hugely admired by poets (like Lowell and Moore, or Ashbery himself) on whom other poets modelled themselves (with the tacit corollary that Bishop is not a poet whom many other poets find they can imitate directly). Empson seems to me a critic's critic's critic: not an easily approvable model, and certainly not someone who moved consistently toward centres of charismatic influence, but someone who is read and admired by many others who have served as widely-imitated models (including Paul de Man, T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, as it happens, but also many others of quite various approaches, e.g. C. S. Lewis, Frank Kermode, Jonathan Goldberg, Christopher Ricks, Christopher Norris, Margreta de Grazia and Jonathan Bate).

Empson's appeal, indeed, may partly lie in his eccentricity. If T. S. Eliot is a twentieth-century model for the poet-critic who centralizes himself, and whose wonderful criticism stands in a fascinating strategic relation to his art, one might think of Empson, like D. H. Lawrence, as another kind of career model for an artist-critic: one with a substantially less consistent professional relation to immediate networks of influence, but one whose work has added appeal perhaps because, however much it is taken up by one generation and set aside by another, it will always seem to speak from an extra-institutional, and perhaps an anti-strategic, perspective. Philip Rahv's division of American writers into palefaces and redskins may have analogous bearing here. Redkins like Lawrence and Empson, who took an extra-institutional position for their criticism in their own lifetimes, may more easily retain corrective force as a result. And like Lawrence's, Empson's personal history bears witness to a sustained need to explore...
alternatives to institutional conventions in living as well as in reading and writing.

Who is William Empson?

Empson is regularly cited when the twentieth century is described as a great age of literary criticism in English. I wonder, however, how many people are in fact reading him. When I told a generally-speaking very-well-informed younger colleague of mine a couple of years ago that I was writing an essay on William Empson and Shakespeare’s sonnets, the response was ‘who is William Empson?’ I do not think Empson is commonly taught or mentioned in the brief introductions to literary criticism and theory that make up parts of the ‘professionalizing’ seminars that tend to inaugurate graduate study in US PhD programs. When described in more detailed courses on criticism, I think he appears in somewhat misleading company, on lists of important early twentieth-century critics one no longer often reads (lists that for Shakespeareans would include, say, Theodore Spencer, E. E. Stoll, John Dover Wilson and M. C. Bradbrook). Or, even more misleadingly, on general lists of New Critics or ‘Formalists’ whom time has left on the shelf – Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks and Maynard Mack, for instance. A shorter and, for the reasons suggested at the end of the previous section, better list would set Empson alongside Kenneth Burke and W. H. Auden as mid-twentieth-century mavericks whom it is a mistake to ignore.

I’ll be arguing in what follows that Empson models, in a heartfelt and often astonishing way, a fairly simple understanding of literary reading that is widely useful both as a goal for other critics, and as a way of diagnosing where more complicated modes of critical reading go astray. But, before describing Empson’s criticism, let me provide a biographical sketch, so that the question ‘who is William Empson’ first receives an answer of the most straightforward kind. Empson believed strongly that one needed to think about authors’ lives in order to understand their work, and his own life certainly illuminates his.

For a literary critic, particularly one who worked mostly as a university teacher, Sir William Empson had an unusually interesting life. Twenty-first century admirers of Empson know all about it, thanks to the splendid recent two-volume biography by John Haffenden, who has also edited a richly-annotated edition of Empson’s poems and a remarkable selection of his letters, as well as being one of the moving spirits in a substantial project
to collect, edit and publish criticism Empson left behind after his death. All recent books and articles on Empson that I know of have begun with a tribute to Haffenden's industry and discernment, and I suspect that most future ones will as well.

Empson was born to long-established Yorkshire gentry, rumoured to be descended from the Richard Empson who features peripherally in G. R. Elton's *The Tudor Revolution in Government*, a minister who collected taxes and made policy for Henry VII and whose unpopularity led him to be hanged, drawn and quartered in the first months of the reign of Henry VIII. But the connection is uncertain. At any rate, the family was settled in Yorkshire by the seventeenth century, fighting on both sides of the Civil War.

Our Empson was a younger son - his elder brother Arthur inherited Yokesfleet Hall, near Goole, where Empson was born in 1906. William Empson showed early academic promise: as a twelve-year-old he won a scholarship to Winchester College, the most intellectual of the great English public schools, where he excelled in mathematics and began to write poetry. He proceeded to a scholarship at Magdalene College, Cambridge, to study mathematics, took a first in Part I of the mathematical tripos, and began writing reviews and publishing poems. A slightly disappointing result (an upper 2nd) in Part II of the mathematical tripos led him to follow his literary interests and register for the English tripos, in which he was tutored by I.A. Richards, a lifelong influence. His long essay for Part II of the English tripos was a study of ambiguity; he took a first with special distinction in English, and in 1929 was elected to a bye-fellowship at Magdalene. Thus far Empson's was a life of intellectual as well as social entitlement.

At this point, he might have been expected to remain in Cambridge for an influential life in the English faculty, which (thanks in part to the Leavises, despite their embattled relation to the institution) would be perhaps the most influential centre of English study for most of Empson's career, and which of course remains one of the great English departments. But his career took a fateful swerve. Empson's sexual life, both gay and straight, had blossomed at university. Just after his graduation, as his personal effects were being moved from a hostel into the college rooms his bye-fellowship entitled him to, college porters, perhaps encouraged in their search by rumours about Empson circulating among the college staff, discovered condoms in a drawer. At a special meeting of the Magdalene governing board, called in the summer of 1929 to deal with this matter, Empson admitted forthrightly that they were his, and that he had indeed
used others like them, though he refused to say with whom, and denied using them in his college rooms. The board heard reports that he had, however, been seen by the bed maker in charge of his hostel in a compromising situation with a woman. I. A. Richards, who would surely have attempted both to resolve this matter in advance and to defend Empson vigorously if it came to a tribunal, was on his way to China, and thus unable to help. In the event, Empson's bye-fellowship was withdrawn, he was sent down from Magdalene, and, since his potentially contagious immorality contravened university as well as college rules, he was declared not welcome in the city of Cambridge. A few weeks after his expulsion, at home in Yorkshire, Empson wrote a poem about it:

My friends who have not yet gone down  
From that strange cackling little town,  
Attend, before you burn your boats,  
To these few simple College Notes.

Lock up whatever it appears  
Might give a celibate ideas.  
You'd best import your own stout box;  
They keep the keys of College locks  
(Not that they wish, especially, to;  
It is their duty, and they do).

Remember what a porter's for;  
He hears *ad portam*, at the door;  
He carries *portari* as he ought  
(Dons love a Latin pun, with port)  
All tales and all exciting letters  
Straight to the councils of his betters  
(Not that he wishes so to thrill;  
But it's his duty, and he will).

Remember that a bedder's dreams  
Are very active on such themes.  
Don't let her fancies loose one minute  
(Take most care when there's nothing in it).

Empson then dispenses advice for how to deal more successfully than he himself did with the 'row' that may result from porters' tale-bearing,
bedders' evidence-gathering, and the reactions of 'chaste good dons' who 'have heard more tattle than one knows,' a 'row'

Which, when it comes, I hope you'll try
To counter with a working lie.
Without deceiving, this endears.
They have been practising for years.

But oh, whatever game you play
(Here is the moral of my lay)
Never believe the words they say
To make you give yourself away.

The emphasis in this quatrain suggests that Empson's frankness before the Magdalene Governing Board was encouraged by the very Fellows who then expelled him for it. He closes by urging his former fellow-students to heed his dire example, and either go out of Cambridge to find prostitutes or confine themselves to the traditional male-institutional sexual paths:

O do be warned by what will happen there,
And go to Bedford or to Leicester Square.

Or would you please those who control your ends
Follow where their high patronage commends,
And stick to what you learned at school, my friends.

Though there is doubtless some anger here, the poem shows remarkable resilience – Haffenden sees it as an instance of 'Empson's buoyant generosity of spirit'. Empson's letters of the time also treat his expulsion with sangfroid, but it was clearly a bitter blow, and it doubtless reinforced a resistance to punitive narrow-minded institutions that had been a theme in his life since his schooldays, and remained one throughout. The poem urges tact, bears witness to the disastrous consequences of tactlessness, and celebrates a kind of honesty that survives the disaster. It thus prefigures Empson's lifelong fascination with the relation between tact and honesty, a relation explored in an excellent recent essay by Matthew Creasy I will discuss below.

