

William Empson

There is a feeling, often justified, that it is annoying when an author writes his own notes, so I shall give a note about these notes. It is impertinent to expect hard work from the reader merely because you have failed to show what you were comparing to what, and though to write notes on such a point is a confession of failure it seems an inoffensive one. A claim is implied that the poem is worth publishing though the author knows it is imperfect, but this has a chance of being true. Also there is no longer a reasonably small field which may be taken as general knowledge. It is impertinent to suggest that the reader ought to possess already any odd bit of information one may have picked up in a field where one is oneself ignorant; such a point may be explained in a note without trouble to anybody; and it does not require much fortitude to endure seeing what you already know in a note. Notes are annoying when they are attempts to woo admiration for the poem or the poet, but that I hope I can avoid. Of course there are queerer forces at work; to write notes at all is to risk making a fool of yourself, and the better poems tend to require fewer notes. But it seems to me that there has been an unfortunate suggestion of writing for a clique about a good deal of recent poetry, and that very much of it might be avoided by a mere willingness to explain incidental difficulties. [1935]

## NOTE ON NOTES

These notes may well look absurdly pretentious, and they start off with the most extreme example. Some of the later ones are more like travel notes, and anyway I think many people (like myself) prefer to read poetry mixed with prose; it gives you more to go by; the conventions of poetry have been getting far off from normal life, so that to have a prose bridge makes reading poetry seem more natural. No doubt the notes are partly needed through my incompetence in writing; they had better have been worked into the text. I do the best I can. But partly they are meant to be like answers to a crossword puzzle; a sort of puzzle interest is part of the pleasure that you are meant to get from the verse, and that I get myself when I go back to it. It is clear that you try to guess the puzzle before you turn to the answer; but you aren't offended with the newspaper for publishing the whole answer, even when you had guessed it. There would be no point in publishing a puzzle in a newspaper, if it were admittedly so simple that there was no need to publish the answer. And the comparison is not quite a random one; the fashion for obscure poetry, as a recent development, came in at about the same time as the fashion for crossword puzzles; and it seems to me that this revival of puzzle interest in poetry, an old and natural thing, has got a bad name merely by failing to know itself and refusing to publish the answers.

Aldous Huxley has written very well about snob interest in poetry, 'that delicious thing old Uncle Virgil said, you remember'; and, as most people would, he treats puzzle interest as a branch of this. They are both good things, but I will

not have my puzzle called their snob. There is no longer the field of 'general knowledge' that old Uncle Virgil used to be in, because there are now more interesting things to know than anybody (or any poet) knows. There is no longer therefore a justification for snob treatment of them; nobody any longer can say, even as a joke, 'what I don't know isn't knowledge'. We are left with puzzle interest, and this though it has most of the virtues of the old snob interest has a distinguishing feature; it is not offended by seeing the answers in the notes.

At the same time, of course, any decent poetry has got more than puzzle interest in it, and the motives behind making the puzzle are themselves very mixed. It is always part of the claim of the puzzle in poetry that this is the best way to say something. Clearly interest in mere puzzle can be bad for a writer (and marks of an obscure moral worry about whether there was too much puzzle interest going on are I am afraid a disfiguring feature of my small output here). What we had before us to write about, in the years when these poems were written, was chiefly the gathering storm of the present war; and so far as I can feel I had anything to say about that I would want to get it said somehow, even if only in a note.

[1939]

To an Old Lady

Ripeness is all; her in her cooling planet  
Revere; do not presume to think her wasted.  
Project her no projectile, plan nor man it;  
Gods cool in turn, by the sun long outlasted.

Our earth alone given no name of god  
Gives, too, no hold for such a leap to aid her;  
Landing, you break some palace and seem odd;  
Bees sting their need, the keeper's queen invader.

No, to your telescope; spy out the land;  
Watch while her ritual is still to see,  
Still stand her temples emptying in the sand  
Whose waves o'erthrew their crumbled tracery;

Still stand uncalled-on her soul's appanage;  
Much social detail whose successor fades,  
Wit used to run a house and to play Bridge,  
And tragic fervour, to dismiss her maids.

