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No Two Ways about It

William Empson’s Enabling Modernist Ambiguities

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Critics, as “barking dogs,” on this view, are of two sorts: those who merely relieve themselves against the flower of beauty, and those, less continent, who afterwards scratch it up. I myself, I must confess, aspire to the second of these classes. . . .

—William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity

For all of his talk of close verbal analysis, William Empson was a literary critic of missed opportunity—which is not to take anything away from the fact that he remains a foundational figure in the institutionalization and practice of literary criticism in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In fact, his scholarly contribution to the study of literature and culture is well-documented across an archive that ranges from reviews of his books and Empson’s responses to those critiques, to discursive essay entries about him in standard reference texts and a selection of full-length monographs committed to renegotiating Empson’s place in the annals of literary criticism. That Empson’s name has become synonymous with the use of ambiguity as a literary device is both highly reductive and ironically accurate. In fact, it is this inescapable association of Empson with his privileging of ambiguity as the operative term for literary close reading that throws into relief his failure to subject experimental modernist texts to the same types of magnified verbal analysis that he practiced in Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930), something that modernism’s experimental poetics explicitly demanded, as well

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as rewarded. This essay attempts to account for both Empson’s conspicuous refusal to engage the complex ambiguity in works of modernist literature, and the profound implications of that decision for modernist studies and narratives about the historical development of literary criticism.

If, according to the discourses of addiction theory, enablers are broadly defined as individuals who create environments that support the continued practice of specific types of behaviors, then William Empson must be read historically as an important enabler of literary modernism, both in terms of its production and reception. Specifically, he enabled modernism, first, because he helped to enshrine detailed close reading as a methodological standard for twentieth-century literary studies; and then, ironically, because he did not apply this method of analysis to the more difficult formal features of canonical experimental modernist texts. As a result, he further enabled modernism because he did not provide constraining procedural models for successor modernist critics to follow when it came to reading meaning into modernist ambiguities.

As early as 1938, John Crowe Ransom touted Empson as “one of the closest living readers of poetry,” but then posed the question that ultimately orients this essay: “What will be the line taken by Mr. Empson when he reviews modern poetry?” (“Mr. Empson’s” 91, 104). In his critique of Ambiguity, Ransom argues that it is Empson’s “manifest destiny” to explicate literary modernism because his “interpretations increase immensely the range of experience, and therefore the density of lines, beyond what the ordinary reader finds of these elements in the poem” (104, 93). However, this obvious critical fit between Empson’s methods of close verbal analysis and the aesthetic formal practices of literary modernism serves only to highlight Empson’s modernist omissions in Ambiguity:

It is remarkable in Mr. Empson that he turns his subtle critical gifts not upon the modern poets who are professionally obscure but upon the old and established poets whose surface logic is explicit and competent, and whose obscurity lies, if anywhere, below, and behind. Mr. Empson hardly notices the moderns, or not on his usual scale. Other critics have to do it, with prodigious exegesis. (103)

Although reviews of Ambiguity would continue to claim that Empson had applied his method of verbal analysis across a range of texts from Chaucer to T. S. Eliot—a misleading if technically accurate statement—Ransom’s where’s the modernism? question cuts directly to the chase. Indeed, Empson’s indirect, career-long answer to this question appears in his subsequent criti-
cal writings, his correspondence, and his published poetry, all of which attest to Empson’s conflicted (perhaps ambiguous) attitude towards experimental modernist literature.

In the “Preface to the Second Edition” (1946) of Ambiguity, Empson specifically addresses the concerns of his early critics, but his responses continue unwittingly to foreground the applicability of his critical methodology to modernist aesthetics. He claims he wants “ambiguity” to do broadly conceived interpretive work, wherever there are “possible alternative reactions to the [same] passage”: “We call it ambiguous, I think, when we recognise that there could be a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading” (x). After he rewrites the sentences at the beginning of Chapter I, he explains in a footnote that his goal in the second edition is to avoid defining ambiguity so broadly that it “becomes almost meaningless,” yet paradoxically acknowledges that “the question of what would be the best definition of ‘ambiguity’ . . . crops up all through the book” (1). In the end, his revised opening statements read just as broadly as the originals:

An ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful. I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of literature. (1)

This retrospective desire to maintain a wide breadth of application for literary ambiguity is not new to Empson’s Ambiguity; in fact, it is evidenced in his seven blurred types of ambiguity that range from puns, allegories, and connotations to ambiguities occasioned by syntax, rhythm, and authorial states of mind (e.g. judgment, doubt, or confusion), as well as in the summary claims he makes for ambiguity as an indispensable tool of literary analysis. Immediately after defining ambiguity as “any verbal nuance” that allows for “alternative reactions to the same piece of literature,” Empson argues that “[i]n a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous” (1). This new claim effectively cuts across any false distinction between poetic language and prose by positing all language use as a potential site for ambiguity. Although Empson’s critical focus in Ambiguity is poetry, he repeatedly acknowledges ambiguity as a general linguistic resource for all literary works within a given field of cultural production: “‘Ambiguity’ itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings” (5–6).
In Empson’s hands, ambiguity becomes an effective tool for literary analysis because it involves an aesthetic “heightening of effect” through “verbal subtleties”; as such, ambiguity is inseparable from both the semantic and formal properties of literary texts. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, even prepositions, according to Empson, all become sources of potentially ambiguous meaning such that every word, theoretically speaking, possesses “a body of meaning continuous in several dimensions”: “[A] word may have several distinct meanings; several meanings connected with one another; several meanings which need one another to complete their meaning; or several meanings which unite together so that the word means one relation or one process” (5).

Strikingly poststructuralist, as well as distinctively modernist, in its commitment to semantic open-endedness and the linguistic proliferation of multiple meanings, passages like this one clearly situate Empson’s arguments within larger twentieth-century philosophical debates and aesthetic experiences. The strong correlation between Empson’s claims about literary ambiguity and experimental modernist texts that exploit this “fundamental situation” of ambiguity—whereby “a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once” (2)—would seem to recommend literary modernism as an obvious testing ground for Empson’s explorations of literary ambiguity. Indeed, he repeatedly offers readers modernist-sounding statements like “ambiguity is a phenomenon of compression” (31), and

Both in poetry and prose, it is the impression that [ambiguous] implications of this sort have been handled with more judgment than you yourself realize, that with this language as text innumerable further meanings, which you do not know, could be deduced, that forces you to feel respect for a style. (28)

However, Empson never directly turns his critical attention to the same, if not more pronounced, aestheticization of ambiguity foregrounded in texts of experimental literary modernism, even though literary modernism provides the dominant contemporary cultural subtext for Ambiguity.

