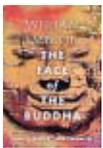


# Why Buddha's smile is lopsided

For 70 years, William Empson's study of Buddhist statues was lost. It's a masterpiece, discovers *Peter Swaab*

## THE FACE OF THE BUDDHA

by William Empson



208PP, OUP, £30

★★★★★

**T**he *Face of the Buddha* is a famous lost book, its publication touched by mid-century romance.

In 1947 the great literary critic William Empson, about to go abroad, entrusted the finished typescript and photographs to a friend in London, asking him to sound out possible publishers for him. The friend left it all in a taxi one drunken night and it was lost – or so he believed. He had, in fact, given it to Meary James Tambimuttu, the Tamil poet and editor of *Poetry London*. Returning to his native Sri Lanka, Tambimuttu passed it on to his assistant Richard March, who died shortly afterwards.

And that would have been the end of it, but in 2003 March's papers went to the British Library, where a sharp-eyed archivist made the connection. The book is now being published for the first time, nearly 70 years after it was written.

Empson's study considers the main traditions for depicting the Buddha – a stylisation with high eyebrow, slit eyes and elongated ears – and how these styles were exported, with local variations, from India to other parts of central and south-east Asia between the 5th and 10th centuries. The book was a labour of love. Empson had been “bowled over” by the Nara statuary he first saw in Tokyo in the spring of 1932. Thereafter, he spent his spare time while teaching in Japan and China in the Thirties travelling in search of other examples. By 1933, the book was drafted, but he worked on it over the next decade intermittently.

Empson deeply admired Buddhism. He found in it the “simplest conception of divinity that the human race has devised”, and thought it neither quietist nor complacent, but a powerful civilising agent full of “immense good sense and public spirit”.

With statuary as well as poetry, Empson has extraordinary power to convince you of how much is going on behind the surface, how much is involved in perceiving something as beautiful or interesting. The figure of the bodhisattva Maitreya, for instance: “In its dream it is skimming the surface of human affairs just as the right hand is just brushing the cheek.”

Empson's thesis is that “the faces

are expressing [...] a whole culture”. He analyses parts of the sculpture with an eye for the distinctive

doctrines that lay behind the styles: a Korean statue has “the straight sharp nose of intelligence rather than rule but perked out at the end so as to imply a refined inquisitive sensuality”, for instance.

His descriptions are a delight. A seated Japanese Buddha “is a rousing figure, in excellent health and temper, keeping his royal dignity but sure that people will listen to his good news and become kind and sensible”. Even better, “there is a certain Boy Scout quality about his eagerness and frankness, but from the side the mouth is prepared to sweep away opposition with a sneer”.

Empson brings his inimitable gift of ventriloquism to some of the figures: “You couldn't understand what I'm thinking even if I meant to tell... It's going to take clever management to keep you out of Hell, but I'm an old hand at this.” It's wonderfully funny but serious, too, with the idea that remote cultures can recognise each other well and learn from it. He means us to appreciate the abundance of value systems in a wide world. It is part of a pragmatic mid-century anti-totalitarianism, a “reasonable attempt to take the world as one place and use the best things in it”.

Empson was best known as the author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*



(1930) and the main hypothesis here is a further theory of ambiguity. He argues that the faces are by convention asymmetrical, with “more slant on the right”. Both psychology and theology are involved: the Buddha has to convey “detachment from the world after achieving peace” but also the “power to help the worshipper”. The calm is on the left, he argues, the power to help on the right.

How does Empson’s hypothesis stand up, 70 years on? The book’s editor, Rupert Arrowsmith, has canvassed several eminent

authorities. Some find it plausible, others don’t. A layman can, therefore, agree with the editor that, “as a working hypothesis, it holds water”. Empson’s own trick photography illustrates the theory by “split” photographs, putting together versions of the left side of the face taken twice over alongside the right similarly doubled. The asymmetries are irrefutably there.