Exiled from a conventional academic career in Britain, Empson moved to London, published Seven Types of Ambiguity in 1930 – a book that almost immediately made him famous as a literary critic – and in 1931 took a
professorship in Tokyo for three years. After spending 1934–7 in London, publishing *Some Versions of Pastoral* in 1935, he accepted a professorship at the National Peking University in 1937. His arrival coincided with the Japanese invasion of China, and Empson travelled under conditions of considerable hardship with Chinese faculty members and students to teach at the Temporary University (an amalgamation of the universities in exile from Beijing) in South China near the Vietnam border. Without access to libraries, he remembered and typed out a great deal of English lyric poetry for his students (though Haffenden does not support the story I was told as an undergraduate, that he had reconstructed *The Oxford Book of English Verse* in its entirety from memory). In 1939, when war broke out in Europe, he returned to Britain by way of the US, and worked through the war for the BBC Chinese Service, producing allied propaganda alongside George Orwell among others. In 1941, he married Hetta Crouse, a South African who also worked at the BBC. Hetta and Empson moved back to Beijing after the war’s end and remained through the victory of Mao Tse-tung’s People’s Liberation Army in 1949 – a result they in general welcomed, having lived under the Kuomintang. Hetta, a Communist, applied to the British Communist Party in 1949 for a transfer of membership to the Chinese Communist Party, though this was never accomplished. Partly because of Empson’s history in China during the war with Japan in the late 1930s, and partly perhaps because of Hetta’s political affiliations, the Empsons were able to remain at Peking University until 1952, unharassed amid increasing pressure on its Chinese faculty to conform to Maoist programmes. But in 1952, the British Council ceased supporting Empson’s teaching position, and he returned to England. His *Collected Poems* were published in New York in 1948, and *The Structure of Complex Words* in London in 1951. He was elected to the Chair in English Literature at Sheffield University in 1953 and remained there until his retirement in 1971, publishing *Milton’s God* in 1961 and holding a variety of visiting positions in the US, Ghana, and Canada before and after retirement. In 1979, he was knighted for ‘services to English literature’ and was elected an Honorary Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, 50 years after his expulsion. He died in 1984, and a number of posthumous collections, including many essays and imaginative pieces unpublished in his lifetime, have appeared since: *Using Biography* in 1984 (the last book he himself brought to press), *The Royal Beast and Other Works* and *Empson on Shakespeare* in 1986, *Argufying and Faustus and the Censor* in 1987, *Essays on Renaissance Literature, vol. I: Donne and the New Astronomy* in 1993, *Essays on Renaissance Literature, vol. II: The Drama* in 1994, *The Strength of Shakespeare’s Shrew* in 1996, *The Complete Poems* in 2000 and *Selected Letters* in 2006.
Haffenden’s portrait of Empson as a person stresses Empson’s exceptional but somewhat abstracted generosity to friends and students, his commitment to truth-telling, and a lifelong social unconventionality that may bespeak not only Empson’s robust intellectual and moral self-confidence, but also a less robust capacity for immediate emotional reading of the intentions of those he was face to face with. Kathleen Raine comments that as a hugely-admired Cambridge undergraduate Empson ‘never had ... any wish to excel, lead, dominate, involve, or otherwise exert power; he was at all times, on the contrary, mild, impersonal, indifferent to the impression he made to the point of absent-mindedness ... his eyes ... nervously evading a direct look’ (WE1, 161). Muriel Bradbrook comments that, when he began seeking relations with women, ‘Those who knew said his relations with women went wrong all the time’, and Haffenden speculates that at this point Empson ‘did not yet appreciate what most moved women ... he liked the act without attachment’ (WE1, 239). Haffenden deprecates, as unconfirmed ‘vulgarity aspiring to facetiousness’, Hugh Sykes Davies’s memory in a 1983 interview that one of Empson’s girlfriends said, ‘He used a girl like a lavatory’ (WE1, 239–240). Though Haffenden does not comment on this, it seems probable that Sykes Davies’s remark is a misdirected remembrance of Empson’s comment on Iago’s sexuality in Complex Words: ‘Iago has always despised his pleasures, always treated sex without fuss, like the lavatory’ (SCW, 226), though I suppose it is remotely possible that Empson here coolly recycles a comment once made about his younger self. While it is not at all clear what, at this point in his Cambridge life, led Empson to pursue heterosexual relations, Haffenden suggests that several of Empson’s homosexual attachments were unfulfilled, notably the love for Desmond Lee that in Haffenden’s view lies behind several of Empson’s love-poems (see WE1, 232–9, 254–5). Haffenden also recounts various occasions when the young Empson acted with a surprising spontaneous violence out of apparent jealousy or rivalry, pushing a preening young man into the Cam in order to supersede him in the eyes of Desmond Lee, nearly strangling Sylvia Meredith at a book party for Seven Types of Ambiguity (if her account is to be believed), probably out of jealousy of her relation to her husband Carew Meredith, and, in an odd repetition of the Cambridge punt-party incident, pushing off a diving-board an attractive young Japanese man who had outdone Empson in swimming during his first weeks as a teacher in Japan (WE1, 237–238, 268, 292–293). Accounts of Empson both in youth and age suggest a man who has some difficulty negotiating directly with others about his or their feelings, prone to alternations between extreme abstraction and awkward suddenness, but who (perhaps as a result) is deeply and intelligently interested in the complexities
of social interaction and social isolation. We might want to place Empson on the impercipient end of a scale of facility in reading the emotional states of others from their faces, while knowing that he excelled deeply in reading ponderable verbal statements having to do with emotional relations. Haffenden (who does not make this diagnosis, and might deplore it) quotes a Winchester journal kept by the teenaged Empson in which he expresses delight at a new kind of social life: 'I could talk to people in College ... I bounced about saying more than I meant, and repeating myself, till told to go away' (WEI, 91). This suggests both Empson's overflowing mental life, and his need for explicit emotional directives, rather than subtle emotional signals, from others. As an adult, Empson had a perhaps consequent need for personal partners of exceptionally robust and clearly-articulated desires and intentions (Hetta above all fits this description, but so do Elizabeth Wiskenden, the woman with whom Empson was involved when he was expelled from Cambridge, and Alice Naish Stewart, Empson's lover for the last thirty years of his life). Haffenden does not make a wound-and-bow argument about Empson's subtlety as an interpreter here, but it seems plausible that Empson's lifelong commitment to making sense of subtle intentions in writing emerged not only from non-conformist radicalism about the possibility of unexpected intentions, but also from his difficulty in picking up subtle social signals, his awareness of their enormous importance and complexity in allowing human beings to escape isolation, and a resultant need to subject complex communications to rational analysis. As Matthew Creasy remarks, 'Empson wishes to separate the meanings of ... words with the kind of sensitivity more usually associated with the exercise of tact in dealings with people'.

I am suggesting that Empson found it fascinating and imperative to use this tact about verbal meaning precisely because being tactful in the presence of other people was difficult for him.

Were this speculation correct, Empson's criticism would be all the more exceptional, since it is unsurpassed in exploring 'delicacies of social tone' (STA 23) while championing reading, writing, and behaviour entirely free from subservience to social conventions. His marriage to Hetta testifies to his own freedom from conventional sources of shame. As he recounts in a poem written in Beijing and first published in Haffenden's biography, he proposed marriage to her by announcing both his willingness for her to entertain other male lovers and his hope that they will help in the fulfilment of his own sexual needs.

Much astonished to find you were handy
I proposed when we first got to bed;
This was viewed as too pushing or randy
   And not what was usually said;
I urged you have lovers beside me
   O lots, and I'd just as soon know.
It took time and angel to guide me
   To make the thing go.

Did I love you as mine for possessing?
   Absurd as it seems, I forget;
For the vision of love that was pressing
   And time has not falsified yet
Was always a love with three corners
   I loved you in bed with young men,
Your arousers and foils and adorers
   Who would yield to me then. (WE2, 385)

It is clear from the rest of the poem that 'who would yield to me then' deserves to be recognized as an ambiguity of the fourth type, 'when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author' (STA, 133). The young men will yield Hetta's bed to Empson himself, who, stimulated by their recent presence, will then make love to Hetta; the young men will yield themselves sexually to Empson. While Empson did not publish this poem, he and Hetta were not at all covert about her affairs and the openness of their marriage; moreover, Empson as a critic was quite firm in suggesting that the sexual lives of Andrew Marvell and of Joyce's Leopold Bloom followed this unusual pattern.

What Does Empson do as a Critic?

In the specific context of this collection of books on Great Shakespeareans, it is notable that much of Empson's best criticism is not about Shakespeare, and that much of his best Shakespeare criticism is about the sonnets. I discuss Empson first as a critic of lyric poetry and of the sonnets, presenting his early work on them as the basis for his understanding of relations between verbal complexity and authorial biography, and then go on to discuss his treatment of Shakespeare as a playwright. In discussing his sonnets criticism, I adapt some arguments and use some examples that I have treated elsewhere, focusing mainly on Seven Types of Ambiguity and
on *Some Versions of Pastoral*. I then discuss the Shakespeare chapters in *The Structure of Complex Words* and some of the later writings collected in *Essays on Shakespeare*. I emphasize the ways Empson, who is famous for far-reaching and imaginative reactions to particular words, lines and passages, cuts between local intense readings and an overall large-scale picture of Shakespeare as someone with a set of imputed preoccupations and habits that allow Empson to identify with him: suspicion of Christianity, bisexuality, anti-authoritarianism and deep commitment to and exasperation with English social forms. Standing on the shoulders of recent commentators on Empson, above all Haffenden, but also Creasy, Matthew Bevis, Christopher Norris, Richard Strier and Paul Fry, it is possible to see William Empson's career as following from the consequences of two broad and relatively simple claims about reading:

A. Complex and multiple meanings can be reasonably read out of particular textual moments by close attention to their details;

B. These meanings must ultimately take shape in the reader's mind as part of an author's struggle to live well, often a struggle to understand, embrace, combat or reconcile himself or herself to particular opportunities and cruelties of the social, moral or natural order.

I'll refer back to A, 'the local complexity claim', and B, 'the authorial struggle claim', below.

Before turning to the articulation and elaboration of these claims or themes in Empson's work, it may be helpful to reflect on what they demand in a reader who aspires to be Empsonian. To tease out the implications of claim B, 'authorial struggle': reading involves the reader in an effort to understand an author's life, but the struggle to live well must take place on the reader's side as well for process B to be complete, in part because no one who is not attempting to sort out the opportunities and cruelties of his or her own culture can sympathize effectively and imaginatively with such struggles on an author's part. As Empson remarked, 'you can only understand people by having such a life in yourself to be their mirror'. In contrast, Process A calls on the reader to develop an elastic, often playful willingness to juggle options and enjoy the complexity of interpretable expression, but also calls on the reader to make sense of things as exactly as possible. Put more concisely, to do A the reader must combine exquisite sensitivity with belligerent rationality. Thus the fully equipped reader ('geared up,' as Empson would say, to do both A and B at once) needs
optimism, moral sympathy and an interest in resistant relations to the social order, as well as a highly developed faculty for logical and unsentimental exegesis.

The two premises I have attributed to Empson can be imagined as the two pincers used to take hold of something, or the two eyes needed to see something in three dimensions. A, the complexity premise, and Empson's extended attempts to provide satisfactory descriptions of the forms verbal complexity takes, and what aspects of linguistic communication verbal complexity illuminates, supply his work with rigour and philosophic interest. B, the authorial struggle premise, and Empson's extended effort to imagine or project selves struggling within and behind literary works, supply Empson's criticism with ethical intensity, give it its substantial historical dimension and provide the outlines of a plausible erotics of reading. But as I have suggested throughout, Empson sees these two premises about reading as enmeshed with each other: words do not mean without speakers or writers; moves in a game are not moves in a game without rules; there are no rules without players, and no players without a culture of play; there is no contest without winners and losers, and no winners and losers without power and pain; and so on. Empson's adeptness at summoning up this sort of expansion from the very local to the very broad is part of his greatness, just as his resistance to attempts to dehumanize the expansion by somehow leaving human suffering and hope out of it is another part.

