

(say) between 22 and 24 seconds

Edition as Totality

Deborah Bowman

ABSTRACT

This essay considers William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930/1947) as a text situated within overlapping cultures of editing. Most famously, the book responds to Robert Graves and Laura Riding's readings of Shakespeare's "unedited" Sonnet 129, but it also closely reads scholarly footnotes. Empson's own revisions for the 2nd edition and his prefatory reflections on them then extend an awareness of and willingness to play with *mise-en-page* unusual in literary criticism of the period, though common in its poetry. *Seven Types* should also be seen in the context of the Experiment group of writers, artists, and film-makers, for whom editing included montage and the curation of found texts and images. As a highly self-conscious textual environment predicated on editorial intervention read and written as a creative resource and scene of performance, it challenges the prospective editor by focusing attention on the spaces and times of editing.

Further questions about textual performance are posed by this article's form. All academic articles, like editions, are montages: they assemble, in significant sequence, textual elements drawn from different sources. Current conventions of scholarly referencing tend to conceal this, however, in that they persistently shift authority and attention away from the montage as process, the local effects of the selections and juxtapositions it performs, and the reader's experience of these in the here and now of reading. Whereas the edition's authority draws a text's history into the present tense of its utterance, the article's scholarly apparatus directs us to the past (in the form of those pre-existing and uncut works from which cited material originates) and scripts a future (in which readers will trace and restore this material to its original location). In order to reflect on the edition, this essay removes most of the article's usual apparatus of reference in order to allow the montage itself and its present tense to predominate; where short quotations are incorporated in the text italics are substituted for quotation marks to indicate the temporary alteration of tone from one voice to another. These departures do not argue for the wholesale elimination of scholarly apparatus; rather, the essay's wider suggestion would be that creative-critical writing is in a position to question all aspects of the academic text, reclaiming its form and formats for authorial use so that the conventional can re-emerge as an expressive resource.

The cast shadow of the subject of enunciation onto its utterance, the I opens up language to its performative circumstances.

—Denis Hollier, trans. Rosalind Krauss, 1994



Figure 1. Joseph Cornell, still from *Rose Hobart*, 1936. 16 mm film, 20 min. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The sciences might be expected to diminish the ambiguity of the language, both because of their tradition of clarity and because much of their jargon has, if not only one meaning, only one setting and point of view. But such words are not in general use; they only act as a further disturbing influence on the words used already. Those who remember how, at the time of the eclipse, the word ‘totality’ came to mean a part of the surface of England, will not expect much rigidity in the popular use of scientific language.*

William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* 1st edn (1930)

The sciences might be expected to diminish the ambiguity of the language, both because of their tradition of clarity and because much of their jargon has, if not only one meaning, at any rate only one setting and point of view. But such words are not in general use; they only act as a further disturbing influence on the words used already.

William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* 2nd edn (1947)

*On 29 June 1927, the first total solar eclipse visible from the British mainland in 203 years had occurred; beginning at 6:23 am, observers in an area extending from Criccieth in North Wales to Hartlepool in North East England experienced “totality” — in astronomy properly referring to “total obscuration of the sun or moon in an eclipse; the moment of occurrence or time of duration of this” — for between 22 and 24 seconds. The few weeks preceding the event had seen “eclipse fever” prompted by intense and widespread media coverage, in which the word was often employed inaccurately to refer to that part of the British Isles from which totality could be viewed.

A NEW EDITION: ONE TEXT SLIDES OVER ANOTHER. SOMETHING goes out of view. Watchers say: look around the edges: corona, marginalia, the footnotes, gravity bending the paths of starlight, coming true in proof. We thought so. The hidden things reappear haloed with explanation, warped, flaring, travelled in time, each more revealing than before.

§

That editing happens under the sign of the eclipse Joseph Cornell knew. When he found a print of George Melford's 1931 B-movie *East of Borneo* and took it apart into his own *Rose Hobart* (1936), one of the first collage films, he cut shots of its leading actress with scenes of an eclipse from another found film and played the whole through colored glass as if it were all solar glare. Now bracketed between a crowd looking skywards and the sun during transit, covered and uncovered, Hobart moved through nearly 20 story-less minutes, unpunctuated out of Melford's jungle melodrama; her gestures and expressions run pale and luminous from shot to shot, sound removed, reshuffled, slowed to silent film speed, projected through blue glass and later as a magenta print, their connections dislocated and circling.