When Empson defends his “method of verbal analysis” in the second “Preface,” for instance, he ironically cites governing modernist sensibilities as the impetus for his research on non-twentieth-century literary ambiguity: “At the time Mr. T. S. Eliot’s criticism in particular, and the Zeitgeist in general, were calling for a reconsideration of the claims of nineteenth-century poets so as to get them into perspective with the newly discovered merits of Donne, Marvell, and Dryden” (viii). Moreover, in prototypical modernist fashion, Empson finds fault with nineteenth-century poets who are too concerned
with atmosphere to practice certain types of grammatical ambiguity; and when they do, he argues, they often highlight their use of ambiguity through the “vulgar” italicization of words (20, 28).

In Ambiguity, however, he is equally dismissive of modern poetry that foregrounds “straightforward mental conflict” and even critically undercuts such modernist examples as “perhaps not the best kind of poetry, but one in which our own age has been very rich” (ix). For Empson, modern poetry that aped Imagist protocols was too “clinical,” a “mug’s game” (here he borrows Eliot’s terminology). In an almost confessional tone, he admits that “I had not read Hart Crane when I published the book, and I had had the chance to” (ix). Conscious of the fact that he never proffered a sustained interpretive account of literary ambiguity in early-twentieth-century poetry when he had the chance, Empson claims that “if I had tried to rewrite the seventh chapter to take in contemporary poetry I should only be writing another book” (ix). Empson’s own awareness of his missed critical opportunity with modernist aesthetics (“I had had the chance to”)—here represented by the poetry of Hart Crane—indirectly haunts the margins of his entire critical project. The modernist intellectual climate of the day helped to focus Empson’s verbal analysis on the “intentional heightening of paradoxes,” but he was much more concerned with such use in already established literary works (xvi). As a result, modernist texts that foreground “ambiguity” and “paradox” as central aesthetic devices selectively make their way into Empson’s Ambiguity, but only as cursory topics of discussion.

At the end of Chapter III, for instance, Empson detours momentarily into twentieth-century literature when he references Marcel Proust as an example of a less obvious form of ambiguity that effectively blurs the distinctions between types three and four.\(^1\) This is one of the only times in Ambiguity that Empson cites a novel—an experimental modern novel at that—thereby suggestively pointing to the applicability of his analysis of literary ambiguity to modernist fiction. His passing reference to Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past (À la recherche du temps perdu, 1913–27), however, is notable because he never specifically names the novel, and never directly cites the corresponding ambiguous passages that highlight the complex interaction of temporalities he foregrounds as “valuable” ambiguity:

[Y]ou remember how Proust, at the end of that great novel, having convinced the reader with the full sophistication of his genius that he is going to produce an apocalypse, brings out with pathetic faith, as a fact of absolute value, that sometimes when you are living in one place you are reminded of living in another place, and this, since you are now apparently living in two
Empson then glosses his own paraphrase of Proustian modernist sensibilities with the summary statement that “[i]n any one place (atmosphere, mental climate) life is intolerable; in any two it is an ecstasy” (131). In fact, Empson holds up Proust’s novel as an example of writing that affords the “formal satisfaction” that comes, not from the modernist “cult of ‘style’” (form for form’s sake), but from the pleasure of a stylistic formalism that “is continually to be explained by just such a releasing and knotted duality, where those who have been wedded in the argument are bedded together in the phrase” (132). Here literary modernism is temporarily showcased for its strategic use of ambiguity, but only in the form of reductive paraphrase that never engages the specific ambiguities of Proust’s actual writing.

Empson, quite simply, had neither the critical desire, nor the energy to explicate works of literary modernism that he did not like. Implicit within all of the dodges of modernism in Ambiguity is a strong subjective value judgment about where to draw the formal limits of modernist literary experimentation. For instance, when he does analyze literary ambiguity in the verse of two of the period’s more notable figures of innovative modernist poetry, T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, Empson chooses selections from their poetic oeuvre that are not distinctively modernist at all, but instead strongly derivative of earlier, more traditional, poetic styles. In the case of Eliot, Empson turned to The Waste Land to illustrate how ambiguity of syntax functions. Rather than interrogating sections from the poem where more fragmented, experimental verse forms produce densely complex semantic ambiguities, he cites the first seventeen lines of “A Game of Chess,” which Eliot’s own note claims was inspired by and written in a blank verse parody of Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra (II.ii.190). Empson completes his critical sidestepping of Eliot’s more challenging modernist poetics by reinforcing his first example of syntactical ambiguity with reference to three (unacknowledged) ABCB rhyming quatrains from “Whispers of Immortality”—again, not “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” or “The Hollow Men,” but rhymed modern verse that closely resembles Empson’s own poetic output (77–79).

His subsequent use of Yeats’s verse to explore poetic instances of ambiguity that say “nothing” by way of “irrelevant statements,” also sets up unfulfilled modernist expectations. Empson introduces the selection as “One of the finest poems of W. B. Yeats,” only to cite (again unacknowledged) the entire two stanza poem of “Who Goes with Fergus?” from Yeats’s 1893 collection The Rose. In Ambiguity, therefore, Yeats is represented as a modern
poet of literary ambiguity not with a poem from the strikingly modernist *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), nor from *The Tower* (1928)—both of which were well known by the time Empson was writing *Ambiguity*—but rather with an early poem (from the late nineteenth century) that sentimentally romanticizes provincial Irish folk traditions. Rather than probing the calculated vagueness and semantic ambiguity in lines from “The Second Coming,” “Leda and the Swan,” or “Among School Children,” Empson concludes the sixth type of ambiguity chapter with an example of modern poetry that is, as is the case with his example from *The Waste Land*, poetically derivative in both its form and subject matter. Unlike Eliot, however, Yeats was not engaging in playful irony.