It is evident that A, local complexity, and B, recognition of authorial struggle, pull in somewhat different directions, but it would be a mistake (though not an uncommon one) to imagine that Empson's career moves alphabetically from A to B. I shall be demonstrating below that both are evident and well developed in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson's first book, published in 1930. It makes some sense to suggest that, after *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), Empson largely sets aside the analysis of local complexity, which he regarded as having been misappropriated by the New Critics, for a less fine-grained reconstruction of authorial struggles; for instance, Milton's struggle with the unpleasantness of Christian doctrine in *Paradise Lost*. More B and less A allows the later Empson to polemicize vigorously, on the one hand, against mere academic explication that ignores the possibility of genuinely meaningful authorial intention, and on the other, against historicist orthodoxies that rule out the possibility of genuinely surprising meaning. Richard Strier has emphasized the latter polemic recently in an argument I'll return to below. Nonetheless it remains true that all of Empson's later work – from *Milton's God* through
Using Biography to the posthumous collections – involves passages of remarkably tight analysis, however far the general arguments are from theorizing local meaning.

Analysis of local complexity and recognition of authorial struggle intertwine, more or less symbolically, in a famous passage from the opening chapter of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, perhaps the first passage in which new readers of that book become certain that they are dealing with a writer of genius.

Not unlike the use of a comparison which does not say in virtue of what the two things are to be compared is the use of a comparative adjective which does not say what its noun is to be compared with.... I shall give an example from one of Mr. Waley's Chinese translations, to insist upon the profundity of feeling which such a device may enshrine.

Swiftly the years, beyond recall.
Solemn the stillness of this spring morning. (STA, 23)

Empson's ‘example' is in a characteristic way Empson's own, as it both misquotes its source poem (where the second line reads 'Solemn the stillness of this fair morning') and gives the reader who does not know Waley the impression that the two lines themselves constitute a complete poem.19 Certainly, as Empson shows, they open a wide perspective on human consciousness that, while not ambiguous, is complicated and dialectical:

The human mind has two main scales on which to measure time. The large one takes the length of a human life as its unit, so that there is nothing to be done about life, it is of an animal dignity and simplicity, and must be regarded from a peaceable and fatalistic point of view. The small one takes as its unit the conscious moment, and it is from this that you consider the neighbouring space, an activity of the will, delicacies of social tone, and your personality. The scales are so far apart as almost to give the effect of defining two dimensions; they do not come into contact because what is too large to be conceived by the one is still too small to be conceived by the other. Thus, taking the units as a century and the quarter of a second, their ratio is ten to the tenth and their mean is the standard working day; or taking the smaller one as five minutes, their mean is the whole of summer. The repose and self-command given by the use of the first are contrasted with the speed at which it shows the years to be passing from you, and therefore with the fear of death; the fever
and multiplicity of life, as known by the use of the second, are contrasted with the calm of the external space of which it gives consciousness, with the absolute or extra-temporal value attached to the brief moments of self-knowledge with which it is concerned, and with a sense of security in that it makes death so far off. (STA, 23–24)

Note how both of the scales hold something inimical at bay: the long scale allows relief from the fretfulness of the moment, and indeed from any local concerns, but makes death near; the short scale gives one the sense that the spatial realm around one is large and full of possibilities, the sense also that there is an almost immeasurable array of possibilities between the observer and extinction, making death hardly worth considering when there are so many other things to think about. Empson continues, returning to the lines, and demonstrating how important to his argument his misquotation is:

Both these time-scales and their contrasts are included by these two lines in a single act of apprehension, because of the words swift and still. Being contradictory as they stand, they demand to be conceived in different ways; we are enabled, therefore, to meet the open skies with answering stability of self-knowledge; to meet the brevity of human life with an ironical sense that it is morning and springtime, that there is a whole summer before winter, a whole day before night. (STA, 24)

Had Empson remembered Tao Qian’s poem exactly as it appears in Arthur Waley’s translation, he could not have written this beautiful sentence, or at any rate would have had to quote more of the poem and to introduce a number of distracting aspects of the poem in order to write it.

I call swift and still here ambiguous, though each is meant to be referred to one particular time-scale, because between them they put two time-scales into the reader’s mind in a single act of apprehension. But these scales, being both present, are in some degree used for each adjective, so that the words are ambiguous in a more direct sense; the years of a man’s life seem swift even on the small scale, like the mist from the mountains which ‘gathers a moment, then scatters’; the morning seems still even on the large scale, so that this moment is apocalyptic and a type of heaven. (STA, 24)

These two scales parallel, though they are not identical to, the intensity of the textual moment and the understanding of the text as part of a whole
life, itself in relation to yet larger structures of belief and custom, that I've identified above as A and B. Moreover, we can see both A and B in these passages, though they are clearer in the full text. There is no invocation of authorial biography in Empson's treatment of a translation of a Chinese text that Empson does not credit with either an author or a date. Nonetheless, in Empson's reading of the couplet something like an authorial intention emerges. By bold explanatory paraphrase, Empson treats the poem as contemplating, and enabling its readers to contemplate, a general or even universal biological contrast between a moment of perception and the whole lifetime of a human being. The goal, as often in Empson's imputations of motive to poets or poems, is making human existence more bearable. Moreover, the passage contrasts short and long time — treating us to some dazzling if obscure calculation in the process (their ratio is ten to the tenth and their mean is the standard working day) — while ignoring the intermediate time structures that, for people like Empson and most adults, stand between the conscious moment and the lifetime whether we are looking back in memory or forward in anticipation: such structures as projects, career phases, epochs of relationship, periods of institutional affiliation, etc. In ignoring such intermediate structures, Empson parallels in a rather uncanny premonitory way his general lack of interest in the larger formal and generic traditions — the inherited structures artists work in — that might be seen as intermediate between particular passages and grand struggles in the life of the author. Christopher Norris sees this inattention to form and genre as part of Empson's focus on the philosophy of communication:

He treats the poem as a concentrated species of ordinary language; drama and the novel as complex solutions to typical problems of social conflict and adjustment.... What seemed to many critics (especially the Chicago Aristotelians) a culpable laxness in matters of formal classification, indicates in fact a much greater interest on Empson's part in the means of communication common to all forms of literature.20

Since many literary critics make careers out of the exploration of such formal classifications or intermediate inherited structures, Empson's tendency to over-leap them deserves to be stressed.

Empson's book on the pastoral mode, Some Versions of Pastoral, might seem to offer a counter-example, but in it Empson treats pastoral as a way to get the complexity of an author's relation to the social order into an apparent local simplicity:
The essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way). From seeing the two sorts of people combined like this you thought better of both; the best parts of both were used. The effect was in some degree to combine in the reader or author the merits of the two sorts; he was made to mirror in himself more completely the effective elements of the society he lived in. (SVP, 11–12)

Thus an author's struggle to live well in a world where class-difference makes the social order seem unjust can be read out of a generic pastoral habit of local complexity: the paradox of shepherds who speak like courtiers.

Empson does comment wonderfully on form, but it tends to be local form, as can be seen in his discussion early in Seven Types of the predominant absence of ambiguity in The Faerie Queene. Meditating on 'the dreamy repetition of the great stanza perpetually pausing at its close,' Empson comments wakefully that 'stanzas may ... be classified by the grammatical connections of the crucial fifth line, which must give a soft bump to the dying fall of the first quatrain, keep it in the air, and prevent it from falling apart from the rest of the stanza' (STA, 33). He performs such a classification in a meaty paragraph that anatomizes a number of the kinds of voice and pace to be found in Spenser's epic, and then adds the following observation:

The size, the possible variety, and the fixity of this unit give something of the blankness that comes from fixing your eyes on a bright spot; you have to yield to it very completely to take in the variety of its movement, and, at the same time, there is no need to concentrate the elements of the situation into a judgment as if for action. As a result of this, when there are ambiguities of idea, it is whole civilisations rather than details of the moment which are their elements; he can pour into the even dreamwork of his fairyland Christian, classical, and chivalrous materials with an air, not of ignoring their differences, but of holding all their systems of values floating as if at a distance, so as not to interfere with one another, in the prolonged and diffused energies of his mind. (STA, 34)

Here, one can see Empson moving from local complexity to an author's attempt to live well by way of trying to imagine the creative process of a
great poet whose mind could be so untroubled as not to produce local ambiguities of diction. Empson returns to the matter in 1952 in a radio talk entitled ‘Edmund Spenser: Is he the “Poet’s Poet”? ’; after again discussing Spenser’s capacity to extend himself (often by placid self-contradiction) rather than concentrating his differences with himself in local complexity or ambiguity, Empson ends that talk by repeating, with evident admiration for his own youthful productions, this paragraph. 21

Empson’s A and B premises, seen either as a way to map lyric or to analyse drama, may seem old-fashioned – though probably they seem less decidedly old-fashioned than they would have 15 or 20 years ago, before books like Stephen Greenblatt’s Will in the World, Katharine Duncan-Jones’s Ungentle Shakespeare, David Riggs’s The World of Christopher Marlowe or James Shapiro’s A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599 reminded us of the possibilities of speculatively reading authorial biography out of a mixture of facts and fictions. Nonetheless, it is premise B, the idea that we must always be imagining an author attempting to live well, that may seem controversial; premise A, the assumption of local complexity, is not overtly ideological as a habit of reading or thought. But premise B, with its imperative interest in the author as an imagined self, located in both an individual and a collective history, clearly is an ideological commitment in its emphasis on agent rather than structure, though a flexible one (because Empson’s authorial agents are always in a complex state of engagement with social forces). On the basis of premise B, Empson in his own time polemized against formalist anti-intentionalism, and Empson now seems to weigh in from the grave on how we should go about imagining the subject’s position in discourse. More generally, Empson weighs in against any attempt to find a vocabulary that will somehow excuse readers from imagining themselves and the authors they read as, to quote D. H. Lawrence, ‘damned and doomed to the old effort at serious living’. 22 Given this insistent humanism, we might expect both poststructuralist readers and historicist readers to be uncomfortable with premise B, specifically with its reliance on an idea of the author as a historically located individual whose intentions we should be trying to infer. 23 But this discomfort, if felt at all, does not impede Empson from exerting influence on many sorts of critics.