This eclipse says: the montage is the story. It's as if Cornell's editorial razor has migrated onto the screen: everything here slides sideways across edges and lines to and from what's been edited out, like Hobart's eyes in her lovely flat suspecting face as she glances behind another gauze curtain or palace doorway at you can't see what, or moves offscreen into a scene which will never come, or like the white ripples from the stone she throws crossing the black surface of water, a shot Cornell splices in twice. In Melford's film her character went looking for a missing husband, and found him; here she becomes a readable margin, a bright corona, around a whole film gone dark. The montage is the story. So that it (and she — not just *Rose Hobart* but *Rose Hobart*) seems to know about the cut.

§

Six years before Cornell projected a film around the shadow of what he'd edited out, William Empson had published *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, a book about reading what wasn't there any more. A word, he said, often appears backlit by its past, the other ways its meaning could have gone for writer and reader still inflecting its present sense. (*If one's mind does not in some way run through the various meanings of a word*, he wrote, *how can it*

arrive at the right one?) Ambiguity happened when what might have been shone out from behind what was.

Seven Types of Ambiguity was also — was this inevitable? — a book written around notes:

Some readers of this chapter, I should like to believe, will have shared the excitement with which it was written, will have felt that it casts a new light on the very nature of language, and must either be all nonsense or very startling and new. A glance at an annotated edition of Shakespeare, however, will be enough to dispel this generous illusion; most of what I find to say about Shakespeare has been copied out of the Arden text. I believe, indeed, that I am using in a different way the material that three centuries of scholars and critics have collected.

Reading *Macbeth* in a student edition cut with critical commentary, he saw its lines as Cornell would present Hobart, their discrete gestures excerpted and made glossy, framed by loaded potential. They were the sources of atmospheres. He read *Light thickens, and the Crow Makes Wing to th' Rookie Wood*, and below it

This somewhat obscure epithet, however spelt (and it should be spelt *rouky*), does NOT mean 'murky' or 'dusky' (Roderick, quoted by Edward's *Canons of Criticism*, 1765); NOR 'damp,' 'misty,' 'steamy with exhalations' (Steevens, also Craig); NOR 'misty,' 'gloomy' (Clar. Edd.); NOR 'where its fellows are already assembled' (Mitford), and has NOTHING to do with the dialectic word 'roke' meaning 'mist,' 'steam,' etc. . . . the meaning here . . . I THINK, is simply the 'rouking' or perching wood, *i.e.*, where the rook (or crow) perches for the night.

A new light. A *transparent chain of negatives*, he called this, making you bear in mind all the meanings it put forward, steamy with exhalations. Diegetic levels lost themselves on the edited page, dazzling him. *I cannot now make the imaginative effort of separating the straightforward meaning of the line from this note*, he wrote. He imagined the richness of the deposit of cross-reference detailed in scholarly footnotes as in-jokes swapped by Shakespeare's actors.

What does such a note claim to know, where does it come from? What readers have thought, he answered, and so audiences might have thought, and so a writer before them. The writer. In the margins were the hidden things haloed with explanation, through which you worked your way back to the shaded text. At the beginning of his book Empson had defined

ambiguity as *any consequence of language, however slight, which adds some nuance to the direct statement of prose*. What he saw at the edges of the Arden Shakespeare were three centuries of consequence, and he wrote his book partly around notes because he also saw that, like ambiguity, like the kind of reading he was doing and the kind of criticism he wanted to write, editing happened when what might have been shone out from behind what was.

Happens. That note and his reading of it looks you in the face as you write a note to it in a margin which is a green room and a rouky wood and an aura. You could say: the following year Bob Brown would publish *Words*, with its marginal glosses in microform typescript; T. S. Eliot had done the endnotes in different voices almost a decade ago. The page hummed with speech. The montage was the story. Here too? Warped, flaring, travelled in time.

Weighing the likelihoods of meanings in this way was the result of a shift like that in recent atomic physics, he said, in which you now attached the probability to the object and not to the observer's mind. There will be a note to that, too; it came from somewhere, his world, whatever it does now, pressed up against the smoked glass.

§

More than that, though: he had begun, as Cornell would begin, as editing begins, with an unediting. An unpunctuation. He took what he called his method, he said, from Laura Riding and Robert Graves, who in 1928, around five decades before Randall McLeod unemended Shakespeare's Sonnet 111, had removed from Sonnet 129 its disambiguating editorial punctuation and spelling and compared the two versions, finding in every line *alternate meanings acting on each other, and even other possible interpretations of words and phrases*, syntax run past line-ends and doubled back. The simple antithesis of *Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream* was now *Before a joy proposd behind a dreame*, with at least six meanings paraphrased out and more, they promised, to be found. It was like a crossword puzzle, they said, working in many directions at once.

Reading like this, Empson said in the same year, produced *something apparently magical and incalculable*. When it was done right, you were *dazzled by the difficulty of holding it in your mind at once*. But the point of his book would be that you could later undazzle, calculate it.

