# Out of Context: An Analysis of the Interplay between Ambiguity and Context in English-Language Modernist Poetry

Pi, David

# Out of Context: An Analysis of the Interplay between Ambiguity and Context in English-Language Modernist Poetry

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David Y. Pi

Student Number ([redacted])

Thesis supervisor/first reader: Prof. Dr. P.T.M.G. Liebregts

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the role of ambiguity—defined as any utterance or verbal nuance which allows alternative interpretations of the same piece of language—as a literary device in English-language modernist poetry. For most of western history, scholars, philosophers, and literary critics considered instances of ambiguity a defect of language that should be avoided and resolved into a single meaning. A significant development occurred in 1930 with the publication of William Empson's treatise, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which instead championed the interpretive potential of ambiguity in literature. This thesis builds on Empson's analysis of ambiguity by developing a more complete catalogue of literary ambiguities that incorporates insights from the fields of semantics and pragmatics. This thesis then analyzes modernist poems to reveal through close reading how ambiguity can lead to multiple valid interpretations of a poem and even lie at the crux of a poem's meaning. That analysis focuses on the relationship between ambiguity and context, showing that the internal context of a poem, the context around a poem's creation, and the reader's personal context—their unique experiences and perspectives—contribute to imbuing ambiguity with literary meaning.

## INTRODUCTION AND THESIS

Literary ambiguity is a powerful literary tool and a feature of poetry that invites readers to explore the insights and thoughts of poets, reflect on their own experiences of the world, and contemplate the context within and around each poem.[1] When used effectively, ambiguity exploits the inherent murkiness of language in a manner that brings the audience into the creative process, imbuing the poetic experience with richness and meaning. That process—mixing writer intention, context, and reader interpretation—also personalizes the experience of poetry to each reader, imparting to them the joy of both creation and discovery. An exemplar and testament to these qualities can be found in H.D.'s poem, "Oread":

> Whirl up, sea—
> whirl your pointed pines.
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks.
> hurl your green over us—
> cover us with your pools of fir. (H.D. 55)

First published in 1914, much has been written about the elements of nature and imagism in "Oread" (Hay 321; Kita 15-22; O'Connor, *Pushing on Through* 41-45; McKay 41-42). But a subtle ambiguity in the poem also makes it an ode to divergent perspectives, and therefore to the diversity of personal contexts that readers bring to poetry. Specifically, it is ambiguous what work the title of the poem performs. In Greek mythology, a nymph is a nature-deity who

[1] For brevity, this thesis will refer to "readers" of literature and poetry, but as used in this context, "readers" also includes listeners who hear poetry rather than read it.

personifies a natural terrain, and an Oread is a mountain nymph (Traninger 3-4). The title might signify that the speaker of the poem is an Oread. Interpreted this way, the poem demonstrates how an Oread sees the world through the lens of a personified mountain. Calling out to the sea, she describes waves and currents as "pointed pines" and "great pines" because trees and mountain scenery are her points of reference when she attempts to describe the sea. Though one might reasonably assume the sea is blue, she interprets its color as just another shade of green, the color of mountain flora that dominates her visual experience. She describes brackish pools as "pools of fir," the closest approximation she has in her visual repertoire to describe sea water. By showing how her perception of the world is shaped by her frame of reference, the poem is a nod to the significance and influence of the personal context through which readers interpret and interact with poetry. Indeed, to the extent the poem has an aesthetic appeal by mixing the sea and mountain through metaphor, the poem highlights the beauty that results from the personal interpretive act.

Alternatively, the title may be interpreted as the addressee of the poem. In other words, someone—perhaps a Nereid (a sea nymph) or the sea itself—calls out to the Oread and addresses the lines of the poem to her. Interpreted this way, the Nereid regards the mountains and forests—personified by the Oread—as something like the sea, her own point of reference for all terrains. She sees the mountain as a type of "sea," and calls upon it to "whirl up." She imagines that the pines "whirl" and "splash," verbs associated with the movement of water, and can be thrown out to sea like a wave. Like the Oread in the first interpretation who knows only a couple nautical words ("sea" and "pools"), the Nereid may have a limited vocabulary of the land ("pines," "fir," and "green") which she supplements with the oceangoing verbs familiar to her. The poem thus presents the opposite perspective (instead of an Oread looking out to sea, the sea looks back to