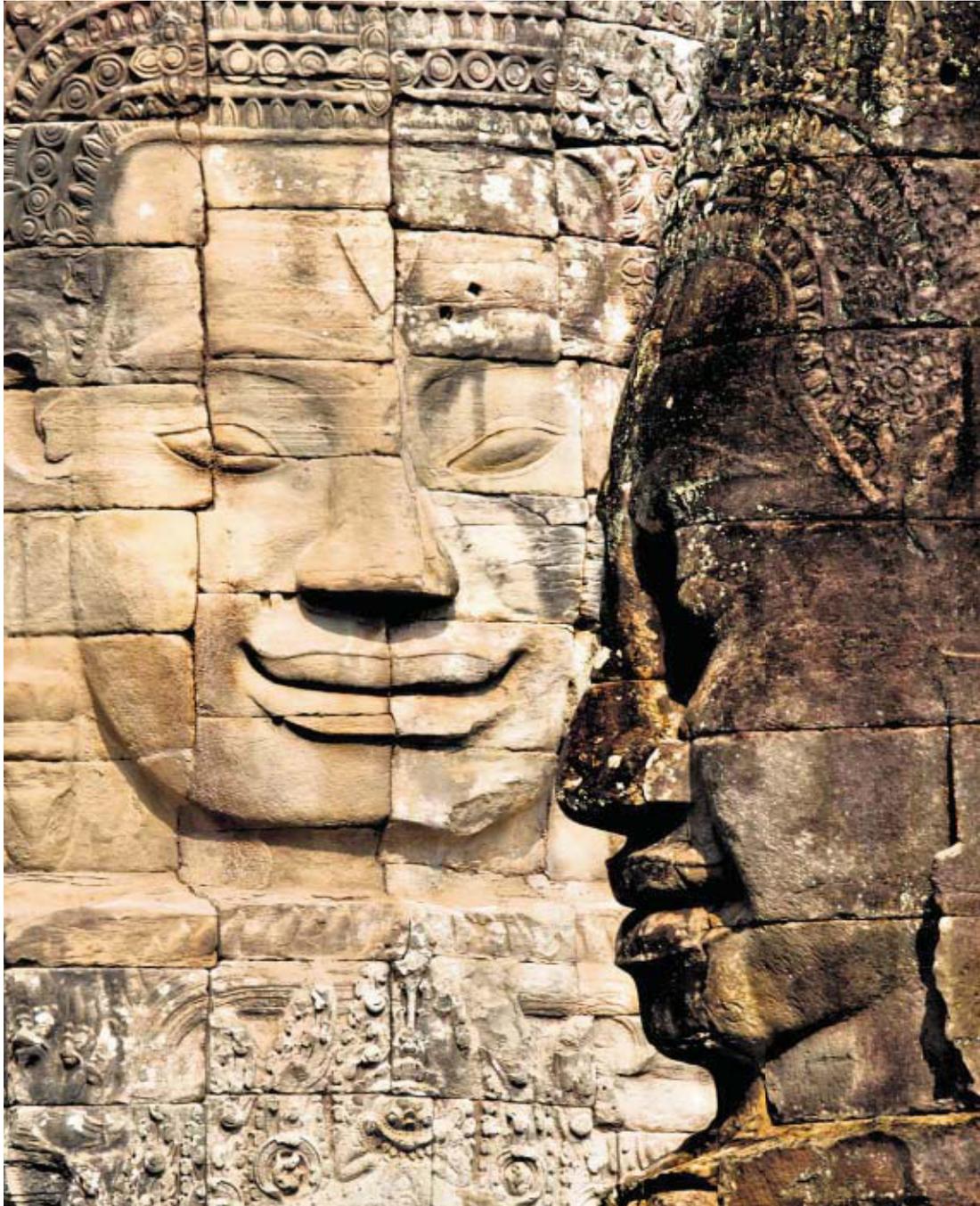
Speaking as somebody who has loved Empson’s writings since I was a student, it is a marvel and

delight to have a new book from his prime, off his main line of literary criticism but aligned with it. *The Face of the Buddha* is brilliantly imaginative, grand in its intellectual scope, fired by intense convictions about religion, art and politics. Hats off to the British Library for spotting it, Rupert Arrowsmith for his fine editorial work, and **OUP** for its richly illustrated edition. We’re only in June, but this must surely be one of the books of the year.



To order this book from the Telegraph for £30 call 0844 871 1515

## Empson’s drunken friend had left the manuscript in a taxi – or so he thought



RUPERT ARROWSMITH

Asymmetrical:  
carvings from  
c1200 on Bayon  
temple in Angkor,  
Cambodia