'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’.

T.S. Eliot,
--‘Andrew Marvell’ [1921], in *Selected Essays* (1932)
--‘The Waste Land’ [1922]
Marianne Moore,
--‘The Student’ [1941] in Complete Poems

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

EMPSON

MOORE
--Taffy Martin, Marianne Moore: Subversive Modernist (1986)
--Laurence Stapleton, Marianne Moore: The Poet’s Advance (1978)

ELIOT
--Matthew Bevis, ‘Eliot Among the Comedians’, Literary Imagination, 16.2 (July 2014), 135-56
Christopher Ricks, Decisions and Revisions in T.S. Eliot (2003)
--Ronald Schuchard, Eliot’s Dark Angel (1999)
GENERAL
-- Stanley Edgar Hyman *The Armed Vision* (1948)
-- Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine* (1933)
-- J.H. Prynne, *They that haue powre to hurt: A Specimen of a Commentary on Shakespeares Sonnets, 94* (2001)