the Oread), one equally limited by personal context, but in reverse. The effect is that regardless of whether the title of the poem refers to the speaker or addressee, the poem depicts the melding of sea and forest through the limited perspective of the either the Oread or Nereid. In this way, a single word's ambiguity may serve as a lynchpin of the poem's meaning. Important to this interpretation is that the ambiguity is not necessarily resolved or eliminated from the poem. The richness of the poem does not depend on deciding whether the title refers to the speaker or the addressee. Rather, the fact that the title could serve either function—the ambiguity itself—underscores the ways in which an observed object or scene takes on a different nuance depending on the perspective of the viewer.

Despite ambiguity's artistic potential, with few exceptions, almost all Western history has regarded ambiguity as a defect to be excised from perspicuous locution. Its potential as a source of artistic meaning, rather than the impediment to it, gained popularity only with William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (referred to herein as "*Seven Types*"), first published in 1930. With a close reading of selected poems and plays, Empson demonstrated the bounty of interpretive possibility when one was willing to play with ambiguous language, rather than avoid or "resolve" it. Though transformative in its impact on literary criticism, *Seven Types* has been the subject of heated debate and scrutiny. The treatise lacked precision in its categorization and treatment of the types of ambiguity in language and Empson has been criticized for using poems as a mere pretext to flex his own creative interpretations (Ossa 7). Moreover, nearly a century of research in semantics and pragmatics addressing ambiguity has flourished since *Seven Types*, rendering its theoretical base incomplete at best. Another noticeable omission from *Seven Types* is that although Empson was a contemporary of modernist poets (and a poet himself), *Seven Types* examines hardly any modernist poems (Clissold 110).

This thesis explores the nature, mechanism, and effects of ambiguity in modernist poetry, with the aim of advancing the understanding of ambiguity as a literary tool and highlighting its unique role in modernism. The contribution of this study is not only to the historical analysis of these topics, but to the interpretation of poems through the lens of ambiguity. This has ongoing relevance in literary studies, as new generations create and consume poetry. The first chapter of this thesis provides a theoretical framework of modernism and the concept of ambiguity, its history, its treatment in *Seven Types*, and subsequent developments in literary studies and linguistics concerning ambiguity. This provides the context for this thesis's contribution to existing scholarship. The second chapter applies the theoretical concepts of ambiguity to selected English-language modernist poems, highlighting the different ways in which ambiguity can operate as one of the primary sources of meaning in poetry.

# CHAPTER 1

## A Theoretical Framework of Ambiguity

### *The Tricky Business of Defining Ambiguity*

It is befitting that the word "ambiguity," is itself susceptible to multiple interpretations—in other words, "ambiguity" is ambiguous. This is in part because ambiguity is interesting for different reasons in different fields of study (Berndt 274). In the broadest sense, an ambiguity denotes "uncertain meaning; a doubt; an uncertainty" ("Ambiguity," *OED*, def. 1b). However, this definition fails to capture the narrower sense of ambiguity as a literary device because it encompasses the concepts of moral ambiguity and meaningless utterances. For example, whether the character Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* is virtuous, depraved, or something in between, may be framed as an ambiguity about the character, but one that depends on evaluating the nature of morality, not language. Analyzing that ambiguity turns on mores and values applied to the character and actions revealed in the novel. Though the elements of Bloom's character are affected by literary ambiguity (since he is described in words), his moral value is a separate question that implicates religion, philosophy, and ethics, rather than language. A meaningless utterance is likewise outside the scope of literary ambiguity examined here, even though it falls within the broad dictionary definition above. For example, the meaning of the symbol, "♑," is not only uncertain in English, but essentially meaningless. In theory, a reader could interpret the symbol to mean anything, and no arbiter could definitively decree it "wrong" to do so. However, a symbol that could mean anything to anyone cannot communicate particular information from one person to another, and therefore has little to no value in literary interpretation. For these reasons, the broadest definition of "ambiguity" presented above is overinclusive for the purposes of literary criticism.

