

APOLOGY FOR QUIETISM

A *Sotto Voce* Symposium

Part 2

*Jeffrey M. Perl, Mita Choudhury, Lesley Chamberlain,
Andrea R. Jain, Jeffrey J. Kripal*

Introduction: “The Need for Repose”

I, for one, do not doubt that the sane view of the world is the true one.
But is that what is always wanted, truth? The need for truth is not constant;
no more than is the need for repose.

— *Susan Sontag*, “Simone Weil” (1963)

Everything about the sociology of quietism is strange, not least its having a sociology at all. Given what quietists are said to believe, it would seem that non-quietists, said to be poor listeners, should never have heard of it. Much of what we know, or think we know, about quietism comes from eavesdropping, from listening “in” rather than listening. A quietist like Simone Weil writes mostly for herself, or else for God:

To be what the pencil is for me when, blindfold, I feel the table by means of its point—to be that for Christ. It is possible for us to be mediators

Common Knowledge 15:2

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-2008-055

© 2009 by Duke University Press

between God and the part of creation which is confided to us. Our consent is necessary in order that he may perceive his own creation through us. With our consent he performs this marvel. If I knew how to withdraw from my own soul, it would be enough to enable this table in front of me to have the incomparable good fortune of being seen by God. . . . I am not the maiden who awaits her betrothed, but the unwelcome third who is with two betrothed lovers and ought to go away so they can really be together.¹

There are quietists who speak to be heard, if only to the extent that one might shush a boor or calm a child in one's arms. The friend who brought Weil's intimacies into print hoped that they might reach "kindred souls," but really he expected "profane use." Then why publish?

Everything, moreover, about antiquetist polemic is strange, from its existence (though a stalker, I suppose, can specialize in shooting doves) to its furious tone. That tone is why I would not specify as strange the avoidance, by friends of quietism, of the terms *quietism* and *quietist*. Less provocative nouns and adjectives may be sought for and sometimes found.

Finally, there is the strangeness, to which I drew attention in the first phase of this symposium, of how magnetic quietism can be to the most assertive personalities.² Her own attraction to Simone Weil was the subject of a poignant essay by Susan Sontag:

As the corrupt Alcibiades followed Socrates, unable and unwilling to change his own life, but moved, enriched, and full of love, so the sensitive modern reader pays his respect to a level of spiritual reality which is not, could not, be his own. . . . In the respect we pay to such lives, we acknowledge the presence of mystery in the world—and mystery is just what the secure possession of the truth, an objective truth, denies. In this sense, all truth is superficial; and some (but not all) distortions of the truth, some (but not all) insanity, some (but not all) unhealthiness, some (but not all) denials of life are truth-giving, sanity-producing, health-creating, and life-enhancing.³

A similar but even stranger case is William Empson's attraction to the Buddha. Empson was among the most assertive, voluble, and quarrelsome intel-

1. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (1952; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 87–89. Weil left in the care of her friend Gustave Thibon "a dozen thick exercise books in which day by day [until mid-1942] she recorded her thoughts." Of these, Thibon made a selection, arranged thematically, and published it in 1947 under the title *La Pensateur et la grâce*—not without some guilt in doing so ("My one consolation lies in the certainty that through the inevitably profane uses of publicity this testimony will reach other kindred souls"). See Thibon's introduction to *Gravity and Grace*, 3, 9–10.

2. Jeffrey M. Perl, "Introduction: 'More Trouble than They Are Worth,'" *Common Knowledge* 15.1 (Winter 2009): 5–6. I was writing about Leon Wieseltier, by profession a polemicist, and his sudden public yearning for mystical experience. (See Leon Wieseltier, "Washington Diarist: Emptiness," *New Republic*, June 11, 2008, 56.) Perhaps to atone for this lapse, his subsequent columns have been especially caustic.

3. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell, 1966), 59–60.

lectuals of his time, but in the Buddhist “version of a death wish” he found a place for refuge and repose. Of Empson’s fascination with Buddhist quietism, I learned from Sharon Cameron’s invaluable study *Impersonality*.⁴ Cameron is among the friends of quietism I just mentioned, those who seek out unprovocative denominations and ad hoc groupings in which to enfold and protect them. “Impersonality” as a term can enfold almost anything modernist, from Weil’s death wish to Eliot’s criticism of Romantic poetry. Still, Empson, who lived in China and Japan in the 1930s, understood the Buddha’s “basic position” to be “denunciation of existence”—a position not assimilable to “impersonality.”⁵ “No sort of temporal life whatever can satisfy the human spirit,” Empson glossed the Buddha’s teachings with satisfaction, and “therefore . . . we must work for an existence outside time in whatever terms” (*A*, 537). Empson’s fascination with the Fire Sermon (a version of it opens his *Collected Poems*) is explicable by his loathing of Christianity and its “tyrant” God. The Buddha’s sermon, in Empson’s explication of it, argued that

“there is no other possible good thing but death,” and it said that very clearly. [Yet] almost all the effects of the Fire Sermon were good effects. For example, hundreds of thousands of men have been burned while still living in the name of Jesus, and probably no man has been so burned in the name of Buddha. But the Buddha said things that gave much more reason for burning, much more hate of common living, much more poison, if you are looking at the simple words, than the words of Christ. But in fact they did no damage. As a question of history, where these words came they did good.⁶

Furthermore, the death wishes evident in Buddhist teaching are, Empson held, “trivial by comparison with the values which grow in their shadow” (*A*, 544). Those values include, at the level of phenomenology, the preference in predominantly Buddhist cultures for a pace of what he called “fantastic” slow-

4. With the author’s generous consent, I draw freely here on materials in Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). I am indebted especially to Cameron’s remarks about Empson’s lost manuscript, *Asymmetry in Buddha Faces*. Extant documents that led toward his completion of that monograph are in the William Empson Papers of Houghton Library, Harvard University. For the story of how the manuscript was lost, see John Haffenden’s introduction to his edition of Empson’s *The Royal Beasts and Other Works* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 45–46; hereafter cited parenthetically as *R*. Haffenden’s biography of Empson, which treats his interest in the Buddha and in Buddhist iconography, is published in two volumes: *Among the Mandarins* and *Against the Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005–6).

5. “Denunciation of existence”: Cameron, *Impersonality*, 2; hereafter cited parenthetically as *C*. “Basic position”: William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. John Haffenden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 600; hereafter cited parenthetically as *A*. Haffenden has collected, among other things, in this volume Empson’s essays on East Asia, including his 1936 essay, “The Faces of Buddha.”

6. *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, ed. John Haffenden (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 150–51; hereafter cited parenthetically as *P*.

ness. “The scientists seem to agree,” he wrote, that human beings “feel differently about rhythm according as it is slower or faster than a heartbeat, and nearly all European music goes faster than a heartbeat. . . . A rhythm quicker than the heartbeat is one that you seem to control, or that seems controlled by some person” (*A*, 578). Much Asian music, dance, and drama, on the other hand, are “based on rhythms slower than the heartbeat” and hence do not promote illusions of personal or even social control. The best reason for not substituting new terms, less fraught terms, for *quietism* is its evocation in three syllables of the physically slow pace—but also the emotional and intellectual quiet—that come with losing the illusion of control.

Empson, at any rate, assessed the varieties of Japanese drama in terms that make *quietistic* a useful word for describing them. Their rhythm, associated with the death wish of Buddhism, is slower than the pace of blood through a healthy heart. Action in Noh plays can be “so near to actual casual movement” that gestures may seem uncalculated or purposeless. As for Kabuki, Empson observed that if, on stage, a “woman becomes violent, it means nothing; it only shows the weakness, and therefore the pathos, of her way of getting into Nirvana” (*A*, 579). *Nirvāna*, which in Sanskrit means “blowing out,” is a death so final that no more rebirths will be suffered. Japanese dance “never finishes a story,” because lives go so unstoppably on; and Empson noted that dramatic closure in Noh plays, however complete, appears always to be inadequate, for “the tragic thing . . . is not being able to die enough.” Death is “ideal” and verbal (or even poetic), whereas life, which opposes it, tends to be violent: “violent forces of life in the action” on stage are set against “the ideal of death . . . in the words” (*A*, 579–80). Declining to endorse one tradition of art, Asian or European, over another, Empson added to his contrast of the two: “I only want to say here that you must take the music [of ‘the Far East’] seriously as something that fits in with the whole story, and the story may well be the other half of the truth about the world” (*A*, 578).

