Culture, Value and Contradiction: Wittgenstein and Empson

Andrew J. P. English

Abingdon, United Kingdom

Abstract

Wittgenstein's farcical clash with literary critic F. R. Leavis over the analysis of Empson's poem "Legal Fiction" is well known to devotees of Wittgenstein's life (*Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* (1981), edited by Rush Rhees, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 80). Less well known is the value of studying Empson's artistic and intellectual achievement as part of the wider cultural background for the appreciation of Wittgenstein's views and influence, early and late. This talk sketches some diverting byways awaiting further exploration. A recurrent theme is contradiction.

When the renowned author of the *Tractatus* returned to Cambridge in 1929, the place was abuzz with the astonishing poetry of undergraduate William Empson. There were public readings, F. R. Leavis mentioned him in lectures, and the poems, published in undergraduate magazines, could be found in most college rooms. Wittgenstein was moved to ask Leavis whether Empson was really any good, and the two men clashed over the analysis of "the analogical structure" of a poem in a recent Cambridge anthology (WE: 174). Empson had by this time completed the Mathematical Tripos, under the supervision of A. S. Ramsey, F. P. Ramsey's father, and decided to begin the English Tripos, under the supervision of I. A. Richards, author of *The Principles of Literary Criticism*. A note in the diary Empson kept in his first year at Cambridge, 1925-26, shows him struggling to reconcile the conflict between the *Tractatus* view of mathematics and its aesthetic interest. "The view of mathematics as an exalted exposition of beauty does not conflict with Wittgenstein," he writes (WE: 105).

> A mathematical equation is a logical form, either a definition or a platitude, and all logical propositions are of equal value. But mathematics is self-evident only to the perfect mind, that is a mind which can grasp every aspect of a situation at once, that is can see at a glance the purport of all possible combinations of the fundamental propositions of a situation. The human mind can only grasp a limited number of aspects; any given mathematical notation draws the attention to some particular method (that is, series of combinations) as the most simple and fruitful. The aesthetic value of a mathematical process lies in the handling of the complex logical forms so as to vary the most natural selection of conclusions; in this way the power of the mind appears to be enlarged, so as to have a logical grasp on situations of greater complexity.

Empson's analysis, formed perhaps in discussion with fellow mathematician Carew Meredith, was, ultimately, Aristotelian: "A perpetual slight surprise, which on the next moment's consideration is turned to a richer acceptance, was what Aristotle found most fundamental to exalted beauty" (WE: 105). Empson never lost his enjoyment of mathematics. On a skiing holiday in the French Alps, in 1936, while his companion the mathematics teacher and anthologist Michael Roberts read Arsène Lupin, Empson tried to recall theorems connected with the nine-point circle, refusing any assistance: "I want to work this out" (WE: 413).

THEOREM 17.

With the usual notation, if P, Q, R are the mid-points of HA, HB, HC, then the nine points A', B', C', D, E, F, P, Q, R lie on a circle whose radius equals $\frac{1}{2}$R.
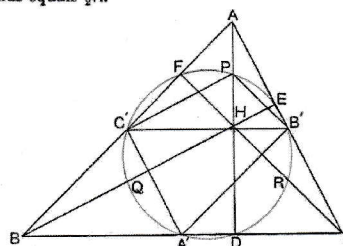

FIG. 21.

Since AP = PH and AC' = C'B, ∴ C'P is parallel to BH.
Since BC' = C'A and BA' = A'C, ∴ A'C' is parallel to AC.
But BH is perpendicular to AC, ∴ C'P is perpendicular to A'C'.

$$\therefore \; A'\hat{C}'P = 90°.$$

Similarly $A'\hat{B}'P = 90°$; but $A'\hat{D}P = 90°$.
∴ the circle on A'P as diameter passes through B', C', D.

$$\therefore \; D \text{ and } P \text{ lie on the circle } A'B'C'.$$

Similarly E, Q and F, R lie on the circle A'B'C'.
∴ the nine points A', B', C', D, E, F, P, Q, R lie on a circle.
Moreover each side of the triangle A'B'C' is half the corresponding side of the triangle ABC and ∴ the radius of the circle A'B'C' equals $\frac{1}{2}$R.   Q.E.D.

The circle which passes through these nine points is called the *nine-point circle* and its centre N is called the *nine-point centre*.