In contrast, semantics offers rigorous definitions of ambiguity that are too narrow for the purposes of literary criticism. The various types of semantic ambiguity are discussed in later sections of this thesis. As that discussion shows, linguists do not always include within their definition of semantic ambiguity occurrences such as context sensitivity, vagueness, under-specification, sense and reference transfer, or even metaphor (Sennet, Kaufer 220). This is because these categories of uncertainty are not necessarily caused by multiple unresolved meanings in an utterance itself, but other factors, usually arising from context. For example, context sensitivity arises in the statement "she is hungry." An ambiguity of the utterance lies in who "she" refers to, but that is not because the language itself is ambiguous, but rather because the statement lacks context (Sennet). Similarly, the absence of context makes it ambiguous whether the subject's hunger is literal or figurative—she could be hungry for success or a ham sandwich. The words themselves are not ambiguous from a semantic perspective, but they are susceptible to multiple interpretations based on context. Context sensitivity and other concepts often distinguished from ambiguity in linguistics will be discussed further below, particularly in the sections discussing pragmatic ambiguity. For the purposes of delineating the working definition of ambiguity here, it is sufficient to remark at this juncture that semantic ambiguities can make poems susceptible to multiple interpretations, but they do not account for all of the types of literary ambiguity that appear in poetry.

The Goldilocks definition of ambiguity, for the purposes of this thesis, is a minor variation on Empson's definition and lies somewhere between its broadest dictionary definition and the narrower categories of ambiguity in semantics. In *Seven Types*, Empson defines ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (Empson 1). This definition is imprecise in its use of the term

"reactions," which could be used synonymously with "interpretations" or could refer to how one responds to an interpretation. As to the latter meaning of "reactions," someone may react to a phrase they like with a smile, another with a laugh, but that difference in reaction does not necessarily render the substance of the communication ambiguous. In other words, readers may have different "reactions" to the same interpreted meanings. Citing Empson, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) adopts a streamlined version of his definition of ambiguity: "a nuance which allows for an alternative reading of a piece of language" ("Ambiguity," *OED*, def. 1d). Though this definition does not use Empson's imprecise term, "reaction," it implies that there are only two "readings" of an ambiguous utterance (one reading and "an alternative" one), rather than a potential multiplicity of interpretations.[2] Moreover, the term "reading" unnecessarily limits ambiguity to written language (though the term "reading" may encompass "interpretation"). Finally, the OED offers another definition of ambiguity as "a word or phrase that can be interpreted in more than one way" ("Ambiguity," *OED*, def. 1c), which is close to the *Merriam-Webster* definition of ambiguity as "a word or expression that can be understood in two or more possible ways" ("Ambiguity," *Merriam-Webster*, def. 1b). The terms "interpreted" and "understood" in these definitions avoid the problems of the terms "reaction" and "reading" in other definitions, but these definitions unnecessarily exclude verbal nuances that are neither "words," "phrases," nor "expressions," such as punctuation or spacing. Taking the elements of

[2] One might be tempted to think of ambiguity as originally denoting a duality between two meanings because of the Latin prefix "*ambi-,*" meaning dual, as in words like "ambidextrous" or "ambivalent." However, the etymology of "ambiguity" is from the Latin verb *ambigere*, which means "to wander around" (Ossa 18).

these definitions that best fit the types of ambiguity considered in this thesis, the following definition will apply herein: an ambiguity is any utterance or verbal nuance which allows alternative interpretations of the same piece of language. This definition is broad enough to cover any use of language, focuses on interpretation of that language, and accounts for an indeterminate number of possible interpretations.

*A Brief History of Ambiguity in Western Civilization*

The scope and significance of this thesis is guided, in part, by the history of ambiguity and the ways in which additional scholarship may contribute to a deeper understanding of ambiguity in literature and a deeper understanding of literary works themselves. Since at least the times of the Ancient Greeks, ambiguity has been the subject of ongoing intellectual scrutiny (Ossa 29). The earliest reflections on ambiguity that survive in the record are those of Aristotle, who concluded that "ambiguity is a fault for the writer or speaker to avoid, and a problem for the reader or hearer to solve" (Ossa 34). Aristotle thought of ambiguity in terms of the different intellectual contexts in which it arose: in philosophy, ambiguity had to be excised because it impeded a philosopher's attempts to accurately articulate his observations of the world; in rhetoric as well, ambiguity had to be eliminated because it "hinders the clear and persuasive communication of argument"; and in the domain of interpreting poetry, religious texts, and legal documents, ambiguity needed to be "resolved" because it "hinders the reader's ability to grasp the writer's intention" (Ossa 29). Thus, part of Aristotle's distaste for ambiguity appears to relate to his conception of language as merely a vehicle for a speaker to transmit their experience of the world to the listener without adulteration. Given this conception of language, it is not surprising that Aristotle saw ambiguity only as an impediment. As he argued, "words are the symbols of mental 'experience' (*pathēma*), which is in turn an image of reality" (Ossa 30). However, as