Empson’s revealing omission of literary modernism from sustained critical scrutiny in *Ambiguity* is further highlighted when, in the second “Preface,” he specifically credits Robert Graves as the “inventor” of and inspiration for his method of close verbal analysis (xiv). The critical work to which he refers, yet again does not actually name, is *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927); and the specific chapter that captured his attention was the one in which poet-critics Laura Riding and Robert Graves analyze an unpunctuated version of Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 129*. Incidentally, the chapter is entitled “Wm. Shakespeare and E. E. Cummings: A Study in Original Punctuation and Spelling,” so Empson necessarily also read their analysis of Cummings’s experimental literary form, which concludes that the poet’s “unconventional typography improves the accuracy of the [poem’s] description” (85). Although Riding and Graves do what Empson would not—that is, directly engage modernism’s more difficult aesthetic forms and productively explicate the significance of unconventional typography (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and alternative word meanings—they ultimately shared with him a belief that modernist poetry in its more experimental forms had effectively divorced itself from the “plain reader” and “common-sense standards of ordinary intelligence” (9). As their title suggests, they were committed to finding critical ways to read the formal challenges of modernist poetry, and they were convinced that understanding literary modernism required close reading methods to interpret its innovative aesthetic practices (258).

Empson’s 1931 public defense of I. A. Richards’s *Practical Criticism* echoes this sentiment, seemingly unaware of the retrospective irony it casts over his work in *Ambiguity*:

>The matter is a topical one nowadays because so much of the best modern poetry is so difficult to read, and so hopeless of finding fit readers. It is for this reason, I said, that it would be useful nowadays, both for the poet and
public, if the “poetical public” had some process of interpretation for the verbal subtleties involved in poetry. (Letters, 30)

In 1930, Empson’s critical neglect of landmark experimental modernist texts is nothing if not conspicuous.

Like Eliot, Empson was both a modernist critic and poet, but he was highly selective about the types of modernist poetics he valued as actual cultural contributions. If his sparing, misrepresentative use of modernist figures in Ambiguity was not statement enough about his preference for modernist verse that appears conservative—when compared to more experimental texts that foreground avant-garde forms and radical ideas—Empson’s pointed discussion about elitist modern aesthetics at the end of the book eliminates all ambiguity on this point:

Not to explain oneself at length . . . is snobbery in the author and excites an opposing snobbery in the reader; it is a distressing and common feature of modern aesthetics, due much more to disorientation and a forlorn sense that the matter is inexplicable (it is no use appealing to the reason of ordinary people, one has got to keep up one’s dignity) than to any unfortunate qualities in the aestheticians. That is one of the reasons why the cult of irrationalism is such a bore. (Ambiguity, 251)

Empson simultaneously condemns and forgives the more experimental (and disoriented) forays made by modernists into the world of avant-garde aesthetics as poetic misjudgments. Literary movements such as Surrealism, Dadaism, Imagism, and the like, are denigrated collectively under “the cult of irrationalism” and deemed a “bore” because they no longer shock and engage in meaningful ways.

Empson’s mixed feelings about literary modernism not only prevented him from engaging modernist poetics fully in Ambiguity; he also chose not to make modernism a central part of the textual analysis in either of his two subsequent books of literary criticism that were decidedly shaped by his work in Ambiguity. He similarly circumvents literary modernism in Some Versions of Pastoral (1935), where prominent figures such as Proust, Faulkner, Kafka, Hemingway, Dostoyevsky, Stein, and Lawrence are considered in passing, but left underdeveloped as examples of writers and literary texts that either pervert or ignore the tradition of pastoral conventions, which Empson delineates in literary production from seventeenth-century poetry to the premodernist novels of Lewis Carroll. Chronologically and strategically, his final chapter stops short of engaging literature from the modernist period, especially
because, for Empson, many of its elitist aesthetic commitments stand in ideological opposition to the pastoral intentions of proletarian literature, broadly defined as “by the people, for the people, and about the people” (13). Likewise, *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), whose very title suggestively evokes the latent multiplicity of meaning characterized by the defamiliarizing aesthetics of literary modernism, ultimately remains dismissive of the modernist examples it cites. “The trouble about the double meanings in *Finnegans Wake,*” Empson argues, “is that since they are wholly artificial one cannot tell which way they are meant to go” (65). As a result, he calls Joyce’s final novel a “titanic corpse” (66). When Empson returns to *Finnegans Wake,* he negatively compares Shakespeare’s overuse of metaphors drawn from the theatre in *Hamlet* to Joyce’s “appalling persistence” with puns: “Exactly like Joyce; and the best thing the public can do is avoid noticing it” (68).

Empson’s statements on modernist poetry in “Obscurity and Annotation,” an unpublished essay that he wrote in 1930—the same year that he published *Ambiguity*—reinforce his troubled relationship with experimental modernist aesthetics:

> Poetry at present is in a difficult position. All the recent good poetry is obscure, and more recent good poetry is more obscure, and becoming more so. . . . [M]ost people will agree that poetry seems, by some inner necessity, to be becoming more difficult to read. (*Argufying*, 70)

From here the essay quickly becomes a throat-clearing defense of authorial annotations, theoretically paving the way for Empson’s own inclusion of explanatory notes with his published poetry. “Poets, on the face of it,” he argues prescriptively, “have either got to be easier or to write their own notes; readers have either got to take more trouble over reading or cease to regard notes as pretentious and a sign of bad poetry” (70). He labels poetic obscurity “unnecessary pedantry,” claiming further that “not to explain a term which competent readers of a poem may have to go and look up is an arrogant act” (71, 72).

Not surprisingly, Empson’s ambiguous relationship with literary modernism (and its attendant difficulties) is also glaringly evidenced in his insistence that his own poetry be published with extensive notes of explication. Writing to Ian Parsons about the possibility of publishing his poetry in June 1929, Empson qualifies his offer of “about twenty poems” with

> [o]n the other hand I should want to print very full notes; at least as long as the text itself; explaining not only particular references—paraphrasing
particular condensed grammar, and so on—but the point of a poem as a whole, and making any critical remarks that seemed interesting. And I should apologize for notes on such a scale, and say it was more of an impi-
tinence to expect people to puzzle out my verses than to explain them at the end, and I should avoid the Eliot air of intellectual snobbery. (Letters, 6–7)

The allusive use of Eliot’s name as an adjective to identify the specific “air of intellectual snobbery” Empson wanted to avoid in his own poetry, at once pays homage to Eliot’s landmark contributions to modern aesthetics (even as a model of what not to do) and signals Empson’s desire to make his poetry notes function differently from Eliot’s: “When Mr. Eliot writes notes to The Waste Land so as to imply ‘well, if you haven’t read such and such a play by Middleton, you had better go and do it at once’—the schoolmaster’s tone is an anachronism, it belongs to a time when knowledge could be treated as a unified field” (Argufying, 71). Indeed, Empson advocates a strangely tem-
pered modernism that tries to balance the aesthetics of obscurity and com-
plexity with a concern for reader comprehension and accessibility.