Years her precession do not throw from gear.  
She reads a compass certain of her pole;  
Confident, finds no confines on her sphere,  
Whose failing crops are in her sole control.

Stars how much further from me fill my night,  
Strange that she too should be inaccessible,  
Who shares my sun. He curtains her from sight,  
And but in darkness is she visible.

TO AN OLD LADY. First three words from *King Lear*. *Our earth* without a god's name such as the other planets have is compared to some body of people (absurd to say "the present generation") without fundamental beliefs as a basis for action. When a hive needs a new queen and the keeper puts one in the bees sometimes kill her. *Her precession* is some customary movement of the planet, meant to suggest the dignity of "procession." The unconfined surface of her sphere is like the universe in being finite but unbounded, but I failed to get that into the line.

The Complete Poems of  
William Empson,

ed. John  
Haffenden

(2000)

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express contempt for the Christian God, and both were brought down. Perhaps the hounds that are represented as hunting down the high diver are the hounds of heaven.

35 *Plunge, and in vortex*: Forrest-Thomson notes 'the plain physical fact that by turning in order to dive the man creates a vortex, first in air, then in water' ('Rational Artifice', p. 233).

### *To an Old Lady*

First published in *Cambridge Review* 49 (20 April 1928), 347; reprinted in *Cambridge Poetry* 1929 and in *transition* nos. 19-20 (June 1930), 137.

CP: First three words from *King Lear*. *Our earth* without a god's name such as the other planets have is compared to some body of people (absurd to say 'the present generation') without fundamental beliefs as a basis for action. When a hive needs a new queen and the keeper puts one in the bees sometimes kill her. *Her precession* is some customary movement of the planet, meant to suggest the dignity of 'precession'. The unconfined surface of her sphere is like the universe in being finite but unbounded, but I failed to get that into the line.

In *The Ambiguity of William Empson*, WE informally explained further that his mother:

most unfortunately read [this poem]. I thought she was never going to but it appeared in a student magazine. She was scolding me because I wouldn't take my civil service examinations. She said I was wasting my life, what did I think I was going to do being a poet, and so on. Then the while denouncing my activities she paused, always willing to be fair, and said, 'I will say, that poem about your Granny, William, now that showed decent feeling.' And I was greatly relieved by her saying this; I thought the situation was very embarrassing. She thought it was about her own mother, who actually was being rather a handful at the time, you see, and I meant it about her. This cleared the matter up very much. And indeed, you see, all these things are meant to be general. It proves the poem was true - that she thought it was about her mother, who really didn't play bridge, otherwise it might have been real. The idea is that we - our ideas in common are so many, we agree on so many points - we somehow can't talk to each other, and why it is that, it seems mysterious. And the bang at the end saying she is only seen in the darkness is, what it really means is, you don't find out how reliable she is until you're in real trouble. Which I didn't know at the time I wrote it.

T. R. Henn, in 'Science and Poetry', lamented what he supposed to be the fact that few contemporary poets had 'attempted any kind of "liaison of

vocabulary" between science and poetry'; poets were failing as mediators: 'on the whole it seems as if modern poets distrust technological achievements; as in William Empson's "To an Old Lady" (which is the Moon)' (p. 535). WE felt annoyed by the imputation that he shied away from science, as well as by the flat misunderstanding of his poem (Alan Bold, in the *Cambridge Book of English Verse, 1939-1975*, made the same mistake), and so drafted this letter to Henn on 21 August 1961:

The old lady was my mother, and I was saying that though we were so completely in the same tradition, or were planets of the same sun, we had no contact and only recognized each other in times of trouble, when no longer self-enclosed in the confidence of our tradition ('but in darkness is she visible'). As the moon can be seen in the daytime, the lady cannot be compared to it, and she is said in the first line to be compared to a planet. When I said it would be better not to do space-travel to her I was thinking only of the personal situation - that to try to explain such feelings would cause embarrassment. I did not mean that I disapproved of space-travel, and I think I do not deserve to be accused of meaning such a silly thing.