Meanwhile his close friend Humphrey Jennings, a poet, painter, surrealist and not quite yet a film-maker, was unpunctuating too, again cred-

iting Riding and Graves. His 1930 edition of *Venus and Adonis*, he said, kept from the 1593 Quarto *everything that might possibly contribute to the pleasure of the intelligent reader (the reader who is prepared to take pains with his author in search of the richest experience attainable from him) and as little as possible beyond that.*

Some of this interest could look like an early movement towards what unediting would mean later in the century, in the work of McLeod and others: a movement arguing against editorial intervention and calling for photofacsimile as the least intrusive medium available for the transmission of early texts, its shed light dispelling what McLeod called *editorial obscurity*. But Empson had different preoccupations and he liked the dark. You could read there for possibility. You could find it in the cloudy atmosphere of a footnote as well as in the reambiguated unpunctuation of a sonnet. You attached it to the object. What he found in Graves and Riding's essay was, like what he made of the Arden notes, less a principle than a performance, unediting as magic trick: the new (*Oxford Book of English Verse*) sonnet printed first as a foil to the old (Q) one, out of which they then pulled strings of paraphrase. Editing and unediting happened when what might have been shone out from behind what was, and out of it you made the richest experience attainable.

In 1928–30 you made out of it the richest experience attainable.

In 1928–30 the point was that you could calculate it.

How to unpunctuate that?

§

After the war he came back to *Ambiguity*. He wrote his alterations in pencil and often over that again in ink, around the margins of a copy of the first edition, where what might have been shone out from behind what was. *I am still not sure how true this paragraph is*, he wrote, and *Maybe this no longer seems so difficult or important and I now think the example a complete mare's nest, but it seems worth keeping in*. He kept it in. After its note he printed another: *I have cut nearly two pages of this analysis for the second edition*. He kept the recent atomic physics and took away the eclipse of 1927 and in that textual edge called a Preface he thought some more about time and about those calculations involved in reading which made it for him also an editing; he thought about what he called *the back of the mind*, his cutting room floor full of possibility.

He thought, too, about cutting. The montage was the story, he already knew. This was still a book about notes; reading them, but now, increasingly, writing them:

It seemed the best plan to work the old footnotes into the text, and make clear that all the footnotes in this edition are second thoughts written recently. Sometimes the footnotes disagree with the text above them [. . .]. Sir Max Beerbohm has a fine reflection on revising one of his early works; he said he tried to remember how angry he would have been when he wrote it if an elderly pedant had made corrections, and how certain he would have felt that the man was wrong.

They needed to be separate to the eye, these textual bodies, like the corrected pages and marginal annotations they transcribe, one the consequence of another. They both measure a distance and demonstrate one.

This, now, was part of the story. His first edition's origin myth had been an unpunctuation. This second edition's would be a separation: what a gap can do on a page. Now it hummed like a telegraph wire. He recalled Beerbohm writing

Why should I try to put my old head upon the shoulders of a young man in the distance? [. . .] The young man in the distance (though I admit that in many ways he irritates me) does not deserve to be beheaded. And would he not have a fair grievance against me [. . .]?

The young coxcomb in the distance, he had read, *t'other side the gulf of five-and-twenty years, stands intact*, as in Beerbohm's many caricatures a Young Self and an Old Self stand intact, overlapping in impossibly-telescoped time, the results of the transit a commentary flaring around them. *How abominably you wrote*, says Old to Young Henry James in one and *How abominably you write*, says Young to Old, their speech-bubbles coincident apart from the final verbs. Their voices cross and pass. They speak simultaneously, which is the impossibility and the joke, about the irreversibility not only of time but of style (he had sometimes altered the punctuation, Beerbohm admitted, *but the style of the punctuation I have nowhere altered*, style being what Young and Old could never—they might think—and would always—we know, don't we?—share, one having been the consequence of the other). They touch but only just and the space between them which is a distance made of time fills up with their mutual feelings, which cannot be.

§

What can a gap do on a page? We know, don't we, who come to inhabit that space between texts which is a distance made of time and combines what we see round the edges of both, the what could be shining around what would be as well as what might have been circling what was. We know, who slip continually between *write* and *wrote*.

What do we know?

That annotation falls into that class of sign that Charles Sanders Peirce called an index, caused by its object. A name, a wound, the word *this*, footprints. The corona of a star in eclipse. A shadow passing across mainland Britain from Criccieth to Hartlepool. A note I will write about an example cut from the second edition of 1947.