I noted above, in suggesting that Empson was ‘a critic’s critic’s critic’, that influential critics of many different kinds quote Empson with a mixture of affection and reverence, and I cited, among others, deconstructors, historicist materialists and queer theorists. In terms of the A and B premises, one can see why deconstructive critics working in English would wish to connect their enterprise with Empson’s habit of extrapolating apparent problems
in resolving local meaning into deeply surprising accounts of the central attitudinal problems behind them. Empson locates these problems (which we might call A/B problems, using our premises) in the author's struggles; deconstructors tend to locate them more impersonally in the erasures and omissions necessary to preserve a façade of logocentric order; but, in some classic deconstructive texts, one finds reference to the authorial consciousness of an entirely Empsonian premise-B variety. For instance, in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', after describing the shock of the death in the white space between the two stanzas of Wordsworth's 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal', Paul de Man concludes that 'there is no real disjunction of the subject; the poem is written from the point of view of a unified self that fully recognizes a past condition as one of error and stands in a present that, however painful, sees things as they actually are ... Wordsworth is one of the few poets who can ... speak, as it were, from beyond their own graves'. This is a particular case of the general tendency de Man finds (and approves of) in Empson. In the essay 'The Dead End of Formalist Criticism', the next chapter of Blindness and Insight, de Man comments on how Empson's interrogations of local complexity (what I call premise A) lead him ineluctably to 'the deep division of Being itself', and when de Man discusses Empson's practice further, it is clear that this division of Being is, for Empson, located in the self of the author, though de Man avoids the word 'self' in describing it:

Empson sheds light upon this dialectic ... of the unhappy consciousness ... He begins with Keats ... a very good selection, for Keats lived this tension especially acutely and lived in its substance ... . We have traveled far from Richards' universe where there never is any error, only misunderstanding. Empson's inquiry, drawn by the very weight of his cogitations to problems that can no longer be ignored, has led him to broader questions. Instead of concentrating on details of poetic form, he will have to reflect henceforth upon the poetic phenomenon as such; a phenomenon that does seem to deserve this kind of attention since it leads, willy-nilly, to unsuspected perspectives upon human complexity.

Though I do not imagine that de Man would be entirely happy with formulating this as 'the author's struggle to live well under inimical conditions', that is, I believe, the way Empson looks at the human complexity his discussions of verbal complexity lead him to. And Empson is clearly a critic de Man takes as an admirable model of rigour, though a rigour that does not express itself in de Man's own chosen philosophical vocabulary (a vocabulary in which 'rigour' is an impersonal God-term).
Similarly, historically-minded critics find a model for their own work in Empson's way of seeing large social conflicts coming into minute focus in an author's struggles to write a sufficiently complex representation of relations among consciousness, communication and the social order. Stephen Greenblatt briefly invokes Empson in 'Invisible Bullets', an essay that stands to New Historicism in roughly the same relation that 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' does to American deconstruction, when Greenblatt gets to his central account of Prince Hal's chilly effectiveness and wishes to suggest that Shakespeare must have had the same ambivalence about Hal that Greenblatt does:

Hal is an anti-Midas: everything he touches turns to dross. And this devaluation is the source of his own sense of value, a value not intrinsic but contingent, dependent upon the circulation of counterfeit coin and the subtle manipulation of appearances:

And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glitt‘ring o‘er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
I‘ll so offend, to make offense a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will. (1.2.212-17)

Such lines, as Empson remarks, 'cannot have been written without bitterness against the prince,' yet the bitterness is not incompatible with 'an ironical acceptance' of his authority. 27

Similarly, though Greenblatt never mentions Empson in his treatment of Wyatt in Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Greenblatt makes a very Empsonian movement from A to B in summing up his treatment of Wyatt:

We are now prepared to grasp how the gap between discourse and intention opens up in Wyatt and hence how it is possible for his greatest poems to engage in complex reflections upon the system of values that has generated them. The result is the complex response evoked by a poem like 'They Flee from Me': on the one hand, acceptance of the speaker's claim to injured merit, admiration for his mastery of experience, complicity in his 'manly' contempt for women's bestial faithlessness; on the other hand, recognition of the speaker's implication in his own betrayal, acknowledgement of the link between the other's imputed bad faith and his own, perception of an interior distance in the ideology so passionately espoused. 28
Certainly Greenblatt sees Wyatt’s lyric as part of an author’s struggle to live well – a struggle in which the author is, at least in part, failing because he has been fashioned by a courtly system that programs him for failure, but also partly succeeding by including intense awareness of this fact in his lyric. Examples from Empson’s criticism both of Shakespeare’s sonnets and Shakespeare’s plays will show the frequency with which his own moves to imputed biography end in the imputation of a dialectical or ambivalent selfhood to his author.

Similarly, queer critics and theorists have taken Empson as a model, both of candour about the complexities of sexual self-positioning (for instance, in his late discussions of Marvell’s sexuality), and in his recognition that verbal complexity is, and should be recognized as, an aspect of the presence of queer issues in the life and culture of authors. Thus Jonathan Goldberg writes on how Empson’s reliance on B-variety intentionalism can guide modern theorists and critics attempting to understand sodomy in Marlowe’s Edward II.

Sodomy may be a void, but it is central to the will…. This is not a position easily assimilable to those who would find in Marlowe a spokesman for modern gay identity. William Empson, with his usual genius, was closer to the point when he argued that Marlowe believed that ‘the unmentionable sin for which the punishment was death was the proper thing to do’; Marlowe is defending sodomy, not an idealized friendship or some spiritual relationship or some self-integrative principle of identity; ‘a critic,’ Empson continues, ‘who muffles it up, from whatever kind intention, cannot be saying anything important about him’.29

Notice here that it is Empson’s belief in his own premise B insight into Marlowe’s mind that makes him, for Goldberg, not only a useful model for Goldberg’s own treatment of Edward II, but a useful corrective for the errors of others.

I now turn to Shakespeare’s sonnets, and, finally, to Empson as Shakespeare critic. As is well known, the sonnets bear a privileged historical role in Empson’s formation as a literary critic. He got the idea for what became Seven Types of Ambiguity from a 1928 essay by Laura Riding and Robert Graves that explored the punctuation, syntax and meaning of sonnet 129 by reading an unedited version of that poem (WEI, 217–225).

The first part of Empson’s book to appear in print was an essay on sonnet 16 that pursued their method. A number of the analyses in Seven Types focus on sonnets, though Empson’s most remarkable sonnet criticism comes
later. Empson’s central treatment of the sonnets is the chapter on sonnet 94, ‘They that have power to hurt’, in Some Versions of Pastoral, and there are recurrent references to the sonnets in Empson’s discussion of the plays and narrative poems ever after, notably in the chapter on ‘sense’ in Measure for Measure in Complex Words and in the essay introducing the Signet edition of the narrative poems, now reprinted in Essays on Shakespeare.

I want to suggest, however, that Empson may have been drawn to the sonnets not merely because they are luminous beacons for any interpreter drawn to complex utterance. For it is in relation to the sonnets that Empson could be said to discover how to join A and B, extremely close textual analysis with speculative authorial biography. The reason for this is fairly obvious. After all, the sonnets are to a preeminent degree both locally complex and biographically suggestive. More crucially, without large-scale biographical inferences local ingenuity has a great deal of difficulty making sense of them: witness the debate over whether Stephen Booth’s attempts, in the notes to his edition, to have a lot of A without much B produce satisfaction. For Empson, at any rate, it is evidently both impossible and undesirable to do much type A analysis of the sonnets without involving himself in a good deal of type B hypothesizing about the life of the author. Empson moves from one to the other in the first two pages of Seven Types, citing line four of Sonnet 73.

To take a famous example, there is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling in,

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,
but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots, and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and Narcissistic charm suggested by choir-boys suits well with Shakespeare’s feeling for the object of the Sonnets, and for various sociological and historical reasons (the protestant destruction of monasteries; fear of puritanism), which it would be hard now to trace out in their proportions; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind. Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of
effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry. (STA, 2–3)

The final sentence in the passage shows that Empson feels that his B-drenched exploration of A gets at something central about the nature of lyric. This is a baroque passage, richer and more startling than most of the later treatments of whole sonnets in Seven Types, and it encapsulates an Empsonian movement from specific words through an emotional state in the mind of the author (Shakespeare’s feelings for the young man) to various aspects of the author’s culture that may have pressed upon Shakespeare’s consciousness. These include Shakespearean ambivalence about the destruction of English Catholicism, possibly an historically prescient awareness that religious intolerance in England is always part of a struggle for power and property between one group and another, and a ‘fear of puritanism’ that seems to involve both a professional wariness of the consequences of puritan anti-theatricalism and a more personal fear that puritanical resistance to the pursuit of bodily pleasure will not only oppress him but also possibly infect him, as it seems to be doing in some of the Dark Lady sonnets (compare Complex Words, 272).

Such speculative unpacking of Empson’s own formulations is, surely, encouraged by Empson’s general way of going about things. Moreover, as we have seen, Empson’s biography supports the speculation. When he published Seven Types, Empson himself was a recent victim of what he clearly regarded as hypocritical puritanism on the part of the fellows of Magdalene. Thus Empson’s biographical projection of a Shakespeare haunted by puritanism and the casting-off of bad influences on the young – a projection that informs his close readings of the Henriad and of Measure for Measure – seems linked to Empson’s own biography from the start.