(Durell 1920: 27, circle added)

"The true spirit of delight, the exaltation, the sense of being more than man, which is the touchstone of the highest excellence, is to be found in mathematics as surely as in poetry," Russell had stated in "The Study of Mathematics" (Russell 1918: 60). But for Russell the *Tractatus* view of mathematics had occasioned great disappointment. "Mathematics has ceased to seem to me non-human in its subject-matter," he wrote in *My Philosophical Development*. "I have come to believe, though very reluctantly, that it consists of tautologies. I fear that, to a mind of sufficient intellectual power, the whole of mathematics would appear trivial." "The aesthetic pleasure to be derived from an elegant piece of mathematical reasoning remains," he said, but no longer could he find, as Plato had found, "mystical satisfaction in the contemplation of mathematical truth," and the certainty which he had always hoped to find in mathematics was, in the aftermath of the contradictions, "lost in a bewildering maze" (Russell 1959: 211-12). What Russell had actually lost was a pleasing metaphysical illusion, satisfying an emotional need. Empson, starting with no such illusion, could

continue enjoying mathematics for what it was, a human creation, like poetry.

And, though at Winchester he had benefitted from the teaching of senior mathematics master C. V. Durell, as had Ramsey before him, it was poetry that had meant most to Empson. As a schoolboy, he says, he had been "a slave to the drug of Swinburne" (WE: 87). Russell's "love of truth" in mathematics could not for Empson be an "encouragement for waning faith," because he had none (Russell 1918: 73). He would "learn a style from a despair" (CP: 53).

In about 1926, when Empson was first attempting to write poetry at Cambridge, he noted down reflections on the feeble artistic response to the "closing tautology" of the *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (TLP 1922: 7).

> The detachment of that phrase from its context is the weakness of our generation. Could not Romeo be written? Were the Songs and Sonets what cannot be said? What philosophy cannot state, art lays open. But philosophy has only just found out that it cannot state, all that we have no art to lay open. (WE: 174)

What philosophy had to be silent about, Shakespeare or Donne had, in their day, the art to "lay open." Empson was determined to supply the contemporary deficiency. His poetry, writes biographer John Haffenden, "stands for an attempt to meet the challenge of Wittgenstein's aphorism" (WE: 174-5).

Empson studied "the right poets (the right ones for him) in the right way," said Leavis in a review (WE: 172). But Empson was also responding to the complaint of biologist J. B. S. Haldane that English poets were not at all up-to-date in their scientific knowledge. Empson thought "the present age had very little to boast about in any form of imaginative work except the scientific one," and it was obvious to him that "a physicist like Einstein or Eddington is making superb uses of the imagination" (CP: xxxvii). Empson's poem "Letter I" was sent to one of Wittgenstein's favourite pupils Desmond Lee, and published in the same month as Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World*. Here is the first verse (CP: 31).

> You were amused to find you too could fear
> 'The eternal silence of the infinite spaces,'
> That net-work without fish, that mere
> Extended idleness, those pointless places
> Who, being possibilized to bear faces,
> Yours and the light from it, up-buoyed,
> Even of the galaxies are void.

"The object of my style," he said, in a 1952 BBC broadcast, "is to convey a mental state of great tension, in which conflicting impulses have no longer any barriers between them and therefore the strangeness of the world is felt very acutely" (CP: xxxv).

Richards' behaviouristic theory of value had put the "equilibrium of opposed impulses" at the basis of "the most valuable aesthetic responses," where "equilibrium" was opposed to "deadlock," a mere state of bafflement (WE: 190). Empson always applauded the rational humanist spirit of his supervisor's writings, but he never accepted his theories, nor, indeed, that there was any need for a theory, "because its findings must always be subject to the judgement of taste" (WE: 193). Empson's true debt, understood pragmatically, was to Robert Graves' "Conflict Theory of poetry," developed after the Great War, and early on to "the Freudian use of opposites" (WE: 223 & 215).

Empson published his first critical work *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in 1930, aged just 24. The seventh type of ambi-

guity identified by Empson in that highly influential book was the severest conflict of all: "full contradiction" (ST 1947: Contents). And Empson's last example of this last type was George Herbert's poem "The Sacrifice." Empson points to a powerful double meaning in its final verse (ST: 289).

> But now I die; Now, all is finished.
> My woe, man's weal; and now I bow my head:
> Only let others say, when I am dead,
> Never was grief like mine.