That “other half of the truth” Empson detailed with precision in his assessment of Buddhist iconography:

The point about the archaic fixed smile, on Buddhas or elsewhere, is that it would be made by a pull on the main zygomatic, the muscle most under conscious control, leaving the others at rest; thus it is an easy way to make a statue look socially conscious, willful, alert. . . . But you have only to sink the ends into the cheeks to give it an ironical or complacent character, and . . . with these simple means, an extraordinary effect both of secure hold on strength and peace and of the humorous goodwill of complete understanding. . . . In the [example given of the] Chuguji [Buddha] . . . it is rather the older convention for the mouth, toned down and with a couple of ripples in the smooth wood, that gives all that lightness and tenderness which will at any moment brush away the present universe as an unwise dream. (*A*, 575)

In accordance with her preference for “impersonality” as a rubric, Cameron evaluates this description of the Buddha’s features as suggesting “a person who is impersonal or who aims, though cannot will, to be so, or who discovers the inevitability of being so; and who represents the inconsequence of personality before a force that leaves personality intact but, notwithstanding its persuasive outlines, in effect always trivial” (C, 12). I would emphasize, instead, the potential of such quietude to humble all who face it into nonexistence. The Buddha’s face reveals our lives to be trivial and our aspirations meaningless. Though with “lightness and tenderness,” two “ripples in the smooth wood” of its carving can “brush away the present universe as an unwise dream.”

However potent the Buddha’s smile and unseen eyes may seem in Empson’s evocation of them, Cameron is right to remind us how violent the description could have been and is not. “When persons are represented in relation to a force that effaces what individuates them, their surrender to that power,” she notes, “is directly linked to violence.” Buddha faces, by contrast, “bear no traces of violence—violence being the antithesis of, the one contradictory feature exempted from, the constellated peace of which the Buddha is the image” (C, 12). In Empson’s words:

the drooping eyelids of the great creatures are heavy with patience and suffering, and the subtle irony which offends us in their raised eyebrows . . . is in effect an appeal to us to feel, as they do, that it is odd we let our desires subject us to so much torment in the world. The first thing to say about the Buddha face . . . is that the smile of superiority can mean and be felt to mean simply the power to help . . . the face is at once blind and all-seeing . . . so at once sufficient to itself and of universal charity. (A, 574)

The “universal charity” of that face offers, to anyone who engages it, a means of getting past the need to have a point of view. “No one,” as Irving Babbitt put it, “was ever more unfriendly than Buddha to persons who had ‘views.’”⁷ But what is wrong with “views”? What *could* be? And why would it be above all the Buddha who would reject them so categorically? A satisfactory answer would bring us to the heart of quietism—or rather, to the organ that T. S. Eliot, who came to Buddhism via Babbitt, identified as the “equal mind.”⁸

Cameron’s way into the question is through a fable of Empson’s, titled *The Royal Beasts*, on which he worked while writing the monograph *Asymmetry in*

7. Irving Babbitt, “Buddha and the Occident” (1927), in *Representative Writings*, ed. George A. Panichas (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 242.

8. T. S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages,” 154. The words are spoken by Krishna: for the context, see Jeffrey M. Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity: Before and After Eliot* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), chap. 3 (“Foreign Metaphysics”).

Buddha Faces. His fable confronts humanity with Wurroos, “a group of newly-discovered African mutants,” whose existence “disturbs the cosiness of the universe” (R, 26, 161). Cameron draws our attention especially to a passage where Mary, a British official’s wife, calls the chief Wurroo—Wuzzoo—“an angel.” Until then, she had thought of him as though a large and “agreeable” dog. In Cameron’s interpretive summary, Mary

tells Wuzzoo—speaking *to* him, but also *of* him as if he were *not* in the room—she has had a flash of insight: “When you see the eyes suddenly, you jump because they are not less than human, they are much more. It is an angel in the room . . . that was what made me jump” [R, 164]. Wuzzoo is in fact dismayed at the designation “angel.” He calls it “real bad news.” (C, 19)

The apotheosis of Wuzzoo dismays him because, as he advises Mary, “You have got all the spiritual heights in the human race and all the spiritual depths too; that is why you are so cruel. . . . We are very flat kind of people beside you” (R, 164–65). By “flat,” Wuzzoo appears to mean what Eliot meant by “equal” and what Cameron means by adjectives like *neutral* and *even*. Where all is flat, even, equal, neutral—ideally indifferent, as a Stoic might say—there is no point from which to see or “have” a view. A figure who is “very flat” does not look down from heights, gaze up from depths, and does not entertain such claims as unflat characters will make for “point of view” or “perspective.”