Empson’s extended discussion of Sonnet 83 in Seven Types furthers such reflections. The discussion comes at the beginning of his chapter on ambiguities of the fourth type, already mentioned above with respect to a poem of Empson’s: ‘when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author’ (STA, 133). Thus Empson abstractly states one of the major relations between A and B in his criticism: a problem encountered in type A local exegesis leads to, and is then retroactively fixed or transcended by, an advance in type B imputed biography. The full sonnet, with Q punctuation and capitalization (though not spelling) as quoted by Empson, is as follows:
I never saw that you did painting need,
And therefore to your fair no painting set,
I found (or thought I found) you did exceed,
The barren tender of a Poet's debt:
And therefore have I slept in your report,
That you yourself being extant well might show,
How far a modern quill doth come too short,
Speaking of worth, what worth in you doth grow,
This silence for my sin you did impute,
Which shall be most my glory being dumb,
For I impair not beauty being mute,
When others would give life, and bring a tomb.
    There lives more life in one of your fair eyes,
    Than both your Poets can in praise devise.  (STA, 133)

Empson comments of the whole:

One must pause before shadowing with irony this noble compound of
eulogy and apology. But one may notice its position in the sequence
(Shakespeare seems to have been taunted for his inferiority, and is being
abandoned for the rival poet); the mixture of extraordinary claims and
bitter humility with which it is surrounded; and that the two adjacent
Sonnets say: 'Thou truly fair wert truly sympathised In true plain words
by thy truth-telling friend,' and 'You to your beauteous blessings add a
curse, Being fond on praise, which makes your praises worse.' It is not
true that the feeling must be simple because it is deep; irony is similar to
this kind of lyrical self-abandonment, or they relieve similar situations;
by the energy with which such an adoration springs forward one can
measure the objections which it is overriding, by the sharpness of what
is treated as an ecstasy one may guess that it would otherwise have been
pain.  (STA p. 134)

Here, Empson moves to a direct declaration, 'it is not true that the feeling
must be simple because it is deep'. The statement seems, in its generality,
to be grounded in Empson's own mind mirroring the imputed experience
of Shakespeare as well as in his reading of this particular sonnet. The claim
makes Shakespearean ambiguity (at least as manifested in this sonnet) into
the expression of Shakespeare's (and, perhaps, everyone's) ambivalence,
an ambivalence that can find 'relief' in either lyric idealization or irony,
or an ambiguous combination of the two. The particular biographical
conclusion Empson has in mind becomes clearer in his discussion of the final quatrain.

It too involves the characteristic movement from A to B. Modern editors almost without exception insert a comma after ‘beauty’ in line 11, so that 11–12 reads: ‘For I impair not beauty, being mute, / When others would give life, and bring a tomb’. This insertion makes it natural to read line 12 as meaning ‘When the other poets who are now writing about you intend to give you life but in fact give you a tomb’. Empson reads the quarto punctuation, ‘For I impair not beauty being mute, / When others would give life, and bring a tomb’. As a result, Empson considers at length the possibility that lines 11 and 12 should rather be paraphrased together to allow the possibility that it is Shakespeare who ‘bring[s] a tomb’:

It would be possible to regard line 12, which clinches the third quatrain, as an antithesis: ‘when others would bring life, I in fact bring a tomb.’ This might be Shakespeare’s tomb; ‘I do not flatter you but I bring you the devotion of a lifetime.’ More probably it is W. H.’s; ‘I do not attempt to flatter you at the moment; I bring you the sad and reserved gift of an eternal praise’. We may extract from this some such meaning as: ‘I do not describe your beauty or your faithlessness, but my love for you’. (STA, 137)

Notice how the series of paraphrases bring out both possible ironies and declarations of abject dependence on Shakespeare’s part – a dependence that, in being expressed, becomes a bit less abject, particularly since it may include the possibility that the older poet is eulogizing the beautiful young man after imagining his death. Empson continues his unpacking:

However, there are two other ways of taking the syntax which destroy this antithesis: ‘When others would bring life, I, if I wrote about you, would bring a tomb’, and ‘When others would try to write about you, would try to give you life, and thereby bring you a tomb’; for both of these the tomb must imply some action which would impair beauty. The normal meaning is given by Sonnet xvii:

Who will believe my verse in time to come
If it were fill’d with your most high deserts?
Though yet Heaven knowes it is but as a tombe
Which hides your life, and shows not halfe your parts.

This first use of the word has no doubt that it is eulogy; the Sonnet is glowing and dancing with his certitude. But when the metaphor is
repeated, this time without being explained, it has grown dark with an incipient double meaning; 'I should fail you, now that you have behaved so badly to me, if I tried to express you in poetry; I should give you myself, and draw from my readers, a cold and limited judgment, praise you without sincerity, or blame you without thinking of the living man'. *(STA, 137–38)*

This is something new, and something more powerful than what came just before it. What is Empson doing when he, as Shakespeare, says to 'W. H.' 'now that you have behaved so badly to me, if I tried to express you in poetry ... I should ... blame you without thinking of the living man'? Surely we must call this a kind of *performance* of the sonnet (this is well within our ideas of what one does with lyric), but it is also a kind of *impersonation* of the poet (and this stretches our normal thinking). Having followed premise A and explored the varieties of possible meaning in the quatrains, Empson takes premise B so far that he in effect becomes the speaker/poet who voices the complex of feelings within it. Like a Stanislavskian actor, Empson constructs a biography for the lyric speaker (mostly out of the adjacent sonnets in the sequence and his general sense of it), and what he voices is a kind of through line for the sonnet – a set of declarations in his own distinctive prose. His tendentious paraphrase picks up the aspect of Shakespeare’s relation to the young man that most interests Empson by giving priority to what most readers find the least probable construction of lines 11–12. This ‘incipient double meaning’ lets Empson, having temporarily become Shakespeare, return and tell us what Shakespeare is like, quoting Parolles’ most famous line from *All’s Well that Ends Well* in the process:

'I should ... blame you without thinking of the living man'. (‘Simply the thing I am Shall make me live’; Shakespeare continually draws on a generosity of this kind. It is not ‘tout comprendre’, in his view, it is merely to feel how a man comes to be a working system, which necessarily excites a degree of sympathy.) *(STA, 138)*

A fairly arid exercise in paraphrase has morphed into the exciting claim that one of the goals of Shakespearean lyric is to anatomize the excitation of sympathy by ‘feel[ing] how a man comes to be a working system’. The ‘generosity’ Empson brings out here is both Shakespeare’s own, and Empson’s own, and is both something Shakespeare aims to arouse, and something Empson intends to evoke. It is quite close, it seems to me, to
the way that Greenblatt suggests that our response to Wyatt involves both a sympathetic admiration for Wyatt’s expression of loss and an awareness that, in his lyric, Wyatt is worked by the system that he is working. But Empson is bolder than Greenblatt in his entry into the mind of his author. And all this plausible and powerful Empsonian generalization about Shakespeare emerges from a type A problem in reading that most modern editions, by repunctuating, render invisible.

Let me close this part of the essay by briefly discussing the chapter on sonnet 94 in Some Versions of Pastoral, which offers a kind of exercise in moving through A to B and fully displays Empson’s technique of Shakespeare impersonation. Following Graves and Riding, Empson quotes the Q version:

They that have powre to hurt, and will doe none,
That doe not do the thing, they most do showe,
Who mouing others, are themselues as stone,
Vnmooued, could, and to temptation slow:
They rightly do inheritt heauens graces,
And husband natures riches from expence,
They are the Lords and owners of their faces,
Others, but stewards of their excellence:
The sommers flowre is to the Sommer sweet,
Though to itselfe, it onely live and die,
But if that flowre with base infection meete,
The basest weed out-braues his dignity:
For sweetest things turne sowrest by their deeds,
Lillies that fester, smell far worse then weeds. (SVP, 88)

Empson begins by setting up the basic problem of interpretation posed by the unspecified terms that need to be placed in comparison with one another in the sonnet: ‘you can work through all the notes in the Variorum without finding out whether flower, lily, “owner”, and person addressed are alike or opposed ... the simplest view (that any two may be alike in some one property) ... yields 4096 possible movements of thought’. He concludes that ‘the niggler is routed here; one has honestly to consider what seems important’ (SVP, 89). There is no ‘person addressed’ in 94 proper (just as line 4 of 73, ‘Bare ruin’d choirs’, is not the ‘simile’ Empson calls it in a passage quoted above), but Empson will not be inhibited from biography by such minor matters of form, and as he points out later, the idea of address is carried over from 93 and continues through 95, both
sonnets on related themes. Empson's calculation that the number of possible movements of thought here is 4^5 has been disputed, incidentally.

Empson's treatment of the sonnet includes many of the kinds of meditation joining A and B I have talked about above — for instance his reflection on the mental instrument sonnet 94 turns out to be. It is both a map on which one can trace many routes, and an instrument on which the reader and the author are both imagined as performers. The mind of the reader and the mind of the author meet here in much the way they met in Empson's discussion of the Spenserian stanza in *Seven Types*.

The vague and generalised language of the descriptions [in sonnet 94], which might be talking about so many sorts of people as well as feeling so many things about them, somehow makes a unity like a crossroads, which analysis does not deal with by exploring down the roads; makes a solid flute on which you can play a multitude of tunes, whose solidity no list of all possible tunes would go far to explain. The balance of feeling is both very complex and very fertile; experiences are recorded, and metaphors invented, in the Sonnets, which he went on 'applying' as a dramatist, taking particular cases of them as if they were wide generalisations, for the rest of his life. (*SVP*, 90)

After an illuminating discussion of the passage (and as part of a generous and helpful discussion of Empson's brilliant contribution to studies of pastoral), Paul Alpers comments oddly in *What Is Pastoral?* that 'the unity of a crossroads (such as it is) is a fact of social existence, with no grounding in nature or analogy to the human individual; the solid flute suggests the limits of the minds that write and interpret, for of course no tune can be played on it'. But surely Empson means that the sonnet is a device that lives through interpretive performance, polysemous in that many varied meanings can pass through it, but solid in that it remains the singular and unchanging instrument on which such meanings are 'played' by the author or by readers? I do not think, *pace* Alpers, that Empson intends the idea of a flute that has no hollow passage through which to blow air.