"After the death of Christ, may there never be a grief like Christ's" is one meaning of the last two lines. Another is, "Only let there *be* a retribution, only let my torturers say never was grief like theirs, in the day when my agony shall be exceeded." Once this double meaning, this clash, has been apprehended, says Empson, the poem can never be read without remembering its possibility. "Christ has made all safe" is the doctrinal point, he says, but "The Sacrifice" does not hide from us that merciful Jesus is also revengeful Jehova. Empson paraphrases: "O death, where is thy sting, because the second death is infinitely terrible" (ST: 289-90).

Empson had benefitted greatly from attending the Sunday evening meetings of the Cambridge Heretics, founded by C. K. Ogden "to promote discussion on problems of religion, philosophy, and art" (WE: 107-8). Previous speakers had included H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, Virginia Woolf, and Empson's particular hero J. B. S. Haldane, author of *Daedalus* and *Possible Worlds*. By his fourth year Empson had become president of the society, inviting his own speakers, and, says Haffenden, "even arranged for Wittgenstein, who had recently returned to Cambridge, to present a paper on Ethics" (WE: 110). This was the so-called "Lecture on Ethics." But Empson missed the talk, given in November 1929, because in July he had been thrown out of Cambridge and stripped of his fellowship, following the discovery of contraceptives in his rooms, a turn of events that has been compared to the expulsion of Shelley from Oxford.

When Lee visited Wittgenstein in Austria in the summer of 1930, he chanced upon Empson *en route*. They travelled together from Salzburg to Vienna, staying a few nights, before Lee was chauffeured up to the Hochreit. Empson recalls a hotel scene in "Letter VI," a poem that remained unpublished in his lifetime (CP: 62).

> In the next bed to you in a pub in Vienna
> I watched the moon shadow of the window upright
> Walk clear across neck and face, in perhaps half an hour,
> Continually illuminating new beauties,
> Placing in you one minute after another everything
> I know of admirable in the history of man.

This is the same illuminated face of which even "the galaxies are void." Empson's love poetry had its detractors, of course. At a time of vital political engagement, it is easy to dismiss such poetry as sentimental. (Julian Bell, who died driving an ambulance in Spain, thought it intolerably obscure.) But Kathleen Raine, who witnessed up close Empson's "perpetual self-consuming mental intensity," said "the incidentalness of sex (or love) and the anguish arising therefrom, *is* his theme" (WE: 161).

In a review of A. E. Housman's posthumous *More Poems*, Empson wrote, "there seems no decent ground for calling all Despair Poetry about love sentimental ... It wants as its apparent theme a case of love with great practical obstacles, such as those of class and sex, because the despair has to seem sensible before this curious jump is made and it is called a universal truth" (WE: 239). But what is this "curious jump"? Is it not a paradoxical jump over *impossible* obstacles? Is it not "a mental state of great tension" finally yielding

to the "full contradiction" of metaphysical utterance? A Tractarian riddle, perhaps?

> But this unlucky love should last
> When answered passions thin to air;
> Eternal fate so deep has cast
> Its sure foundations of despair.

Empson quotes these lines from Housman to end his review of *More Poems* (A: 419), the clear suggestion being that his great hope in love, like Housman's, was impossible because against "eternal fate." (Empson's "Letter VI" was sent, dramatically enough, on Lee's wedding day.)

It is not wholly surprising, then, that computational linguist Margaret Masterman, one of the six undergraduates to whom Wittgenstein dictated the *Blue Book*, should have turned to Empson's writings in an attempt to broach anew the question "What is metaphysics?" Her paradigm of philosophical discovery was the *Tractatus* view of logic and mathematics as understood and accepted by Russell. But on the nature of metaphysics she preferred Ramsey's criticism of Wittgenstein that there is no such thing as "important nonsense," finding inspiration too in John Wisdom's later suggestion that metaphysical statements are not nonsense because they are gibberish but nonsense because they are paradoxes. Yet this she thinks is not enough. "Only William Empson," she says, "has made any attempt to examine, in greater detail, the kinds of logical form which poetical or metaphysical paradoxes might turn out to have" (Masterman 1957: 294).