More strangely still, Empson himself participated in multiple economies of modernist cultural production and reception. In 1928, the same year he started work on Ambiguity, Empson even co-founded and co-edited, with Jacob Bronowski, the avant-garde magazine Experiment. The Cambridge-based magazine ran for seven issues until May 1931, and, as its provocative title suggests, was committed to publishing works of modernist experimenta-
tion broadly conceived as “all and none but the yet too ripe fruits of art, sci-
ence, and philosophy” (Haffenden, Among, 152). Both Joyce and Eliot wrote letters of praise to the editors acknowledging the magazine’s contribution to modernist thought and aesthetic experimentation, and in 1930, Eugene Jolas reprinted a group of modernist pieces first published in Experiment in his own Paris-based avant-garde magazine transition.

Over the seven-issue lifespan of Experiment, the co-editors stayed with their original mandate and consistently published innovative

verse of all sorts, critical essays, fiction, portraits, reproductions, transla-
tions, photographs by Cartier-Bresson, paintings by Braque and Ernst, and articles on everything from biochemistry to art and theatre design. Every genre and medium that was new and vital (and very little that could be called phoney with the benefit of hindsight) filled out its pages—and Bronowski even had the cocksureness to reject a proposed submission by Ezra Pound. (Haffenden, Among, 152)
According to his biographer, “Empson had editorial control [of Experiment] only for the first three issues”; however, even though no longer an official editor for the last four issues of Experiment, he still contributed poems and articles to every one of the remaining issues. Ironic, then, that the man who published works like sections of Joyce’s Work in Progress and Malcolm Lowry’s Ultramarine in the avant-garde magazine he co-edited at Cambridge should be so dismissive of works like Finnegans Wake in his literary criticism. To Empson’s credit as an early enabler of modernist works, he helped provide a publication vehicle for a range of experimental literature which he regularly described quite pejoratively as “a collage of logically unrelated images” (Argufying, 160).

Empson’s reservations about literary modernism are even more perplexing because, at the time, he himself was also considered an important poetic figure of literary modernism. His poetry began appearing in print as early as June 1927, when he anonymously published “Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth Century” in Magdalene College Magazine. However, it was the Hogarth Press publication (by Leonard and Virginia Woolf) of Cambridge Poetry 1929, that publicly established Empson’s reputation as a modern poet; of the twenty-three contributors, only Empson and T. H. White shared the distinction of having the most pieces (six poems each) published in the collection. In his review of the collection, F. R. Leavis acknowledged Empson’s modernist poetics by highlighting his nuanced originality and difficult poetics:

He is an original poet. . . . His poems have a tough intellectual content (his interest in the ideas and the sciences, and his way of using his erudition, remind us of Donne—safely), and they evince an intense preoccupation with technique. These characteristics result sometimes in what seems to me unprofitable obscurity, in faults like those common to the Metaphysicals. . . . But Mr Empson commands respect. (qtd. in Complete Poems, xii)

According to Leavis, the critical chatter around Empson’s poetry even led language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein—upon his return to Cambridge in 1929—to demand, on one occasion, that Leavis read and explain Empson’s poetry to him. When Richard Eberhart nostalgically remembered Empson’s status as a poet in 1929, he described his poetry in terms conventionally associated with iconoclastic experimental literary modernism:

In Cambridge everybody talked about Empson’s poetry. His poems challenged the mind, seemed to defy the understanding; they amused and they
enchanted; and even then they afforded a kind of parlour game, whiling away lively hours of puzzlement at many a dinner party. The shock and impact of this new kind of poetry were so considerable that people at that time had no way to measure its contemporary or timeless value. They were amazed by it. Eliot was already enthroned. The “Oxford Group” [led by W. H. Auden] had not yet got under way. And Cambridge was buzzing with activity. (qtd. in Complete Poems, xiv)

By the end of 1929, Empson had been transformed into a modern poetic celebrity—at least around Cambridge; Leavis, apparently, had even started citing Empson's poetry in his classes.¹ “The Empson cultus is ubiquitous,” wrote one of Empson’s contemporaries; “Public readings of his poems are given, as you probably know. Leavis mentions him in every lecture. Some poem of his is to be found in nearly everyone’s rooms; even in the possession of people who would not dream of reading the work of an ordinary poet” (emphasis mine; qtd. in Complete Poems, lii). Modeling his poetry after T. S. Eliot’s modernist dictum in “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921) that “poets in our civilization must be difficult” (65), Empson’s verse is both difficult and erudite.

His conspicuous use of recondite language and densely abstract extended conceits directly links his poetry to both Donne’s and Eliot's. In “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921), Eliot called for modern poetry to “produce various and complex results,” while commanding poets “to become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, [and] more indirect” (65), and Empson’s poetry tried to answer the call.² In 1932, when Hogarth Press again published six of Empson’s poems in the collection New Signatures (along with the likes of W. H. Auden, Julian Bell, and Stephen Spender), the editor, Michael Roberts, made strong revolutionary claims to market the collection, something that J. H. Willis, Jr., in his book on the history of the Hogarth Press, notes and develops further:

The poems in New Signatures vigorously announced the arrival of a second generation of modernist poets on the Hogarth list. The press was once more, if briefly, on the leading edge of modern poetry, a position not enjoyed since the Woolfs had hand printed Eliot’s Waste Land in 1923. (qtd. in Complete Poems, liv)

Such was the modernist company that Empson’s poetry kept in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when his poetic output was consistently surrounded by the legitimizing rhetoric of modernist aesthetics. In 1932, for example,
Leavis again included a discussion of Empson’s poetry in his “Epilogue” to *New Bearings in English Poetry*, where he compares Empson’s verse to that of Donne and Eliot, and then emphasizes the distinctive modernism of his poetics:

Mr Empson’s poetry is quite unlike Mr Eliot’s, but without the creative stir and the reorientation produced by Mr Eliot it would not have been written. . . . [H]e has clearly learnt a great deal from Donne. And his debt to Donne is at the same time a debt to Mr Eliot. . . . But it will not do to let this reference to Donne imply a misleading account of Mr Empson. He is very original: not only his ideas but his attitude towards them and his treatment of them are modern. The wit for which his poetry is remarkable is modern, and highly characteristic. . . . [A]ll of Mr Empson’s poems are worth attention. He is often difficult, and sometimes, I think, unjustifiably so; but his verse always has a rich and strongly characteristic life, for he is as intensely interested in his technique as in his ideas. (qtd. in *Complete Poems*, xiii)

Empson’s first solo collection of poetry entitled *Poems* appeared in 1935 to mixed reviews: “The volume received extensive critical coverage, much of it favorable, though some of the reviewers were perplexed by the density of the verse, and by the allusive obscurity” (Haffenden in *Complete Poems*, xxiv). It is precisely this perception of Empson’s “density” of verse and “allusive obscurity” that, for some, places his poetic sensibilities squarely within the characteristic traditions of early-twentieth-century experimental modernist poetry. W. B. Yeats solidified this coterie image of Empson as modern poet when he included one of Empson’s poems (“Arachne”) in his 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, and, in the same year, Michael Roberts again chose to include six of Empson’s poems in *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, claiming “I have included only poems which seem to me to add to the resources of poetry, to be likely to influence the future development of poetry and language” (qtd. in Gardner, 12).