I have been trying to write a piece about Donne, showing that the metaphors from astronomy meant a great deal to him in personal terms, and were felt to raise theological questions. This was commonly supposed when I was young and imitating Donne, but since then there has been a great drive to insist that he was only making silly jokes. I think this is done by people who consider it their Christian duty to exclude any heretical ideas from Donne, but the effect is to make his work seem trivial and in bad taste.

Thus I have even seen it said that, in comparing his love to a pair of compasses, Donne meant an irony against materialism - he despised his love for being like a tool. But he loved his compasses for being so elegant and for being so sensible; and the whole point of the poem is to say 'This kind of love is real.' Criticism which leaves out the whole point, I find, usually imputes nasty and trivial meanings to the author.

I am thus used to seeing the thing done to Donne, but to have it done to me, his humble imitator, seems a new extremity of unpleasantness. And yet, writing to *Nature* to complain of such a thing would seem adding to it, somehow. (Empson Papers)

See Morelli, pp. 42-6; Willis, pp. 139-44; Thurley, pp. 39-40; Ricks, pp. 179-82; TGA, pp. 70-74.

1 *Ripeness is all*: the quotation from *King Lear* (V.ii.10) may be meant as an unequivocal compliment to the 'old lady', but it preserves a trace from its original context (8-10), where the phrase is spoken by Edgar to a father who sees himself as ripe for little but despair and death: 'What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither. / Ripeness is all. Come on.'

5 *Our earth alone given no name of god*: 'Mum was not a sanctimonious woman'

and it seemed clear to me that the Martians would not call the earth after some quite unexpected god. Still, it is true she was a Christian and I wasn't; and it might have been easier to talk to her if I had been' (his letter to Maxwell-Mahon, 21 August 1973).

7 *seem odd*: M. C. Bradbrook recalled of her contemporaries at Cambridge in the 1920s (including WE): 'We were innocently confident in our right to pronounce judgement . . . We were given to words like "report" (verb and noun) and "analysis", but "insist" – that favourite Leavisism – had not made its appearance very prominently. Our strongest term of disapprobation was "odd"' ('I. A. Richards at Cambridge', in *I. A. Richards: Essays in His Honor*, ed. Reuben Brower, Helen Vendler and John Hollander (New York, 1973), p. 71).

8 *Bees sting . . . queen invader*: Schutz explains:

A queen bee is introduced into a hive in two situations: 1) When a keeper has hived a cast of bees without a queen; 2) When, by observation, the keeper sees that a full colony has an aged queen who is not breeding well and above all is not producing (as is normal) a number of cells each season. In the first situation the keeper introduces the new queen in a paper ended box through which she eats her way, slowly acquiring the hive smell, and the workers do not kill her. In the second situation the keeper follows the same procedures and when the new queen is free in the hive the workers or drones normally turn the old queen out of the hive or kill her. So long as procedures like these are followed . . . the new queen is not killed . . . The metaphor involved is substitutional . . . but Empson's point is that if the new queen seems entirely new, an invader, she will be killed. The political and social implications of the image are therefore those of Edmund Burke: if change is a total break with the past (revolution), only chaos follows. Moral and social security follow from historical tradition: the ritual and temples (stanza three), the social detail, wit, tragic fervor (stanza four). ('Apiarian Imagery in Empson's "To an Old Lady"', p. 6)

In an undated loose-leaf journal note, the young WE scribbled:

I was so furious with mama for damping my wanting to be capable with bees (it *was* the right time of day then, he admitted later), . . . it was July, they had been a day or two in the rain already, she did not want them, though the other hive was filled only with corpses. I dressed up the incident so illuminatingly as the type of my hating her, of my not daring to show any activity, or venturing (except in letters) on sketching any methods and subjects . . . the impulse of taking the bees without her knowledge, the walking from her to swarm without giving my wish to be handy away further, the paralysis in fact . . . My mother apologizing to the old man [presumably a beekeeper] afterwards, he would never have been allowed to have come if his wife had known, said she was so sorry to have given him such trouble, after his illness, and she had told William it would be too much strain. Unconscious probably that she hadn't, thinking in fact in terms of the attitudes evoked in talking to different people, her attitude to such a situation can only be worked out and made intelligible

with reference to a multitude of insincere kind answers, and never by herself presumably known. (Empson Papers)