We know too that time and space interrupt the index, complicate it into designations and symptoms and traces: that a name is a designation and a shadow is a symptom and a wound a trace. We know that between the symptom happening in the now of its object and the trace left behind it intervene time and distances.

A footnote appears as you turn the page and is simultaneous with the text. It was written around the edges, years afterwards, and its recognitions follow, were prompted by, trail after the text. It is consequence made simultaneous. That distance which is made of time between symptom and trace is the territory of annotation.

How long do I have?

§

Editing happens under the sign of the eclipse. In June 1927 the meaning of totality slipped from what you saw to where you were when you saw it because of what mattered: your view, which depended on your position. To see totality was to go there, to have travelled to Giggleswick, Southport, Llysfaen, to the summit of Snowdon in one of seven trains laid on from Llanberis. The word warped because a general truth became suddenly sharply practical: that a point of view means being in a place at a time

pressed up against the smoked glass

An index, Peirce said, was *anything that focuses the attention*.

§

Empson's attention, in *Ambiguity*, was snagged repeatedly by the mechanics of negation, the inability of language to shut a thing out without naming and so including it. You can only oppose an argument by inhabiting it, he had written. He had come from a mathematics degree where *not-p* was never *p* but when literature spoke logic out loud it gathered inflection, blurred with a different kind of calculation, the emphases of denial. The Arden note did that; *No, no, go not to Lethe; neither twist* did too, telling you that someone *must have wanted to go to Lethe very much, if it took four negatives in the first line to stop them*. Decisions came freighted with what had been jettisoned along the way. How did you undazzle that?

Looking out of the corners of his eyes he saw the edges of definitions where possibilities shifted. A word pushed itself off from them like a swimmer and he built the finale of *Ambiguity* around that equal and opposite reaction, the way it cleaved and cleaved. *The existence of English Bibles with alternatives in the margin*, he thought, *may have had influence on the capacity of English for ambiguity*. Meaning appeared like a handprint on the walls of Altamira, plotted not just in but by a negative space whose paint-deposit records a blur of attention.

What if, notes can say, and *Perhaps* and *Also* and *Meanwhile*, moving in the corners of your eyes, thrown off by the instant of publication. *Not*, even. *NOT REPEAT NOT*. New light, a look. The edge a reading could push itself off from.

Under the sign of the eclipse you look at the edge, at what escapes, at how. Rose Hobart (and so *Rose Hobart*) escaped: Cornell's final shot isn't the eclipse, but the woman. Her eyes slide aside, down, away. She is his reply to the crowd at the beginning; the shadowed sun they see as they look up — a reaction shot, a formal bracketing — is its antepenultimate image, succeeded by two shots taken from within the bracket and repeated: the splash of stone in water, again; her look, again.

Something repeated says that it is free of whatever you are making of it as well as its past and it includes its whole future by stopping short of it.

He made a film that is free of itself and full of what it isn't, seeing through the whites of its eyes. Hobart crosses the bright projected beam, an event, one of Cornell's central filmic shadows, an interference, and the transit of this one cut film crosses her, a face, his pale obsession, uncaught. He wanted to look back around their edges, at the source, at cinema. At love. They would tell him.

To walk through the streets at night, George Reavey had written in May 1929 in a prose-poem published in the Cambridge student magazine *Experiment*, which Empson edited, and watch yourself multiplying in the shadows, which entice and pursue, so that past and future are one in you [...] You are the shadows going before and after, now penned into a harmony that might have been. Its title was from D'Annunzio, 'QUEL CHE NON FU FATTO, IO LO SOGNAI', what was not done, I dreamed.

Ambiguity, Empson would write in 1947, looking again, was any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.

§

Humphrey Jennings had looked from 1930 towards the Quarto of 1593 and saw himself in a shadow-play of versions

reprinted for experts, modernized for plain readers, and annotated for students; no edition however is available, prepared on the lines of (say) Professor Grierson's *Donne*, giving the spelling and punctuation in the original — supposed obstacles to the plain reader — but with its errors and encumbrances — so dear to the expert — cleared away.

He had also been designing stage-sets but here, editing, all ways were in someone else's and everyone's view was restricted. His dashed sentences slide clauses past each other like scenery, obstacles, encumbrances, contexts. You crane your neck. On his way backstage to *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols., 1912, he turned, spoke this time in parentheses, a spotlight, a blind spot, a totality. (Say), he said. He knew it was his call, for now.

A nuance had been a cloud.

Could it be a pillar?

What do I see from here?

His world, the richest possible experience, a screen, the back of the mind, our mutual feelings, which cannot be.



Figure 2. Joseph Cornell, still from *Rose Hobart*, 1936. 16 mm film, 20 min. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

University of Cambridge