Whether critics liked or disliked Empson’s poetry, they consistently argued their positions through his apparent radical modernism. Virginia Woolf’s nephew Julian Bell, for instance, criticized Empson’s “extravagant” obscurity as lacking “discretion,” going so far as to offer the caustic suggestion that “[a]nother use for obscurity, Mr. Empson’s, is setting ingenious puzzles for old maids to solve in the *Spectator*” (qtd. in Gardner, 23). In 1930, F. L. Lucas similarly critiqued the distinctively modernist inaccessibility of difficult poets like Empson, but this time in a parody poem entitled “Chorus of Neo-Metaphysical Poets”:
We twist the riddle of things terrene
Into such a riddle as never was seen,
And nobody knows what on earth we mean,
So nobody contradicts us . . . (qtd. in Gardner, 23)

This aesthetic response to Empson’s poetry confirms two important things: 1) that Empson was considered a modern poet worth recognizing through parody; and, 2) that his poetry was read as distinctively modernist because of his obscure diction and metaphorically complicated subject matter.

The majority of Empson’s poetry was written and published between the late 1920s and late 1930s, which means that he started writing poetry, and continued to do so, during the apex years of Anglo-American modernism. Taken together, the more celebrated critical statements made by contemporary readers about his poems and the publication vehicles that featured his poetry effectively cast Empson as an impressive and influential figure of poetic literary modernism; however, his idiosyncratic versioning of modern(ist) poetics—while reminiscent of, if not directly influenced by the likes of Eliot, Stein, and Pound—was never consistently experimental enough to rank him among modernists who were more conspicuously committed to avant-garde aesthetics. At a time when free-verse experimentation with poetic forms and poetic diction was defining what it meant to be a modernist poet, Empson was still writing verse according to strict rhyme schemes and with an eye to maintaining a consistent iambic pentameter, however loosely. In the *Journal of British Aesthetics*, Empson once baldly declared his poetic preferences: “I am in favour of rhyme and metre in British poetry” (qtd. in Willis, 23). True to his Classicist word, his poetic stanzas are, for the most part, arranged in tightly rhyming quatrains or *terza rima*, and his commitment to elaborate interlocking stanza forms is exemplified in the poems “Villanelle” and “Sonnet,” where the practice of form is announced in each poem’s self-reflexive, pointedly generic, title. While this juxtaposition of conventional verse forms supplying the material support for Empson’s poetic explorations of modernity (such as increased scientific awareness, the ethics of modern warfare, new ideas in psychology, and ever-changing social relations) would, in the hands of more experimental modernist practitioners, become a potential site for contrapuntal irony, Empson intends none.

In fact, Empson’s poetic commitment to classical form—in terms of meter and rhyme scheme—makes his poetry sound and appear artificially elevated. His use of traditional verse forms fills his poetry with the poetic archaisms and forced syntactical constructions that were anathema to experimental modernist sensibilities. In order to maintain metrical rhythms in his poetry,
Empson carefully counted feet, and when lines were too long, he resorted to recognizably archaic truncations to excise extra syllables: “ere” (“Dissatisfaction with Metaphysics” and “Rolling on the Lawn”); “ne’er” (“Rolling the Lawn”); “oft” (“Sea Voyage”); and “o’erthrew” (“To an Old Lady”). These efforts were often coupled with Empson’s regular use of hyphenated-adjectival epithets to compress his imagery and make it conform to his fixed metrical patterns. However, these are not the only seemingly elevated constructions of fitted syntax in Empson’s poetry; consider the forced syntactical inversions in the following lines designed to preserve patterned end-rhymes and rhythms at the expense of lyrical flow: “What though the garden in one glance appears?” (“The Ants”); “Can then go munching on unburst” (“Advice”); “Dwarf seeds unnavelled a last frost has scolded” (“Value Is in Activity”); “Holding it then, I Sanctus brood thereover” (“High Dive”); “(Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be)” (“This Last Pain”); and “It lit, like a struck match, everything by” (“Flighting for Duck”). Because there is no indication from either Empson’s verse or his accompanying notes of explanation that such decidedly archaic poetic practices were ironic parody, they read instead as poetic posturing. Against a benchmark of unconventional modernist poetics, Empson seems especially stilted and traditional when he uses dated poetic diction such as “Alas” (“The World’s End”) and “delighteth” (“Four Legs, Three Legs, Two Legs”), especially when it is completely unwarranted by either metrical or rhyme-scheme motivations.

That said, Empson’s poetry does contain individual lines and isolated stanzas that showcase a distinctively experimental modernist poetics. For instance, the last stanza of “High Dive” is driven by an elliptical insistence in tone and noun-verb imagery that is reminiscent of Vorticism and Imagism:

Leave outer concrete for the termite city
Where scab to bullet and strong brick has grown;
Plunge, and in vortex that destroys it, puppy,
Drink deep the imaged solid of the bone. (Collected Poems, 14)

While these lines are suggestively modernist because enigmatically ambiguous, the dangerous “[p]lunge” inward that leads to destruction described in them employs diction that directly recalls specific modernist avant-garde movements: Vorticism (“vortex”) and Imagism (“imaged”), even as its compression also recalls uses of language associated with these movements. Isolated lines of his poetry, like “Your well fenced out real estate of mind” (“Legal Fiction”), “This is the Assumption of the description” (“Doctrinal Point”), and “Delicate goose-step of penned scorpions” (“Plenum and Vac-
uum”), similarly reveal Empson’s strong modernist tendencies towards playful semantics, condensed syntax, elevated diction, and conceptual Imagism. In spite of his carefully measured syntax and rhyme schemes, then, such lines still express a characteristically anti-traditional modernist style and attitude.