11-12 *Still stand . . . waves o'erthrew . . . crumbled tracery*: Pritchard notes the borrowing from Milton's account of Satan's fallen army, which resembles 'scattered sedge / Afloat, when with fierce winds Orion armed / Hath vexed the Red Sea coast, whose waves o'erthrew / Busiris and his Memphian chivalry . . .' (PL, l. 304-7): 'The association is less with the powerfully disturbing star (though that may have played its part) than with images of fallen power and desolation; the loss of authority and rule in barren sand (of lifeless planet, desert or time) suggests another memory, of Shelley's "Ozymandias"' ('Milton's Satan and Empson's Old Lady', pp. 59-60).

13 *her soul's appanage*: 'appanage' means a territory or property (such as might be provided for the maintenance of the young children of royalty or the aristocracy), or, more loosely, a specially appropriated possession, a perquisite. WE's phrase can be construed as saluting his mother's personal, economic and territorial privileges or prerogatives.

17-18 *Years her precession . . . her pole*: OED notes that 'precession' (1) has sometimes been used in error in the sense of a 'going forward, advance, procession'; but has an extended meaning (2) that WE's usage would appear to seek to embrace: 'The action or fact of preceding in time, order, or rank; precedence.' In astronomical terms, precession is the steady motion of the rotation axis of a planet (the old lady) when it is subject to the torque (turning forces) exerted by external gravitational influences. WE, however, was unconcerned here about precise definitions; as far as he was concerned, the old lady is simply the best sort of planet, constant and true in her motion.

19 *no confines on her sphere*: Bronowski, a friend of WE's at Cambridge, remarks: 'the heart of the metaphor comes from mathematics: it is the theorem that a surface can be finite in extent and yet have no boundaries, no confines. The surface of a sphere . . . is of this kind: it is finite in extent, and yet if you or the old lady walk all over it you will never meet any boundary and will seem to be going on to infinity' ('The Imaginative Mind in Science', p. 27). Cf. 'The World's End'.

21 *night*. ] *night*, P 1934, P, CP 1949, CP. 'While I am at it, there ought to be a full stop not a comma after *night* in the *Old Lady* poem, for the rhythm' ('Corrigenda', CP).

23 *sun*: "Sun" not "son" is meant; though isolated we shared a system closer than the great minds in books' (*Listen*). In his letter to Maxwell-Mahon (6 November 1967), WE added: 'I thought I said in my note that the *sun* is not explained by the poem; it meant the traditions which I shared with my mother. The whole conception of the poem of course is that relations with Mum are compared to space travel.'

23-4 *He curtains . . . but in darkness is she visible*: the primary point of reference



for WE's paradox is Milton's description of the lake of hell where Satan and his angels are revealed at the opening of *PL*, l.61-7: 'A dungeon horrible, on all sides round / As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible / Served only to discover sights of woe, / Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace / And rest can never dwell, hope never comes / That comes to all . . .' However, 'curtains', together with the run of references to regal or imperial majesty in connection with the mother, suggests a secondary source, Pope's *The Dunciad*, which hails the goddess of Dullness: 'Yet, yet a moment, one dim ray of light / Indulge, dread Chaos, and eternal Night! / Of darkness visible so much be lent, / As half to show, half veil, the deep intent. / Ye pow'rs! whose mysteries restored I sing, / To whom Time bears me on his rapid wing, / Suspend a while your force inertly strong, / Then take at once the poet and the song' (IV.1-8). Moreover, the antecedent of 'He' is the sun; but 'curtains' is a slang idiom for death.

In WE's letters to Maxwell-Mahon (6 November 1967) - with reference less to hermeneutics than to personal impulse - ' "But in darkness" etc. meant that you didn't realize what a strong support she was till you were in real trouble'; and (21 August 1973): 'The bang in the last line, "but in darkness", was meant to imply: "It's only when you're in real trouble that you see the old woman at her best", and this was written before I was thrown out of Cambridge, when I thought her behaviour justified my tribute. I ought to have put this in the notes, but was shy about it.'

