

Critic as Clown: modernist verbal analysis

**Dr Helen Thaventhiran**

‘I believe myself poetry is written with the sort of joke you find in hymns.’ So William Empson provoked in a review comment in 1928. This seminar seeks to explore the contours of an unserious modernism by attention to its critical prose. We shall explore the workings of wit, irony and joke in the work of several modernist poet-critics as they experiment with where to draw the distinction between sense and non-sense. We’ll consider the comic impetus and critical force of various ‘techniques’: paraphrase, parody, ventriloquy, irony, demotic, parataxis, pastiche, shock. Is, for example, Eliot’s prose best characterized as a re-narration of English literary history according to where we ought to laugh? Who appears most absurd in *Practical Criticism*, I.A. Richards’ ‘modern Dunciad’ of misreadings? Can this phase of the history of literary criticism itself be read as a line of wit?

This seminar departs from a range of critical writings published from the 1920s-40s: from each writer, a prose piece and a poem. Our aim shall be to read these writings as minutely as their authors might, characterizing their distinctive tone, terms, textures and tactics, responding to the provocations and pleasures of some of the most distinctive twentieth-century styles. But these works of verbal analysis also chart, indirectly, a history of interwar turbulence, both literary and social: you are encouraged to read this prose both closely and contextually, considering its intersections with significant historical moments and contemporaries. First-type ambiguity Empson defined as ‘a general sense of richness of possible reference’. On this principle, the seminar is also an occasion to think about a wide variety of other problems, puzzles or jokes that arise when we surround the words of others with our words. But to organize our discussion, please identify, before the seminar, two particular concerns or phrases from the set reading that you’d like to discuss.

**Core Texts**

[All core texts will be supplied on Moodle: please bring your annotated copies to the seminar.]

William Empson,

--*Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), chapter: ‘They that have power: Twist of Heroic-Pastoral Ideas into an Ironic Acceptance of Aristocracy’.

--‘Camping Out’ [1929], in *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, ed. John Haffenden (2000).

T.S. Eliot,

--‘Andrew Marvell’ [1921], in *Selected Essays* (1932)

--‘The Waste Land’ [1922]

Marianne Moore,

- ‘Well Moused, Lion’, and ‘A Penguin in Moscow’, in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, edited by Patricia C. Willis (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp.91-8 and pp.301-3
- ‘The Student’ [1941] in *Complete Poems*

**Further reading**

[Below are suggestions for developing interests, rather than required readings for this session.]

EMPSON

- Bevis, Matthew, ed., *Some Versions of Empson* (2008)
- Terry Eagleton, ‘The Critic as Clown’, in *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-85* (1986)
- Forrest-Thomson, Veronica, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (1978)
- Fry, Paul, *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice* (1991)
- Haffenden, John, *William Empson: Among the Mandarins* (2005) & *Against the Christians* (2006)
- Sale, Roger, ‘The Achievement of William Empson’, in *Modern Heroism: Essays on D.H. Lawrence, William Empson, and J. R. R. Tolkien* (1973), pp.107-192

MOORE

- Elizabeth Bishop, ‘Efforts of Affection: A Memoir of Marianne Moore’, in *Elizabeth Bishop: Prose*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz (2011)
- Linda Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore* (2013)
- Taffy Martin, *Marianne Moore: Subversive Modernist* (1986)
- George Saintsbury, *The History of English Prose Rhythm* (1912).
- Laurence Stapleton, *Marianne Moore: The Poet’s Advance* (1978)

ELIOT

- Matthew Bevis, ‘Eliot Among the Comedians’, *Literary Imagination*, 16.2 (July 2014), 135-56
- William Empson, ‘The Style of the Master’, *T.S. Eliot: A Symposium*, ed. March and Tambimuttu (London, 1948)
- Barbara Everett, ‘The New Style of Sweeney Agonistes’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 14 (1984) pp.243-263
- Jason Harding ed., *T.S. Eliot in Context* (Cambridge, 2011)
- Frank Kermode, ‘Eliot and the Shudder’, *LRB*, 32.9 (13 May 2010), pp.13-16.
- Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T.S. Eliot and His Context* (1987)
- Christopher Ricks, *Decisions and Revisions in T.S. Eliot* (2003)
- Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot’s Dark Angel* (1999)

## GENERAL

- Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (1987)
- Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (2001)
- John Casey, *The Language of Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1966)
- Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From 'The Spectator' to Post-Structuralism* (1996)
- Stanley Edgar Hyman *The Armed Vision* (1948)
- Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine* (1933)
- Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971)
- J.H. Prynne, *They that haue powre to hurt: A Specimen of a Commentary on Shakespeares Sonnets, 94* (2001)
- D. Ross, ed., *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences, 1870-1930* (1994)
- Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927)
- Helen Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers* (2015)