One poem of Empson’s in particular stands out for its formal experimentation, and its opening stanza is worth quoting at length to highlight the rare innovative stylistics he was more than capable of producing. Ironically, it was the very first poem Empson ever published, albeit anonymously, and its title, “Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth Century,” strategically juxtaposes obsolete Victorian content (a nineteenth-century ball) with radically experimental modernist form:

Feather, feather, if it was a feather, feathers for fair, or to be fair, aroused. Round to be airy, feather, if it was airy, very, aviary, fairy, peacock, and to be well surrounded. Well-aired, amoving, to peacock, cared-for, share dancing inner to be among aware. Peacock around, peacock to care for dancing, an air, fairing, will he become, to stare. Peacock around, rounded, to turn the wearer, turning in air, peacock and I declare, to wear for dancing, to be among, to have become preferred. Peacock, a feather, there, found together, grounded, to bearer share turned for dancing, among them peacock a feather feather, dancing and to declare for turning, turning a feather as it were for dancing, turning for dancing, dancing being begun turning together, together to become, barely a feather being, beware, being a peacock only on the stair, staring at, only a peacock to be coming, fairly becoming for a peacock, be fair together being around in air, peacock to be becoming lastly, peacock around to be become together, peacock a very peacock to be there. (Collected Poems, 10)

In this uncharacteristic aesthetic foray into vers libre and the modern prose poem, Empson’s repetitive and riffing involutions of word play (reminiscent also of stream of consciousness) read like Stein’s stylized development of modernist writing through verbal repetition and the riffing recirculation of central motifs. In addition, the poem’s style adheres remarkably to the defining principles of Vorticism: constant dynamic movement and aggressive formal disruption via non-linear unconventional syntax.

Not surprisingly, Empson’s note for the poem is a complete disavowal of its innovative formalism: “There is a case for hating this type of poetry and calling it meaningless; I had better explain, to protect myself, that no other poem in the book disregards meaning in the sense that this one does” (Collected Poems, 95). He then proceeds to explicate the multiple meanings of
these supposedly “meaningless” lines: “The main idea is the clash between pride in the clothes etc. and moral contempt for it. Air: an atmosphere, a tune, a grand manner” (Collected Poems, 96). In the 1935 introductory remarks to the Notes for his poetry, Empson concedes that in cases like this “[i]t is impertinent to expect hard work from the reader merely because you 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” (Collected Poems, 93). This desire not to offend and to produce modern poetry that was challenging, yet still accessible, made Empson appear almost anti-modernist in his dismissive attitudes about the state of contemporary poetry: “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” (Collected Poems, 93). For Empson, the very presence of explanatory notes—whether they actually aided in interpretation or not—signify that an “author wants to be intelligible” (Complete Poems, 113). They also signify a desire to distance one’s poetry from the perceived elitist and unforgiving poetics of experimental modernist literature.

Indeed, Empson practiced a reserved modernism that often appears undecided in its aesthetic commitments. Defending the published notes for his poetry, he argues that “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” (Collected Poems, 112). All Joycean echoes of a commitment to aestheticized puzzling (“the only way of insuring one’s immortality”) are strongly qualified by this one important distinguishing feature that, unlike the “snob interest” in difficult modernist literature, the “puzzle interest” in Empson’s poetry “is not offended by seeing the answers in notes” (Complete Poems, 113).

By his own admission, Empson knew his poetry was difficult, or as he claimed “too narrow” and “too specialized” (Complete Poems, 123) in its erudite use of scientific vocabularies and cultural allusions. In the self-reflexive notes for “Your Teeth Are Ivory Towers,” Empson claims that the poem is a defense of such difficult modernist poetics, but it is one he makes using strict terza rima verse forms. He orients his poetic defense specifically towards critics who “often say that modern poetry retires into an ivory tower, doesn’t try to make contact with a reader, or escapes facing the problems of the time,” but his concluding notes for the poem undermine both the poem’s intent and his annotated defensive efforts: “I suppose the reason I tried to defend my clotted kind of poetry was that I felt it was going a bit far” (Collected Poems, 110, 111).
escapist modern poetics gets tempered by an equivocal warning about excessive obscurity:

But if its parts
Into incommunicable spacetimes, few
Will hint or ogle, when the stoutest heart's
Best direct yell will not reach; though you
Look through the very corners of your eyes
Still you will find no star behind the blue. (*Collected Poems*, 47)

The conflicted nature of this poem's content (inaccessible difficult poetry), coupled with its use of a traditional verse form, exemplify the tensions surrounding Empson's ambiguous relationships with literary modernism.

The publication of *Ambiguity*, however, drastically recontextualized the reception of Empson's poetry (arguably placing it even more squarely within modernist poetic traditions): prior to 1930, Empson's poetry had only appeared occasionally in various Cambridge publications, often alongside the book and movie reviews he also wrote; with the publication of his 1935 *Poems*, in the wake of *Ambiguity*, Empson is again cast as an incarnation of Eliot's modernist critic-poet:

Having shown the ambiguity of great poetry, he seems to wish to prove the worth of his own by making it ambiguous, and so ambiguity becomes an end in itself. This is particularly obvious in one or two of the later poems . . . where it is impossible to see the poems for the puns. (Cooke, 59)

To this particular reviewer, Empson's “tendency to use words, which bear not so much the meaning required, as the greatest number possible” was a “defect” that actually got in the way of his poetry. This actually sounds strikingly similar to Empson's own negative criticism of experimental modernist form; however, in the context of this 1935 review, Empson figures as a radical modernist poet: “The whole charge of ‘obscurity’ against modern verse is, of course, based on a lack of general knowledge of even the ‘well educated’ reader; Mr. Empson, in particular, will suffer for his familiarity with subjects that baffle even the minority” (59). In review after review of *Poems*, Empson's poetry is described using distinctively modernist vocabularies and situated in relation to other recognizable works of literary modernism: “Mr. Empson, more than any other contemporary poet of importance, seems to raise the question of obscurity in verse” (59). Another reviewer argues that Empson “is a great hand at words, his syntax arrests, and he can manage the
significant pun,” but that he writes “[i]nhuman poetry,” which at best provides “parlour-game exercise” (MacNeice, 58).