*Part of Mandevill's Travels*

First published in *Experiment* no. 1 (November 1928), pp. 38-9; then in *Cambridge Poetry* 1929.

CP: *Gravelly*, the spelling of the original, means 'of gravel' but suggests graves. Milton said

*on the snowy top  
Of cold Olympus rules the middle air,  
Their highest heaven,*

which doesn't fit; the boast was only that the Christian heaven was higher. The Roof of the World is, I believe, the Himalayas; the geography here is as dim as Mandevill's. 'Spears (first shoots of the metal trees - of man's use of metal) poke up above ground in the basin of the river during the dawn; the same spears at noon tower like cranes, and before night are engulfed and leave the plain bare; they are upheld only by sand which goes deeper than their roots.' I meant the

To John Frederick Nims

Elizabeth Bishop

Poet John Frederick Nims, the editor of Poetry magazine, had written EB about a few footnotes to her poems that he wanted to use in the college textbook he was

editing, The Harper Anthology of Poetry, covering English verse from medieval times to the present. On the day she died, EB typed out and mailed this friendly letter. Her closing word, "Affectionately," is proof that her goodwill and good manners persisted to the end.

437 Lewis Wharf  
Boston, Massachusetts  
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... I'm going to take issue with you—rather violently—about the idea of footnotes. With one or two exceptions (I'll mention them later) I don't think there should be ANY footnotes. You say the book is for college students, and I think anyone who gets as far as college should be able to use a dictionary. If a poem catches a student's interest at all, he or she should damned well be able to look up an unfamiliar word in the dictionary. (I know they don't—or most of them don't—but they should be made to, somehow. The [historically] earlier poems you are using of course may require some help—but mine certainly don't!) "Isinglass" is in the dictionary; so is "gunnel" (see "gunwale"); so is "thwarts" [these three words occur in "The Fish"].

One of my few exceptions is the ESSO-Exxon note to "Filling Station," because I'm not sure how long ago now that happened, but a good many years. Also, I'd let students figure out—in fact, I TELL them [in the poem]—the cans are arranged to say so-so-so, etc., so I don't think *that* has to be explained. However—most of them might well not know that so-so-so was—perhaps still is in some places—the phrase people use to calm and soothe horses. All flower names can be looked up, certainly—some students even SEE flowers still, although I know only too well that TV has weakened the sense of reality so that very few students see anything the way it is in real life.

In "The Moose" I'd prefer to have you use just the first sentence of the note—on page 1226. (!) I don't think page 1227 needs any notes at all, nor does 1228. Please leave all that out! (A Japanese anthology quoted another poem in which I mentioned the Port of Santos—and that footnote said, "Port—a dark red wine." Also—the Norton Anthology is full of such stupid remarks—they locate St. John's [Newfoundland] in the Caribbean somewhere, and so on & so on.) "Macadam" is in the dictionary. And—a lot of the poem is about "childhood recollections"—I almost say it in so many words. If they can't figure that out, they shouldn't be in college—THERE!

You can see what a nasty teacher I must be—but I do think students get lazier and lazier & expect to have everything done *for* them. (When I suggest buying a small paperback, almost the whole class whines, "Where can I find it?") My best example of this sort of thing is what one rather bright Harvard honors student told me. She told her roommate or a friend—who had obviously taken my verse-writing course—that she



was doing her paper with me, and the friend said, "Oh don't work with *her*! It's awful! She wants you to look words up in the dictionary! It isn't *creative* at all!" In other words, it is better *not* to know what you're writing or reading. Perhaps my class at M.I.T. has embittered me—but so did N.Y.U. and some of the Harvard classes—although there have been good students and a few wonderful ones from time to time. But they mostly seem to think that poetry—to read or to write—is a snap—one just has to *feel*—and not for very long, either. Well, I could go on and on—but I won't! Two or three years ago I was talking away about "The Quaker Graveyard" and when I asked a question the whole class responded in chorus with what I discovered (I was using my own book) were the footnotes from the Norton anthology—some right, in that case, but again some wrong. We finally all got to laughing—but that was an unusually bright class.