She finds somewhere in Empson's tangled book *The Structure of Complex Words* the view that "paradox is the most extreme kind of metaphor, just as metaphor is the most extreme kind of simile," and that "ancient metaphysical and doctrinal statements" nearly all "push metaphor to the point of paradox" (Masterman 1957: 295 & 297). But could there really be, as she attempts to envisage, a "paradox-logic" which is the true logic of poetry and metaphysics? Crucially she remains wedded to a calculus conception of language. The advance represented by the *Blue Book* seems to have passed over her without trace. It was characteristic, Wittgenstein had said, of a metaphysical question "that we express an unclarity about the grammar of words in the *form* of a scientific question" (BBB 1958: 35). The tendency "to ask and answer questions in the way science does," he said, "is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness" (BBB 1958: 18). It is clarity we need, not a new logic designed to accommodate "metaphysical paradox and its putative insights" (Hacker 1996: 145).

A truer comparison between philosophy and poetics is to be found in the writings of O. K. Bouwsma, who knew Wittgenstein towards the end of his life. "A poet's words can pierce us," says Wittgenstein in *Zettel*, thinking perhaps of Housman's Leslie Stephen lecture and the discussion in G. H. Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology* (Hardy 1940: 24-31). "And that is of course *causally* connected with the use that they have in our life. And it is also connected with the way in which, conformably to this use, we let our thoughts roam up and down in the familiar surroundings of the words" (Z: 155). Bouwsma comments, "How much that sounds like what we do when we remind ourselves of the uses of expressions in the interest of clearing up confusions. But how different the purpose! In the one case we need the reminder as a term of comparison; in the other we do what we do in order to get the feeling of the word, the condensation of the meaning now filling the word" (Bouwsma 1982: 263). Bouwsma's comment also illuminates this remark from von Wright's selection *Culture and Value*: "The queer resemblance between

a philosophical investigation (perhaps especially in mathematics) and one in aesthetics" (CV 98: 29). This is the resemblance between Empson's "grammatico-critical" work, scratching around trying to understand how a poem achieves its aesthetic effect (WE: 274 & ST: 12), and Wittgenstein's logico-philosophical work, jumping about all round trying to understand, through language, "the bewitchment of our understanding" (CV 98: 33 & PI 2009: 109).

In a remark reminiscent of Bishop Berkeley, Wittgenstein wrote, in 1929, "There is no religious denomination in which so much sin has been committed through the misuse of metaphorical expressions as in mathematics" (CV 98: 3). A metaphor to whose misuse Wittgenstein obviously objects is the "infinite realm" of mathematics; but he objects no less, as careful readers know, to the cry that "the finite cannot understand the infinite." This expression *in mathematics* is "inept," he says (Z: 273). What Wittgenstein clearly wants is no "juggling," no tricks. Eddington's perplexing misapplication of the picture of a "thinly filled space" to his presumably solid writing desk (BBB 1958: 45) and Cantor's dizzying proofs (LA: 28) were for Wittgenstein prime examples of a style of thinking for which he felt genuine disgust. But, of course, Rutherford's scientific discoveries, popularised by Eddington, and Cantor's mathematical inventions, the "solid core" (RFM 1956: 142), that is, can each be "expressed in an entirely different way," one "which loses the charm it has for many people" (LA: 28).

Not yielding to aesthetic impulse can in philosophy be an authentic achievement.

Bibliography

Bouwsma, O. K. (1982) "Are Poems Statements?" in *Toward a New Sensibility*, edited by J. L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Durell, C. V. (1920) *Modern Geometry: The Straight Line and Circle*, London: MacMillan and Company.

Eddington, A. S. (1928) *The Nature of the Physical World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Empson, William (1930, Second Edition 1947) (ST) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, London: Chatto and Windus.

Empson, William (1951) *The Structure of Complex Words*, London: Chatto and Windus.

Empson, William (1987) (A) *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, edited by John Haffenden, London: Chatto and Windus.

Empson, William (2000) (CP) *The Complete Poems*, edited by John Haffenden, London: Allen Lane.

Hacker, P. M. S. (1996) *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Haffenden, John (2005) (WE) *William Empson: Among the Mandarins*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hardy, G. H. (1940) *A Mathematician's Apology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Masterman, Margaret (1957) "Metaphysical and Ideographic Language" in *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century: A Cambridge Symposium*, edited by C. A. Mace, London: George Allen and Unwin.

Russell, Bertrand (1918) *Mysticism and Logic*, London: Longmans, Green and Company.

Russell, Bertrand (1959) *My Philosophical Development*, London: George Allen and Unwin.