Aristotle recognized, there were more things and experiences in the world than there were words available to describe them, making it inevitable that certain expressions would be ambiguous. As summarized by Ossa in his study on the history of ambiguity: "The 'poverty of language' compared to the plenty of things remained the default explanation of lexical ambiguity in antiquity" (Ossa 30). Thus, to Aristotle, ambiguity was an inescapable part of language, but one that people engaged in communication should endeavor to eliminate through detailed and precise locution.

The Aristotelian conception of ambiguity as a linguistic blemish persisted through the medieval period, Renaissance, and early modern times, with limited variation and exposition (Ossa 45-50). Like Aristotle, most scholars until the twentieth century appeared to have embraced the view that the purpose of language was to communicate the specific intentions of the speaker to the listener (Ossa 75-76). As noted by the nineteenth-century scholar, Franz Lieber, "there is only one true sense of a text or utterance, and that is what the author intended." Ossa writes: "Almost nobody outside the law genuinely advocated ignoring authorial intention before the twentieth century, and a formalistic approach to literary criticism, when it was advanced, was in fact grounded on intention" (Ossa 97). The seriousness with which scholars approached the concept of speaker intention is understandable because for much of western history, the analysis of writing largely took place in the context of religion and law. The scripture was regarded as the word of God, and it would be a cruel god indeed who guides his adherents with ambiguous proscriptions. According to Ossa, Catholics and protestants alike "at least shared one common assumption, namely that every verse of the Bible had one true literal meaning, even if they could not agree on what it was or how to determine it" (Ossa 154). And while God spoke with a single intention, ambiguity was the realm of Satan, the great deceiver, "the epitome not

only of the world's evil, but of its mendacity and its ambiguity" (Ossa 106-109). Similarly, in the domain of law, scholars accepted that there were unavoidable ambiguities in contracts and other legal documents but were steadfast in developing various maxims and heuristics to resolve those ambiguities into single interpretations (Ossa 84-91). Again, though there was disagreement over how to handle ambiguity, there was little debate that it was a problem that needed to be resolved.

During this long stretch of history from antiquity to the modern era, the only arena where ambiguity flourished was that of humor and wit. For example, Odysseus of Homer's *Odyssey*, known for his cunning, introduced himself to the cyclops, Polyphemus, as "Nobody." When he later blinded Polyphemus and escaped from his cave, Polyphemus screamed out to his brethren that "it's Nobody's treachery…that is doing me to death" (Homer 120, Ossa 111). Odysseus's use of the double meaning of "nobody" demonstrated his cleverness, while also serving as the punchline to a comedic dialogue. Renaissance literature, notably Marlowe and Shakespeare, also took advantage of puns and other wordplay for comedic effect (Ossa 111-112), but it was not until the eighteenth century that ambiguity began to be described in contemporary writings as more than just "elegant wit and deceit…usually focused in a single rhetorical device" (Ossa 236). The discourse on poetic ambiguity as a field of play for creative interpretation is traceable to the mid-eighteenth century (Ossa 283, 296). However, the innovations of that time were not in the mainstream and remained relatively obscure until the late nineteenth century and ultimately in the publication of Empson's *Seven Types* in 1930 (Ossa 363). Empson represented a significant break from all that came before him by embracing the complexity of ambiguous language as the very thing that allows us to communicate the "complexities and contradictions of life" (Ossa 392).

*Classifications of Ambiguity in Linguistics, Literary Studies, and Beyond*

The following subsections of this study summarize different types and categories of ambiguity that have applications in literary criticism. The goal is to identify the different ways in which language can fall into the definition of ambiguity developed above and then search for and analyze how that ambiguity contributes to meaning in modernist poetry.

**Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity**

*Seven Types* is somewhat incomplete in that it does not actually set out to provide a comprehensive taxonomy of ambiguity found in literature. Rather, Empson describes seven scenarios in literature that elicit from him a sense of confusion about the author's meaning or intent, the resolution of which generates interesting artistic results. The seven types are as follows:

Type 1: Metaphor (Empson, 2-3).

Type 2: Lexical and syntactic ambiguity that resolves into a "single main meaning" (Empson, 48- 50).

Type 3: Puns in which both meanings are relevant in context of the literary work (Empson, 102).

Type 4: Multiple meanings of a statement are contradictory, but the contradictory meanings "combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author" (Empson 133).

Type 5: The "author is discovering his idea in the act of writing, or not holding it all in his mind at once, so that, for instance, there is a simile which applies to nothing exactly, but lies half-way between

two things when the author is moving from one to the other (Empson 155).

Type 6: A statement has no clear meaning and the reader is "forced to invent statements of his own and they are liable to conflict with one another (Empson 176).

Type 7: The "meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind" (Empson 192).

Some of Empson's categories deal with language itself (Types 1, 2, and 3), others focus on how the overall impression of statements reveal confusion or conflict in the mind of the author (Types 4, 5, and 7), and Type 6 concerns any kind of unclear statement that requires the reader to "invent" conflicting statements to resolve the ambiguity. Empson's lack of rigor in listing types of ambiguity is striking. For example, he does not directly account for many of the specific semantic mechanisms through which language is susceptible to multiple interpretations. He directly addresses lexical and syntactic ambiguities (in Types 2 and 3) but does not systematically attempt to categorize phonological, idiomatic, and morphological ambiguities in any meaningful way. Apart from specific forms of ambiguity studied in semantics, Empson also does not formally consider pragmatic ambiguities such as context sensitivity, under-specification, sense and reference transfer, sarcasm, insinuation, and a plethora of other reasons why a verbal nuance might allow multiple interpretation of the same piece of language. Of course, Empson can hardly be blamed for failing to list all of these semantic categories, many of which were classified and studied with more precision after the publication of *Seven Types*, but

these omissions still contribute to the incompleteness of *Seven Types*.

Any of the semantic features of language, not specifically analyzed by Empson, could fall into Type 6 or Type 7 ambiguities because they deal with the effect of the ambiguity rather than the source of the ambiguity. However, theses catch-all types only underscore the disorganization of *Seven Types*, which conflates sources and effects of ambiguity into "types" without drawing a distinction or creating subcategories of ambiguity in his study. Although it is interesting and enlightening to untangle Empson's types of ambiguity, *Seven Types* does not provide a toolset or systematic approach for readers to identify and exploit ambiguities in their own analyses of literature. Indeed, *Seven Types* is more useful for the examples in each chapter demonstrating Empson's method of close reading, which picks at the minutiae of literary texts to tease out potential contradictions and confusions that resolve into interesting interpretations. However, to analyze the nuances of ambiguity as a literary tool comprehensively, Empson's types need to be supplemented with additional language concepts found in linguistics and beyond.

**Linguistic Ambiguities**

There is no consensus among linguists on the categorization of different types of ambiguity and there is disagreement over which categories of ambiguity contain subcategories, whether those subcategories should be considered separate categories themselves, and whether certain concepts like vagueness and metaphor can count as types of ambiguity. This thesis does not engage in those disputes and seeks only to describe as many of the distinct concepts of ambiguity that might appear in poetry, so that they can be identified and analyzed for their contribution to the meaning in poems.

Lexical Ambiguity: A lexical ambiguity occurs when there is a word that can have more than one meaning in its context (Baker 241-242, Sennet). For example, in the sentence, "I will go

to the bank," the word bank might refer to a riverbank, an institution where money is kept, or a repository for any number of things, such as a food bank or a seed bank. Many examples of lexical ambiguity involve homonyms, homophones, homographs, and polysemes. Some classifications exclude ambiguities in which the definitions of the word that create the ambiguity require a class change from one part of speech to another (Baker 242). For example, in the sentence, "He saw her duck," it is ambiguous whether someone saw an animal or a person stoop down. However, some classifications do not consider this a lexical ambiguity because the relevant homonyms of "duck" are from different parts of speech—a noun and verb, respectively. Those alternative classifications would place this type of ambiguity in the category of syntactic/structural ambiguity (Oaks 16).