However, even when other forms of modernist poetry are evoked to contrast with Empson’s, the comparison effectively locates the contrasted poetic forms within a shared field of modernist cultural production. This occasionally became a complicated process as evidenced in a 1935 review that both praises Empson’s poetry as “a long way ahead of the pseudo-Eliot-Pound school with their unrhythms, misallusions, and faked significance” and condemns it for not privileging “sparseness and clarity” (58). According to this review, Empson’s poetry falls uncomfortably somewhere between the modernist poles of esoteric free verse and Imagistic simplicity. For most reviewers, his poetry has a decidedly modernist sensibility that is measured in terms of obscurity and elitism—this despite Empson’s annotations. “His poetry is so self-enclosed, so perfectly and primly circular,” writes one critic while reviewing Some Versions of Pastoral, “that for most readers it will probably always remain inaccessible—a distant island in the traffic” (Stonier, 62).

Even I. A. Richards, who was from the outset much more reserved and cautious about his student’s contribution to modern poetry, configured Empson in relation to the main currents of literary modernism. In a 1936 review of Poems, he noted that “At the worst, Mr. Empson will allow [readers] to say that modern poetry is in an even more desperate state than [they] feared,” and that the poems “[i]f they do not grow to full life, . . . will show, I think, that excessive demands are being made upon words—not that Mr. Empson’s poetic powers are too slight, but that he has been there experimenting with impracticable modes” (Richards, 76, 77–78). For Richards, Empson is a misdirected modernist poet whose commitment to formal experimentation (“impractical modes”) and defiant referential obscurity sometimes gets in the way of what is otherwise a “superlative book of riddles” (76).

With the 1940 publication of Empson’s second book of poetry, Gathering Storm, Eliot’s Faber and Faber continued rhetorically to market Empson’s poetry as distinctively modernist. The collection’s cover copy hails Empson as “the most brilliantly obscure of modern poets” (Complete Poems, xxvi). In fact, it was Eliot’s strong endorsement of Empson’s poetry that—when it eventually came (after continued pressure from Empson)—led to the publication of The Collected Poems of William Empson in the United States. Writing to Allen Tate in 1948, Eliot stressed that “until I can get William Empson’s poems published in New York I am not so much interested in anyone else,” and he later makes another personally invested appeal for a British version of The Collected Poems: “I think it would be a great pity if Empson’s poems ceased to be available” (Collected Poems, xxvii).
In the decades that followed the American (1948) and British (1955) publications of Empson’s *Collected Poems*, his celebrated status as an early-twentieth-century critic-poet became even further invested with modernist credentials, even though other mid-century poets like Delmore Schwartz called Empson an “intelligent,” but “boring” poet (qtd. in Complete Poems, lv; n. 42). Reviewers and literary critics alike somewhat (mis)leadingly figured Empson as a modernist poet on a par with Yeats, Pound, and Eliot. One of the strongest statements to this effect came from John Wain in 1949 when he published “Ambiguous Gifts: Notes on a Twentieth-Century Poet”—an article-length analysis of Empson’s underappreciated poetic contribution to modern literature. He begins this essay lamenting that Empson’s name has been recently listed in the *Sewanee Review*’s “Notes on Contributors” as “British critic,” to which Wain responds, “but in Empson’s case it would be a pity if he were known simply as the ‘ambiguity’ man, and not as a poet” (Wain, 169). His analysis of Empson’s poems is remarkably balanced, finding both fault and value in selected pieces. That said, he evaluates the poetry in light of both its “advertised” obscurity and the poet’s own claims that his verse contains “puzzles,” only to conclude that Empson’s “intellectual and elliptical poetry,” once again, amounts to a modernist versioning of metaphysical poetics: “a kind of general modernity which leads poets to bring in current ideas and current language, and a strong, at times almost perverse, desire to follow the argument wherever it leads the poem” (178). Wain tests for literary modernism in Empson’s poetry and not surprisingly finds it: where “a minor-verse form . . . exactly fits its content” in one poem, and where “a riot of subsidiary meanings” is grouped around a “hub of meanings” in another (176, 177). His critical privileging of Empson’s literary modernism even finds its way into passing statements like his concluding observation that “[i]ndeed, [Empson’s] two books of criticism are valuable chiefly as a very telling attack on the idea that we understand what we read” (175). Here Wain reads Empson’s scholarly work in *Ambiguity* and *Pastoral* as implicit theoretical endorsements for modernist obscurity and semantic ambiguity. According to this view, Empson’s critical search for submerged meaning via close verbal analysis not only legitimized modernist aesthetic practice, but, more importantly, it also legitimized the reception of such practice.

In another 1949 review of *The Collected Poems*, the reviewer for the *New Republic* does not simply situate Empson’s poetry in relation to landmark figures and texts of literary modernism; he actually inflates Empson’s verse into an aesthetic benchmark for modernist poetics: “If we were to work out a coherent view of modern poetry, if it were only to recognize and put a proper value on our various appetites and pleasures, we would have to keep
the works of William Empson and William Carlos Williams simultaneously in mind” (Fitzgerald, 182).

The review effectively relocates Empson’s modernism within an American context through the contrast with Williams; even though “they represent the extremes of formal difference in contemporary verse,” they both share the modernist commitment to uncompromisingly difficult poetics: “the refusal . . . to adopt the formulae that come most easily to the mind, with the most specious comfort or the most fashionable portentousness” (183). For this reviewer, Empson’s poems were already “famously difficult”: “A few of them resemble quartzlike fusions that will resist analysis almost as long as they will decomposition. All there is to say on this point is that every one of them means more the more it is studied, and that the study is always worth making” (183). What is described here is the “difficult pleasure” of modernism—the promise of interpretive payoff after sustained critical analysis; it is this critical mapping of Empson’s difficult poetry onto American versions of literary modernism, to reveal their shared attendant values, that qualitatively justifies Empson’s aesthetic choices and marks them as conspicuously modernist.10

If the Empson hype sounds excessively repetitive and hyperbolic, that’s because it was. At some level, it doesn’t even matter whether or not Empson’s poetry is as legitimately modernist as it was said to be; his poetry was rhetorically endorsed as literary modernism by a coterie of reviewers (many of them other modernist poet-critics), with the, by this point, institutionalized status of Ambiguity figuring as a central part of the evaluation. In similar hyperbolic fashion, A. Alvarez’s book *The Shaping Spirit: Studies in Modern English and American Poets* (1958) participates in this public relations work of maintaining Empson’s reputation as modernist critic-poet. His chapter devoted to Empson’s poetry (subtitled “A Style from a Despair”)11 appears in his table of contents preceded by a chapter on Eliot and Yeats, and one on Pound; it is followed by four more chapters each focused on Auden, Crane, Stevens, and Lawrence, respectively. Sandwiched between these recognizable pillars of modernist literature, however, Empson appears retrospectively as the odd modernist out. Alvarez unwittingly acknowledges as much when he concludes that Empson is important as a “stylist of poetry and ideas” who “took over all Eliot’s hints about what was most significant in the English tradition, and he put them into practice without any of the techniques Eliot had derived from the French and Italians” (86).