At any rate, this idea of the lyric as crossroads or instrument serves as Empson's segue in the wide-ranging linkage between this sonnet, all the sonnets and a number of the plays that follows. As he notes, 'it is hard not to go off down one of the roads at the crossing, and get one plain meaning for the poem from that, because Shakespeare himself did that so very effectively afterwards; a part of the situation of the Sonnets, the actual phrases designed for it, are given to Prince Henry, to Angelo, to Troilus, to the
Greek army; getting further from the original as time went on’ (SVP, 102). After exploring these, Empson concludes with a tendentious paraphrase that is both his own final attempt to read sonnet 94 and Shakespeare’s final attempt to sum up his relation to the young man:

It is not surprising that this sentiment [Bassanio’s awareness that he is loved for superficial beauty and for his own success in being loved] should make Shakespeare’s mind hark back to the Sonnets, because it was there so essential; these poems of idealisation of a patron and careerist depend upon it for their strength and dignity. ‘Man is so placed that the sort of thing you do is in degree all that any one can do; success does not come from mere virtue, and without some external success a virtue is not real even to itself. One must not look elsewhere; success of the same nature as yours is all that the dignity, whether of life or poetry, can be based upon’. This queer sort of realism, indeed, is one of the main things he had to say.

The feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home with most versions of pastoral ... (SVP, 114–115)

Thus, in his type B criticism of Shakespeare, Empson is preoccupied with, and vocalizes from the inside, a quasi-biographical question about Shakespeare that was probably at times an autobiographical question for Empson as well: how could someone so unimaginably successful in literary creation be so unhappy — or, to put it another way, how could someone with such extraordinary analytical gifts make such self-destructive object choices? Empson’s answer comes here, in the idea that literary creation can come out of the acceptance that ‘life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so’. This intellectually enabling though not personally reassuring attitude, a kind of negative humanism, informs much of Empson’s Shakespeare criticism.

Empson’s example has had a considerable effect on later critics of the sonnets, most explicitly in their embrace of the A position outlined above. As Empson says in defence of this A premise at the end of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, ‘an advance in the machinery of description makes a reader feel stronger about his appreciations, more reliably able to distinguish the private or accidental from the critically important or repeatable, more confident of the reality (that is, the transferability) of his experiences; adds, in short, in the mind of the reader to the things there to be described, whether or not it makes those particular things more describable’ (STA, 254).
As we turn from Empson’s criticism on Shakespeare’s sonnets to his treatment of Shakespeare as a playwright, it is worth restating and slightly expanding the claims I am making for an Empsonian critical scheme:

Empson consistently follows out the implications of linking, and treating as inseparable, two large ideas about literary experience:

A. When allowed to mean in the mind of a receptive reader, particular passages or words convey extremely complex, often ambiguous, self-divided or historically unexpected meanings;

B. When, as readers, we move inevitably from local complexity to a more general meaning-giving framework, that framework is not centrally historical or generic, but interpersonal: meanings need to be understood as the intentions (conscious or not) of an author struggling to live well amid an array of usually inimical forces, some so pervasive as to be almost universal (e.g. mortality, inequality, subjective isolation), others particular to the author’s historical situation or the author’s way of using the form s/he is employing.

A and B taken together imply:

C. Literary meaning requires a fit reader who is also preoccupied with the problem of living well under inimical conditions and who is not boxed in by an inappropriately limited, or misleadingly technical, view of how serious reading proceeds. A critical reader striving to understand the sense of a particular line is also a human being trying to identify in imagination with another human being. Precise attention to semantic features of verbal complexity does not diminish the necessity of attending to the author’s social struggle. Attention to social struggle does not make semantic analysis of verbal complexity unnecessary, moot or relatively frivolous. In fact, verbal complexity registers how, in the minds of poets – but also ordinary speakers – the struggle to make sense of social complexity manifests itself.

Empson’s insistence on both A and B at once has rich implications for philosophy of language as well as for literary criticism. Christopher Norris, probably the most philosophical of Empson critics, argues in 1978 that readers of Wittgenstein and Austin ought to be taking Empson seriously, and in 2002 that readers of Derrida and Davidson ought to do the same.39

Much of the interest, both philosophical and psychological, of Empson’s B premise comes from the question it raises about whether authors are
fully conscious of how their words and works participate in their struggle to live well. Empson throughout his career is fascinated by paradoxes about intentionality, self-awareness and meaning, particularly in the minds of writers whom most readers take to be deeply committed to an ascertainable system of beliefs. Empson reads both Herbert and Milton, for instance, as resistant, at complex moments, to aspects of the Christianity Empson has no doubt that they generally believed in. Late in life, in the course of an interview, Empson tells Christopher Ricks an anecdote intended to clarify his own position with respect to authors' conscious intentions, an exploration of the way premise C both obliges and allows critics to have fun in their relations to the struggles of authors. The anecdote nicely illustrates Empson's infectious delight in mischief directed at dogmatic commitments, supporting Jonathan Bate's bold remark that 'Johnson, Hazlitt and Empson are the greatest English critics of their respective centuries not least because they are the funniest'.

There was a fine statement by G. K. Chesterton, a very good critic I've always thought, who said that if criticism means anything ... [it] means saying about the author the very things that would have made him jump out of his skin. And the idea that you should avoid making the author jump out of his skin, I really do hope hasn't occurred to me. That would be falling down on the great duty.

This is worth taking note of: Empson regards it as the critic's 'great duty' - perhaps a bit jocosely - to as it were demonstrate to authors that they may not really know what they meant, but really do mean it. Empson continues with an example:

[T]here's a grand case of it in the nineties when Frank Harris ... greatly admired, very rightly, the poems of the Shropshire Lad, the poems of A. E. Housman. And so he took a taxi to the north of London and insisted on dragging Housman ... out to lunch, and Housman recited a poem about God Save the Queen and praising the first, second, and third Zulu wars, and various wars of that kind which were going on in the nineties, and said 'Oh God will save her, be you the man you've been, get you the sons your fathers got, and God will save the Queen'. And Harris said, 'and so he will, and so the old bitch will be saved till the men can be fooled no longer', or something. At any rate, 'old bitch' came in, and Housman rose up, white and shaking, and said 'You must allow me to go, I had no intention of meaning anything of the kind',


and it is very baffling to see how he could have written those poems without knowing that they were being ironical or at any rate saying that the [soldiers] were being wasted for trivial purposes ... I mean, here is a case where the author was made to jump out of his skin. And this could only be because in some mysterious way he knew what was inside his skin. (WE2, 635–636)

For Empson, Frank Harris succeeded in a type C reading, to shocking effect, in his response to A. E. Housman. Such readings often involve a technique of projective biography, and given the ways C links engaged reader with engaged author, projective biography is often projected autobiography as well. As Paul Fry puts it, ‘We don’t doubt for a moment that ... [Empson] was a good though opinionated judge of character; the reason we don’t doubt this is that we gladly agree with Empson in liking, admiring, and recognizing the lineaments of the character he judges well, even though it is to a large extent the character he sees in the mirror’.  

This biographical and autobiographical tendency has often been mentioned and is obvious in Empson’s later writing. The readers of Empson who see his work proceeding alphabetically often also believe that he peaked early, with Seven Types of Ambiguity and Some Versions of Pastoral, and so regard Empson primarily as a close reader or practical critic. They do not see projective biography as central to Empson’s best work. One thing I hope to have accomplished already in this essay is to demonstrate that there is no A without B, even in Seven Types of Ambiguity. Nonetheless, the projected biography and projected autobiography do grow more evident as Empson’s career proceeds. René Wellek comments that Empson’s reading of Sonnet 94 in Pastoral discussed above ‘assign[s] to Shakespeare what seems Empson’s own peculiar wisdom about life, “the feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so”’. Frank Kermode, reviewing the first volume of John Haffenden’s biography of Empson in the London Review of Books, comments that ‘Empson himself was a pugnacious believer in the relevance of biography to the study of literature’. Paul Fry says that for Empson ‘in honouring literature we are praising the scope of the human mind, hence should keep the mind as fully in view as the static interference of the text will allow’, and goes on to say of The Structure of Complex Words that ‘a book devoted to the analysis of self-conception becomes at the same time a wonderfully suggestive moral and intellectual autobiography’. And everyone who cares about Empson knows that biographical readings of literature, constructing complex unexpected intentions for authors,
characterize Empson’s late work. John Haffenden, in the second volume of his biography, William Empson: Against the Christians, entitles a late chapter ‘Rescuing Donne and Coleridge’ and details how Empson argued passionately for beliefs and intentions on the part of Coleridge and Donne that he felt essential in recognizing their struggle to live decently in a world deformed by bad Christian structures of belief (WE2, 560–605). And of course a late volume collecting Empson’s essays, published just after his death in 1984, is entitled Using Biography.

It should be noted here, given the corrective tendency of much of Empson’s later criticism, that B and C involve both an intentionalist idea about how literature should be read and a platform for the critique of ideas about reading that limit the power of authors to mean in unexpected ways and the entitlement of readers to be correspondingly surprised by what they read. Moreover, Empson’s corrective tendencies very often involve impatience with what he sees as a false science, or an inappropriately determinative contextualizing vocabulary, that gets in the way of surprising identification between reader and author. I believe that this aspect of Empson’s basic stance still has corrective power. Indeed, I suggest that Empson’s likely future salience as a great critic (by the standards suggested earlier in this essay) and a great Shakespearean arises from a combination of exemplarity in explicating local complexity with reference to Shakespeare’s imputed human struggle, on one hand, and on the other corrective force in showing how wrong it is to rule out interpersonal imputation of this kind in reading.

Is Empson a Great Shakespearean?