Of course I am writing this just about my own inclusions—and "The Moose" may well be too long. And of course there are many [historically] early poems I can see the necessity for notes for. If "The Moose" is too long, I'd suggest another from *Geography III*—any you like. I do hope I haven't offended you now—but I think the teaching of literature now is deplorable—and if you can get students to *reading*, you will have done a noble work. Affectionately . . .

On Notes  
Functions

Tennyson

Johnson, Preface to Shakespeare

NOTES

AUTHOR'S PREFATORY NOTES

Poetry is like shot silk with many glancing colours, and every reader must find his own interpretation according to his ability, and according to his sympathy with the poet.

I am told that my young countrymen would like notes to my poems. Shall I write what dictionaries tell to save some of the idle folk trouble? or am I to try to fix a moral to each poem? or to add an analysis of passages? or to give a history of my similes? I do not like the task.

Knowledge, stone, knoll—let him who reads me always read the vowel in these words long.

My paraphrases of certain Latin and Greek lines seem too obvious to be mentioned. Many of the parallels here given are accidental. The same idea must often occur independently to two men looking on the same aspects of Nature. There is a wholesome page in Eckenmann's "Conversations with Goethe," where one or the other (I have not the book by me) remarks that the prosaic mind finds plagiarism in passages that only prove "the common brotherhood of man."—T.

P. 1. TO THE QUEEN. [First published in 1851.—Ed.]  
P. 1, lines 7, 8.  
This Laurel grows from the brow of him that after a nobling bare.

[Wordsworth. On Nov. 19, 1830, my father was appointed Poet Laureate in succession to Wordsworth. See *Memoir*, vol. 1, p. 334 foll., and "Reminiscences of Tennyson in Early Days," *Memoir*, vol. 1, pp. 208-210.—Ed.]

The third verse in proof stood—  
Nor should I dare to flatter state,  
Nor such a lay would you receive,  
Were I to shape it, who believe  
Your nature true as you are great.

P. 2. (JUVENILIA) CLARIBUS. [First published in 1830.—Ed.] All these ladies were evoked, like the camel, from my own consciousness. [Isabel was more or less a portrait. See p. 896, note to p. 6, *Isabel*.—Ed.]

"Juvénilla," were published in 1830. John Stuart Mill reviewed the volume in the *London Review* (July 1835); Leigh Hunt in the *Tattler*; and Professor Wilson (Christopher North) in *Blackwood*.

P. 2, line 15. *intezuhie*, i.e. linen.  
P. 2. NOTHING WILL DIE. [First published in 1830.—Ed.] All things are evoked. [Cf. the early poem:

Of *flowers*  
All thoughts, all creeds, all dreams are true,  
All visions wild and strange;  
All is the measure of all truth  
Unto himself. All truth is change;  
All men do walk in sleep, and all  
Have faith in that they dream;  
For all things are as they seem to all,  
And all things flow like a stream.  
There is no rest, no calm, no pause,  
Nor good nor ill, nor light nor shade.

Notes are often necessary, but they are necessary evil. Let him, that is yet unacquainted with the powers of Shakespeare, and who desires to feel the highest pleasure that the drama can give, read every play from the first scene to the last, with utter negligence of all his commentators. When his fancy is once on the wing, let it not stoop at correction or explanation. When his attention is strongly engaged, let it disdain alike to turn aside to the name of Theobald and of Pope. Let him read on through brightness and obscurity, through integrity and corruption; let him preserve his comprehension of the dialogue and his interest in the fable. And when the pleasures of novelty have ceased, let him attempt exactness, and read the commentators.

Particular passages are cleared by notes, but the general effect of the work is weakened. The mind is refrigerated by interruption; the thoughts are diverted from the principal subject; the reader is weary, he suspects not why; and at last throws away the book, which he has too diligently studied.

Parts are not to be examined till the whole has been surveyed; there is a kind of intellectual remoteness necessary for the comprehension of any great work in its full design and its true proportions; a close approach shows the smaller niceties, but the beauty of the whole is discerned no longer.