Think of the Buddha as Wuzzoo, and Wuzzoo as Willard Van Orman Quine. “There is what there is,” Quine wrote, brushing away the present universe as if it were an unwise dream. And if instead of heights and depths—ontologies—about which we unwisely dream we acclimated to “the desert landscapes” for which Quine expressed “a taste,” then we might come to live as Wurroos do—without cruelty.⁹ We might acquire the “humorous good will” and “mildness without sentimentality” that characterize the Buddha faces Empson admired. While stipulating that we cannot see the eyes of Buddha statues directly, we “can see into the eyes of . . . Wuzzoo, who, less than a person—as the Buddha is more than a person . . . nonetheless sees, as the Buddha does, with even neutrality” (C, 20).

Obsessed with questions that the Buddha’s face seemed poised to answer, Empson collected photographs of Buddhist statuary and then “doctored” them. He

secured two photographic prints of each Buddha face—one reversed, the mirror image of the other. He cut these two faces down the center

9. W. V. O. Quine, “On What There Is,” in *From a Logical Point of View: Logico-Philosophical Essays* (1953; New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 1–19, at 1 and 4.

and arranged the matching halves so that the mirror halves formed a single image. From a single original photograph, he thus produced two images, now quite different from each other, each symmetrical, with the left and right sides of the face identical. Placed side by side, these two faces seem not only “constructed to wear different expressions” but also to derive from different countenances, from figures so unlike as to have no commonness between them. Then—illustrating that the two sides we might assume to be identical in the Buddha face are not in fact identical—Empson repeated this procedure with a second photograph of another Buddha face, which (splitting and duplicating its halves) he showed also to be self-different. (*C*, 14–15)

I would venture that, in the dark room with these photographs, Empson was looking for an answer to a standing question of European philosophy: “Can the skeptic live his skepticism?”¹⁰ The question stands only in the sense that it will not go away, for a right answer is implied in its knowing tone and choice of verbs. “Can the skeptic live?” might be read to imply that a good skeptic is a dead man, or that dead men make the best skeptics. Whereas in Buddhist thought, since “the tragic thing . . . is not being able to die enough,” the question of how, or even whether, the skeptic lives seems trivial. What matters is for the skeptic—the adept—to extinguish concern for what does not matter, and this accomplishment requires extinction of the adept’s own point of view. Empson wanted to know what a skeptic who lived his skepticism might look like and collected photographs of him in China and Japan.

Quine apparently never heard of ethics. But as the Buddha, Empson, and Wuzzoo all suggest, the point of giving up ontology, of dropping our pretense to know heights and depths, is to be compassionate and not cruel. One must practice, conduct experiments if need be, to become flat and quiet, of “equal mind,” while others dig and build, decline and rise, around the clock without repose, until they have emotions, thoughts, beliefs—a point of view—that they can call their own. The Buddha urged adepts to regard feelings and sensations, notions and beliefs *meteorologically*, as if kinds of weather, passing through, belonging to no one. Most of us want, of course, to stake a claim. Those claims are shrill, uncondusive to repose; and their tendency is escalation. This behavior, which most of us term “life,” suggested an evocative metaphor to Eliot. “Ultimate reality,” he wrote in a piece about Kant, “haunts us like the prayers of childhood.”¹¹ In a dark room, at night, when our day of claiming has turned to disquiet, we reach out for someone we can trust to say *shbb*. And when she or he reliably does so, we then wail even louder.

10. See Myles Burnyeat, “Can the Skeptic Live His Skepticism?” in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed Burnyeat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 117–48.

11. T. S. Eliot, “Report on the Relation of Kant’s Criticism to Agnosticism,” 4 (20 of the library folio), MS dated April 24, 1913, John Hayward Bequest, King’s College Library, Cambridge. For the context of the words quoted, see Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity*, 68–70.