Indeed, Hugh Kenner noted this comparative disjunction as early as 1950 in a review of *Collected Poems* entitled “The Son of Spiders.” His justification for reading Empson’s work as inferior to known and established works
of modernist literature is a result of “the late twenties . . . being superimposed on the new fifties”; Kenner argues that Empson’s poems necessarily pale in comparison with other works of literary modernism currently being read:

[I]t is because they are occurring in America after rather than before the impact of *Finnegans Wake*, *Four Quartets*, and *The Pisan Cantos*, three of the most considerable works of imagination of the century, that they exhibit themselves now in immediate rather than proscriptive relation to final causes. (212)

Measured against the *tour de force* modernist aesthetics found in the later works of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, Empson’s poems figure, according to Kenner, “as contrapuntal outriders commenting on certain features of ‘period’ sensibility accidental to Eliot’s analogical drama [*The Waste Land*]” (214). Put differently, Empson’s self-contained poetry has neither the “protuberances,” nor the “excisions,” needed to elevate his modernist practice to the level of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, who necessarily “provide a context for assessing the limitations of the sensibility there at work” (216). Empson’s poetry—far from exhibiting the paratactic poetic structures of formal fragmentation or the dense intertextual networks of elitist allusion exemplified by leading modernists—helped to fill in the modernist field of cultural production between the formally innovative experimental avant-garde and the blank mimicry of conventional forms and traditional literary content inherited from canonized predecessor poets. In this comparison, Empson appears as a procedural modernist, going through the motions of complexity and obscurity, always with reservations.

In a 1933 letter to John Hayward, Empson concludes a discussion about cultural production by pondering, “I suppose most of our Great Traditions are only histories of refusals to follow up opportunities” (*Letters*, 57). By his own admission “half drunk” at the time of writing, his statement resonates prophetically with his choice not to foreground literary modernism in his most influential critical works of verbal exegesis, most notably *Ambiguity*. Even his modern poetry evinces a strong discomfort with difficult modernist aesthetics in the perceived necessity for accompanying notes of explication. As a quick reading through his limited poetic output (seventy-seven published poems) will impart, he was a difficult modern poet because he chose complicated metaphorical subjects, not because experimental form complicated his poetic reception. With the critical long view of modernism afforded by the twenty-first century, it becomes clear that Empson’s direct contribution to modernist literature as a poet was negligible. Without question, Empson’s
poetry participated in the field of modernist cultural production, but it did not define it. In fact, his idiosyncratic version of modernist poetics was developed largely in opposition to what he considered the elitist formal experimentation of foundational works of literary modernism. He practiced an equivocal modernism that, in a 1931 letter, he articulated through (dis)qualifying aesthetic commands: “a poet must not pander to a public, but he must be intelligible” (Letters, 30).

This essay has sought to offer a metacritical survey of the multiple intersections among William Empson’s criticism, poetry, and literary modernism. Rather than only regarding Empson as one of literary modernism’s critics of missed opportunity because he failed to engage representative works of modernist literature with the types of verbal analysis he helped to make so widespread, I have reconsidered him as an unexpected enabler of difficult modernist poetics. Indeed, Empson served to enable both literary modernism and modernist studies because he helped to create a reception environment (as well as helping to institutionalize close reading practices) that supplied the critical means of exploring experimental modernist forms of semantic uncertainty and open-endedness. The very terms the New Critics used to explicate (and domesticate) literary modernism are evidence of Empson’s enabling ambiguities: irony, tension, paradox. Empson knew all too acutely that the power of ambiguity lies in its ability to open up critical space for things to be alternative and otherwise—this is why so many modernists exploited it and why Ambiguity still has, what one 1933 Scrutiny reviewer called “unusual fertilizing power” (Bradbrook, 53). As a methodological primer for close reading literary modernism—and as a modernist text in its own right—Ambiguity, one might say ironically, helped set the institutional stage for studying literary modernism by avoiding it.

Notes

1. John Crowe Ransom describes Empson’s third and fourth types of ambiguity as “III. Where one locution simultaneously has two meanings, and only one of them has logical relevance. This type includes pun” and “IV. Where one locution has two or more meanings which do not agree very well” (“The New Criticism,” 112).
2. T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Virginia Woolf also make appearances in the book, but for their critical perspectives as readers of the texts under scrutiny.
3. According to both John Wain (“Ambiguous Gifts”) and A. Alvarez (The Shaping Spirit), I. A. Richards also quoted Empson’s poetry in his lectures at Cambridge.
of the lectures, but met with Eliot informally over breakfast to discuss literature and criticism.

5. Twice, Leavis somewhat misleadingly draws critical attention to what he calls Empson’s poetic focus on “technique”; however, “technique” for Leavis does not mean “technique” in the Shklovskyan sense as strategically innovative formalism that creates experiences of modernist defamiliarization. Instead, it means Empson’s penchant for elaborately artificial stanza forms with strict rhyme schemes and regulated meter.


7. Empson defends the comparison between modern poetry and crossword puzzles as historically contingent: “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 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” (Complete Poems, 113).

8. The pool of allusions in his poetry ranges from classical to contemporary. Direct references to recognizably important figures of modern thought and literary modernism serve not only to self-reflexively legitimize Empson’s status as modern poet, but also to signal his invested participation in and engagement with the ongoing cultural conversations of and about modernism. Darwin appears in “Invitation to Juno,” Wittgenstein in “This Last Pain,” Piaget and Leavis in “Your Teeth Are Ivory Towers,” Dostoevsky in “Success,” Freudians in “Ignorance of Death,” Marx in “Just a Smack at Auden,” and both Freud and Marx in “Autumn on Nan-Yueh,” along with additional references to Yeats, Woolf, and Fraser’s The Golden Bough.

9. In his introduction to Empson’s Complete Poems, John Haffenden argues that the blurb on the jacket of Gathering Storm—although unattributed—is Eliot’s: “there really can be no doubt that it is Eliot” (xxv–xxvi).

10. In a subsequent parenthetical observation, the legitimacy of such canonical positioning gets confirmed when Empson is compared to another foundational icon of American modernist poetry: “(He has, for example, taken over and extended E. E. Cummings’ structural stunt of writing one poem in parenthesis inside another.)” (184).


Works Cited