Syntactic/Structural Ambiguity: A syntactic or structural ambiguity occurs when an utterance can have more than one interpretation based on the arrangement of verbal nuances in an utterance, or when it "implies more than one syntactic relationship between constituents within a structure" (Oaks 15). Simple examples include the sentence, "I saw her play," where the word "play" could function as either the verb of engaging in ludic activity, or a staged performance. Another example that does not turn on the class of a particular word would be the phrase, "the chicken is ready to eat," which could mean either that there is a "chicken that is ready to be fed or be fed to someone" (Sennet). Syntactic/structural ambiguity also includes scope ambiguity, like the statement, "everyone in the room speaks a foreign language," which could mean that everyone in the room speaks at least one foreign language, though it may be a different foreign language for each person, or everyone in the room speaks the same specific foreign language (Ehrich 15).

Phonological and Morphological Ambiguities: A phonological ambiguity occurs when word sounds create an ambiguity of meaning. For example, in the joke, "How did the banana know he was ill? / Because he wasn't peeling well," the phonological similarity between "feeling" and "peeling" creates an ambiguity (Sennet). A morphological ambiguity is similar in that it turns on the way an utterance sounds if spoken, but specifically relates to word boundaries (Baker 147). For example, in the joke, "Why couldn't the skeleton go to the ball? / Because he had no body to go with," there is a morphological ambiguity that makes it unclear whether the skeleton had "nobody" or "no body" to go with (Baker 248).

Idiomatic Ambiguity: An idiomatic ambiguity occurs when an utterance could take either the idiomatic or literal meaning of an expression. Take, for example, the riddle, "Why did the schoolboy eat his homework? / Because his teacher said it was a piece of cake" (Baker 253). Here, the punchline exploits the difference between the idiomatic expression "piece of cake," referring to an easy task, and a literal piece of a cake (Baker 253).

Pragmatic Ambiguity: Pragmatic ambiguity occurs when more than one interpretation of an utterance arises from a lack of context rather than the words or structure of the sentence itself. This covers a vast group of ambiguities. Indeed, pragmatics is an entire field of study within linguistics "that investigates relationships between language, its users, and its contexts of use" (Warner 385). Pragmatics, as an academic field, would have been unknown to Empson at the time *Seven Types* was first published, as the scope and name of the field were developed in 1938 (Warner 385). Broadly speaking, pragmatics concerns how context operates to facilitate communication, given indeterminacy, ambiguity, vagueness, and other unclarities of language. However, context can also be a source of ambiguity. An example of pragmatic ambiguity is "speech acts." The idea of speech acts touches on implicature generally and how language

implies meanings outside of literal meanings. Take, for example, a statement that "the cops are coming." That statement "can be an assertion, a warning, or an expression of relief" depending on the context (Sennet). Metaphor, tropes, irony, and parodies, context sensitivity, under-specification, and sense and reference transfer are also considered types of pragmatic ambiguity in certain treatments of the subject (Black 102-123, 153-154). Ambiguous deictic expressions (these, that, this) and pronouns also fall into the category of pragmatic ambiguity when the referent is unclear (Black 4-5).

**Other Ambiguities and Pseudo Ambiguities**

Vagueness: Linguists often distinguish ambiguity from vagueness as separate phenomena in language. Rather than being susceptible to discrete interpretations, something is vague when it is a borderline case or when the borders delineating a category are fuzzy (Sennet). One definition in linguistics is that "an expression is vague if it can be unclear to a speaker informed of all relevant facts whether the expression correctly applies" (Braun 133). For example, it is arguably vague to describe a person as "short," because the borderline of that category is fuzzy. Braun provides the following example: "Imagine a series of patches of color varying continuously from red to pink. A speaker who can see the patches clearly will nevertheless be unsure whether 'red' applies to certain intermediate patches" (Braun 133). For the purposes for literary criticism, these linguistic distinctions are not as important as whether vagueness constitutes an analyzable verbal nuance that allows more than one interpretation of an utterance. If so, it falls within the broad definition of ambiguity used here and offers the same interpretive value as any other ambiguity. As Braun puts it, "vagueness is a lot like ambiguity" because both ambiguous and vague sentences "do not have unique meanings" (Braun 134). Rather than attempt to resolve this taxonomic dispute, this study takes the position that certain instances of vagueness fall within the

working definition of ambiguity here and can meaningfully contribute to the multiplicity of meanings in poetry.