Empson’s reputation as a remarkable critic is closely associated with A; that is, with the way his work is shot through with exemplary local readings. Everyone knows he can find amazing things in passages and words, and relatively few link their amazement to Empson’s complex projections of ethical intentionality. In the rest of this essay, I will take Empson’s powers as an exemplary explicator for granted, thus assuming readers who can remember the dazzling experience of reading Seven Types of Ambiguity or Some Versions of Pastoral. Most also know that Empson had mathematical training, and at some points attempts quasi-scientific classifications of linguistic phenomena. This means that his reputation as a theorist is a bit misleading. A good deal of his work that appears on its face theoretical rather than critical – chapters or passages in which Empson is generalizing
rather than reading – proposes taxonomic structures for local verbal complexity. Thus seven types of ambiguity (René Wellek notes that the card catalogue at the University of Iowa library had the title as *Seventy Types of Ambiguity* without enormous distortion), and the difficult-to-remember set of ‘equations’ expounded in the opening chapters and charted at the end of *The Structure of Complex Words*. Nonetheless, Empson’s taxonomies never for him conflict with the idea that poetry should be construed as someone grappling with a life-problem that we need to participate in imaginatively (or actually) in order to understand. Indeed, he asserts such views regularly in defence of his most theoretical work, as in this comment on an unsympathetic review by an academic philosopher of *The Structure of Complex Words* that accused it of ‘logical monstrosities’: ‘if a training in logic makes a man stupider than he would be without it, that is only to its discredit … As to the “personalist [biographical] heresy”, I think that a reader should try to decide what his author intended to say … Any theory designed to give a shorter answer, I think, loses touch with common sense … I think a critic should have an insight into the mind of his author’. And it is this view that gives Empson’s controversial writing long-term corrective force. The long-term corrective force, combined with local exemplarity, makes Empson great.

An example of corrective use of Empson’s criticism is provided by Richard Strier’s *Resistant Structures*. Strier begins his book with an account of Empson’s extended public and private disagreement with Rosamund Tuve about how to interpret Herbert’s ‘The Sacrifice’, and how to read Renaissance poetry more generally. Strier’s point is that Empson’s view of the open relation of the poet to history and tradition ought to be more congenial to historically-minded critics of poetry than Tuve’s more deterministic one, because Empson’s view means ‘trying to appreciate each text’s distinctive qualities, however strange or familiar … [and] letting the historical chips fall where they may’. In other words, if we historicize by identifying traditions that determine what people at a given moment are able to think, as Tuve does, we don mind-forged manacles (partly in order to bash others with them), whereas Empson shows how, as Strier puts it, ‘Lots of different ideas were available in the past, especially in so yeasty a period as the Renaissance’. This is both helpful and right, and Strier’s chapter gives a very attractive introduction to Empson’s wit, reasonableness and generosity as a reader. But one might, following the scheme I have suggested, tweak the account slightly and see Empson vs Tuve as Empson’s quite passionate and consistent defence of the freedom of Herbert and other Renaissance poets to be surprising to themselves as well as to us,
undertaken by Empson in an emancipatory spirit somewhat reminiscent of Shelley’s ‘Defence of Poesy’. Tuve, exemplifying the historicizing critic who diminishes her own capacity to read for surprise, becomes a kind of censor, restricting not only the freedom of her followers, but also that of the poets she discusses. Thus Empson’s work not only provides Strier with a way of correcting the wrong kind of historicizing, but provides us all with a warning not to let whatever learning we have ossify into a set of directive expectations that prevents us from being surprised by the genuinely surprising.

In Empson’s later work on Shakespeare, he often turns explicitly to a kind of speculative unverifiable biography, creating a possible human author in a plausible situation to explain what he is finding in a text. This serves not only to contextualize a local unexpected understanding, as in the discussion of Herbert, but also to create a plausible literary-historical or generic surround for a general approach to a large issue, like Hamlet’s enactment of human depth or Lear’s enactment of cruelty and folly. Many of the telling remarks about Shakespeare in Empson’s later writing fall into this category, such as his comment on Macbeth and civil war:

‘Cruel are the times, when we are traitors, and do not know ourselves’ – the point could hardly be rubbed in more firmly, with even the child Macduff prattling about whether his father is a traitor too. It is not merely a literary effect; it is what people really do feel in times of civil war, and Shakespeare had a practical and lasting fear of civil war. (ES, 143)

We should add that some plays, notably Lear, arouse in Empson admissions of partial uncertainty about what was in Shakespeare’s mind rather than the confident eloquent impersonation of Shakespeare we see when Empson is sure of a reading. He concludes the Lear chapter in Complex Words with a set of possibilities raised by his method of investigation: ‘What the keyword or “pattern” approach brings you to, I submit, is a fundamental horror, an idea that the gods are such silly and malicious jokers that they will soon destroy the world’ (SCW, 156). But, as Empson points out, ‘The question of whether Shakespeare meant this or not is still quite a live controversy, and usually thought to be independent of any question of critical technique’ (ibid). And Empson goes on to ventriloquize a debate among different critics, each of whom seems to speak partly for Empson, disagreeing about whether the apocalyptic atmosphere of the play needs to be subordinated to the moral development of the characters, or vice versa. Empson concludes, characteristically, by locating the uncertainty
in the reader’s attempt to see into the mind of Shakespeare, a mind in this case perhaps not quite made up: ‘I do think that the suggestions of a fundamental horror in the play were meant to be prominent, whether you interpret them as some profound intuition about life or prefer to say, more simply, that the theme released a lot of real bad temper in him’ (ibid).

In Empson’s discussion of Hamlet, he claims that by putting the problem of theatrical behaviour – the subjective problem for a person of attempting seriously to intend a scripted, externally imposed set of actions – out front as a problem that Hamlet as the theatrical protagonist is aware of and puzzled by, Shakespeare opens an endlessly interesting and provocative set of relations among consciousness, will and action. Empson arrives at this idea by entering Shakespeare’s own perspective on the play: ‘the enormous panoply of theory and explanation [of Hamlet] falls into a reasonable proportion if viewed, so to speak, from Pisgah, from the moment of discovery by Shakespeare’ (ES, 79). Empson’s Shakespeare is, in this context, at the outset a canny professional and cooperative company man who is ordered to revise Kyd’s Ur-Hamlet, a script that has been intermittently performed since the late 1580s:

We have to consider why Shakespeare rewrote a much-laughed-at old play, and was thus led on into his great Tragic Period, and the obvious answer is that he was told to; somebody in the Company thumbed over the texts in the ice-box and said ‘This used to be a tremendous draw, and it’s coming round again; look at Marston. All you have to do is just go over the words so that it’s life-like and they can’t laugh at it.’ (ES, 80)

Empson actually traces Shakespeare’s steps from a meeting in Southwark back to his lodgings: ‘I think he did not see how to solve this problem at the committee meeting, when the agile Bard was voted to carry the weight, but already did see how when walking home’ (ES, 80).

Now Empson wrote this essay at a time when a great deal of Shakespeare scholarship (notably that of John Dover Wilson, a favourite critical antagonist of Empson’s) mapped Shakespeare’s early printed texts in layers on the basis of putative stages of revision, usually of his own early drafts. Empson has already efficiently summed up the evidence that there was an Ur-Hamlet, and that it was both widely-known and thought to be funny in an over-the-top theatrical way in the 1590s. So his version of Shakespeare confronted with a ten-year-old script by Kyd brings to life a version of Shakespeare’s activity that was hypothesized (far less vividly) by many scholars. In rewriting Kyd, Empson thinks, Shakespeare may indeed have
followed Kyd's play closely: 'For all we know, when Shakespeare created a new epoch and opened a new territory to the human mind, he did nothing but alter the dialogue for this structure, not even adding a scene' (ES, 80). But Empson has a general complaint about this mode of reconstruction of Shakespeare's writing process, which is that critics often use it to denigrate or limit aspects of Shakespeare's creativity - rather as, from Empson's point of view, Tuve limits Herbert's creativity as well as Empson's by attempting to fix Herbert in a static and weighty tradition. As Empson says,

The trouble with this kind of critical approach, as the experienced reader will already be feeling with irritation, is that it can be used to say 'That is why the play is so muddled and bad'. On the contrary, I think, if taken firmly enough it shows how, at the time, such a wonderful thing as Shakespeare's Hamlet could be conceived and accepted. (ES, 80)

Another corollary of B and C is that, as in interpersonal relations, we need both a minimal principle of charity to understand authors at all, and we need a substantial principle of charity to learn from and care about them. This charity needs to include realism: for Empson in this situation, it means postulating the originality of Hamlet as Shakespeare's craftsmanlike solution to a problem between company and audience:

[We should not] forget that the misfortunes of genius often have a wild luck in their timing. But he must have seemed an unlikely person just then to start on a great Tragic Period, and he never wrote a Revenge Play afterwards; we can reasonably suppose that he first thought of Hamlet as a pretty specialised assignment, a matter, indeed, of trying to satisfy audiences who demanded a Revenge Play and then laughed when it was provided. (ES, 84)

Though Empson does not say this, he must have in mind Hamlet's critique of theatrical clowning that 'though it makes the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve' (3.2.25–26). In any case, while turning this over in his mind on his walk, Empson's Shakespeare sees what to do:

It was a bold decision, and probably decided his subsequent career, but it was a purely technical one. He thought: 'The only way to shut this hole is to make it big. I shall make Hamlet walk up to the audience and tell them, again and again, “I don’t know why I’m delaying any more than you do; the motivation of this play is just as blank to me as it is to you;
but I can’t help it.” What is more, I shall make it impossible for them to blame him. And then they daren’t laugh’. It turned out, of course, that this method, instead of reducing the old play to farce, made it thrillingly life-like and profound. (ES, 84)

Having thus ventriloquized Shakespeare ventriloquizing Hamlet – creating imaginary self-paraphrases and statements of intent by authors is a mark of Empson’s criticism when it really gets going – he proceeds to explain what this turns Hamlet into:

‘Looked at in this way, the plot at once gave questions of very wide interest, especially to actors and the regular patrons of a repertory company; the character says: “Why do you assume I am theatrical? I particularly hate such behaviour. I cannot help my situation. What do you mean by theatrical?”’ (ES, 84)

Notice how Empson’s imputation of authorial intention here creates an extraordinarily lively imputed relation between character and audience. Empson continues:

Whole areas of the old play suddenly became so significant that one could wonder whether Kyd had meant that or not; whether Hamlet really wants to kill Claudius, whether he was ever really in love with Ophelia, whether he can continue to grasp his own motives while ‘acting a part’ before the Court, whether he is not really more of an actor than the Players, whether he is not (properly speaking) the only sincere person in view. In spite of its great variety of incident, the play sticks very closely to discussing theatricality. Surely this is what critics have long found so interesting. (ES, 84)

In offering this extremely suggestive summary, drawing on an imaginary Shakespeare talking to himself in the voice of his protagonist while working over a semi-imaginary play by Kyd, Empson is able to offer an answer to the important question he poses at the beginning of his essay:

The real ‘Hamlet problem’, it seems clear, is a problem about his first audiences. This is not to deny (as E. E. Stoll has sometimes done) that Hamlet himself is a problem; he must be one because he says he is; and he is a magnificent one, which has been exhaustively examined in the last 150 years. What is peculiar is that he does not seem to have
become one until the end of the eighteenth century; even Dr Johnson, who had a strong grasp of natural human difficulties, writes about Hamlet as if there was no problem at all. We are to think, apparently, that Shakespeare wrote a play which was extremely successful at the time (none more so, to judge by the references), and continued to hold the stage, and yet that nearly two hundred years had to go by before anyone had even a glimmering of what it was about. This is a good story, but surely it is rather too magical. (ES, 80–81)

Empson sees, that is, that psychological readings of Hamlet that take his inhibitions and nature, his discovery of his own mysterious interiority, as the central problem of the play need, if they are to be part of an authorial intention (conscious or not), to be somehow incorporated into a plausible view of what Shakespeare was trying to do as a theatre professional for an imaginable audience at the time. Empson is trying to be historical without ruling out rich readings: in fact, he goes on to point out that raising the historical problem of delayed recognition of Hamlet’s profundity can create a reductive historicist response, and has done so:

Indeed, as the Hamlet Problem has developed, yielding increasingly subtle and profound reasons for his delay, there has naturally developed in its wake a considerable backwash from critics who say ‘But how can such a drama as you describe conceivably have been written by an Elizabethan, for an Elizabethan audience?’ Some kind of mediating process is required here; one needs to explain how the first audiences could take a more interesting view than Dr Johnson’s, without taking an improbably profound one. (ES, 81) 43

Empson believes, however, that by grounding Hamlet in an authorial struggle to make something lifelike and expressive out of an old script that had both absurdity and theatrical power, he has made the psychological profundity of Hamlet into something Elizabethans could appreciate without turning themselves into improbable proto-Coleridges:

What the first audiences came to see was whether the Globe could revamp the old favourite without being absurd. To be sure, we cannot suppose them really very ‘sophisticated’, considering what plays by other authors they admired; to make The Spanish Tragedy up-to-date enough for the Admiral’s Company ... to catch up with Shakespeare’s Hamlet ... only required some interesting ‘life-like’ mad speeches. But that they imagined
they were too sophisticated for the old Hamlet does seem to emerge from the surviving jokes about it, and that is all that was required. We need not suppose, therefore, that they missed the purpose of the changes; 'he is cunning past man's thought' they are more likely to have muttered into their beards, as they abandoned the intention to jeer. (ES, 85)

Empson's Hamlet essay does not, in fact, contain many stunning examples of local reading. It does, however, show Empson navigating a prime historical problem in the interpretation of Hamlet through projective biography: constructing a believable problem that Shakespeare could be trying to solve by writing the Hamlet (or Hamlets) we have. Empson's use of projective biography also incorporates a very full idea of collaboration into its view of authorship: Empson's Shakespeare collaborates not only with the other members of his company, but with an audience he knows and caters to, in conceiving this version of Hamlet.

Moreover, we see Empson framing the ethical issues raised by a genre in the same sort of way in his appendix on Revenge Tragedy. For 'a critic living in a fairly placid society', he comments, it can be 'an initial obstacle' to 'bring his mind round' to find 'revenge very real or interesting'. Then he continues, in an appendix he appears to have added in the early 1980s, perhaps with the IRA in mind, to the essay as revised from the initial 1953 publication sans appendix in Sewanee Review: 'But in the modern world it has become painfully familiar to have some social group or nation take into its head that it has been unbearably wronged, so much wronged that it positively ought to cut off its nose to spite its face; and this is the fundamental situation of the Revenge Play, which is practically always concerned with the painful and distorting effects of revenge regarded as a duty' (ES, 118–119). Empson follows this remarkable comment, which seems even more salient now than it can have seemed in the 1980s, by bringing to bear his experience as an English department head at Sheffield, generalized so as to apply also to the President of the United States or, indeed, to God: 'Indeed, anyone who has to do administrative work is likely to come to feel that the basic purpose is not so much to do justice as to prevent anyone from coming to feel too much wronged; there is always a suggestion of handling the waters which might otherwise flood the plain' (ES, 119). Once again, we see Empson's way of placing literature, in this case a genre without an author, into a context of long-term life problems.

Empson personalizes the process of reading other critics as well as that of reading poets and playwrights. Thus he comments on Dr. Johnson's personal access to Falstaff's inner life (in contrast to Dover Wilson's stress on Falstaff as a generic Vice figure):
This interior of Falstaff, rather hard to get at for most of us, is ... sharply lit up by some remarks of Dr Johnson ... he could say without absurdity that he regretted not having met Falstaff. Also [Johnson] himself was a man of startling appearance; a pugnaciously and robustly amusing talker, who regularly conquered but never won anything that mattered, a hero of taverns, fretted by remorse ... starved of love, unwilling to be alone. He has several comments such as that ‘a man feels in himself the pain of deformity’; ‘however, like this merry knight, he may make sport of it among those whom it is his interest to please’. If we compare this with the struggles of Dover Wilson to prove that Falstaff was a Medieval Vice, with no interior at all, surely the truth of Johnson stands out like a rock. (ES, 65)

Here Empson uses his own sense of Johnson’s premise B criticism to correct what he regards as the inhumanity of generic/historicist criticism among Empson’s contemporaries.

Let me conclude with one more example of how Empson combines postulating purposes and problems for Shakespeare with a corrective attitude toward modes of criticism that would rule out his kind of imaginative identification. Empson defends Shakespeare’s freedom of thought – and thus, in effect, his own freedom to make up Shakespeares that suit him from his understandings of text and context – with considerable attention to competing ways of doing criticism at the opening of his chapter ‘Sense in Measure for Measure’ in The Structure of Complex Words. Empson comments on two ways that critics on either side of the Atlantic limit what they feel Shakespeare is entitled to have meant, asserting that ‘the recent drift of various British critics toward royalism is mild compared to that of various American ones toward behaviourism, which happens to go in the same direction’. This ‘direction’ inclines critics to collect evidence about the way Shakespeare’s contemporaries thought and use it to limit what he can be allowed to mean:

As the evidence about the Elizabethan mind piles up, we are tacitly asked to believe that Shakespeare could not possibly have disagreed with it, or have dared to show that he disagreed. I think he was a more self-indulgent kind of man than that, as well as not such a stupid one. 45

The last sentence sounds flippant, but it is actually deep: it forces critics to recognize that they ought to accord great authors the same sorts of mental freedom they would be shocked not to be thought to have
themselves. Empson continues along this line, amplifying his reservations about ‘American critics of Shakespeare [who] claim their work is “objective”’. Basically, he has in mind New Critical claims to be discussing verbal icons as self-standing pieces of ‘behaviour’ to be divorced from the intentions of their creators, alongside the attempts of North American genre critics like the Chicago Aristotelians to discuss literary form as if it is subject to immutable laws. In a 1953 letter draft, apparently never sent, to W. R. Elton in response to Elton’s *King Lear and the Gods*, Empson writes of scholars who attempt to overwhelm their readers with contextual evidence while ignoring the meaning of the text, ‘The work of a “scholar” is the same as that of an Imagist poet; both proceed from complete rejection of the intelligence and rely upon a Behaviourist technique of glutting the reader with immediate stimuli’. So this is what Empson means by his initially puzzling mention of ‘behaviourist’ critics in North America.

If we give *objective* its full claims, to ‘wonder what Shakespeare thought about it’ becomes a disgraceful self-indulgence; a critic should limit himself to rigid proofs, like the scientist that he is. That is, in effect, he should talk about the author as one of a type, not as an individual acquaintance; to a certain extent this really gets done, and it seems clear to me that the method produces superficial criticism. No doubt the timidity of the thing saves a critic from the more flamboyant errors of the last century; and you may reasonably say that we cannot make Shakespeare into a personal acquaintance. But it is enough to refute the behaviourist, on this issue, if he admits that we can make *anybody* into a personal acquaintance; that we can ever get any ‘insight’ into another person’s feelings. (SCW, 271)

In other words, for Empson interpersonal intimacy, as opposed to systematic science, ought to function as a model for literary knowledge. In saying this, Empson asserts neither that there can be no science about literature, nor that there can be no science about human intimacy:

One of the things a critic has normally claimed to do is to show this sort of insight about authors; there is nothing that I can see in the theory of behaviourism, only in its ‘atmosphere’, to get this forbidden; and if a critic insists that he has no such insight, it seems to me, he is only saying in an unnecessarily pompous manner (and sometimes quite falsely) that he is unfit to do his work. (SCW, 271–2)
If Empson survives as a great Shakespearean, I suggest, it will be not only because we are swept away by the exemplary brilliance of his local readings and because we recognize his imputed human socially-located Shakespeare as a helpful locus for our understandings of the plays and poems. He will survive also because we experience a continued corrective power in his conception of the 'insight about authors' needed to make critics 'fit to do their work'. Indeed, by gathering together, under the idea that good reading involves 'insight about authors', such rich varieties of authorial struggle – conscious and unconscious, historical, philosophic, sexual, religious, whatever in Shakespeare allows him to 'feel how a man comes to be a working system' (STA, 138) – Empson's capacious B premise offers a formulation of the aims of his own critical practice that is likely to have corrective force in Shakespeare studies for a long time. 47