Metaphor*:* Metaphor is a source of contention in linguistics and merits separate treatment here. Although metaphor is Empson's Type 1 ambiguity and was previously mentioned as a type of ambiguity falling within the broader category of pragmatic ambiguity, it is not universally accepted in linguistics that metaphor is a type of ambiguity at all (Kaufer, Empson 41-42). In "Metaphor and its Ties to Ambiguity and Vagueness," Kaufer argues that metaphor does not meet any of the conditions of ambiguity and can be explained more precisely as a form of vagueness. He provides an example where a teacher, chiding a student for poor performance on an exam, tells the student that "your pencil needs sharpening" (Kaufer 212). According to Kaufer, this is not a genuine ambiguity. Indeed, of the two most natural interpretations of that utterance, one is that a literal pencil needs to be sharpened and the other is that the student needs to hone his skills further. Given the context, Kaufer would argue that one would not realistically apprehend the former interpretation (Kaufer 217-218). In other words, the teacher's meaning is not susceptible to multiple *valid* interpretations given the context. However, other examples of metaphor clearly do fall within the working definition of ambiguity. If one were to say that "life is a lottery," multiple interpretation may immediately spring to mind. It could mean that the outcomes in life are subject to chance, that almost everyone loses in life except the few lucky ones, that the hope keeping us going comes from envisioning how we would live if we realized our goals (i.e. figuratively winning the lottery), that one should not take life too seriously, or any number of other possible interpretations. Thus, regardless of the disputes over classifying metaphor in linguistics, it fits within the working definition here and will be among the literary devices examined.

Connotations and emotional reactions: Connotation is described in linguistics as "pragmatic effects that arise from encyclopedic knowledge about its denotation (or reference) and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used" (Allan 1047). The connotation of word choice not only communicates something about the thing referred to, but also about the speaker's characteristics, the speaker's audience, and the tone the speaker wishes to convey (Allan 1048). Even words that are ostensibly neutral have been shown to possess positive and negative connotations (Feng 1774-1775). This thesis draws special attention to connotations and the emotional reactions to language as a separate category of ambiguity. Though pragmatics is concerned with the interpretation of language based on context, one of the focuses of this thesis is that certain words carry different connotations and emotional associations to different readers. In other words, there can be an ambiguity in the sense that a poem may not necessarily convey multiple meanings to the same reader, but there may be multiple interpretations among different readers based on the unique connotations they perceive and emotional responses they have to the language.

*The Problem of Big-Picture Meaning in Poetry*

The preceding section describes different types of ambiguity that typically occur at the level of word or phrase. However, anyone who has read a "difficult" poem will be familiar with the feeling, particularly at the end of a first reading, that the poem's overall meaning eludes them. Indeed, even after dissecting the diction, meter, rhyme, and individual elements of ambiguity, a reader may struggle to identify what the poem means in its entirety. The ambiguity of a poem's overall meaning is also an ambiguity that requires analysis and is one that is unique to literary studies.

Returning to "Oread," the interpretation offered in the introduction of this thesis was that

the poem is a celebration of individual perspective, and therefore of poetic interpretation. But many others have arrived at vastly different interpretations from the twenty-seven words of "Oread." Much of the focus of interpretation of Oread has been on the mixing of natural elements of water and land and the clashing imagery presented (Hay 321; Kita 15-22; O'Connor, *Pushing on Through* 41-45; McKay 41-42). Although arguments can be advanced for the validity of certain interpretations, the interpretation of a poem, much like the interpretation of a particular ambiguity, depends on the individual contexts readers bring to the table—their experiences, prejudices, knowledge, and sentiments. It does no good to tell the Oread she is wrong to interpret the waves as "great pines" because there are no trees in the sea. Her interpretation simply reflects the context of her life. Marsen describes the fluidity of meaning in communication: "It is generally recognized that elective or meaningful communication, and the access to resources that this entails, depends on shared beliefs among members of a community, more than it does on a transcendental, empirical, or universal truth" (Marsen 205). For this reason, ambiguity is a particularly powerful literary tool because it calls upon readers to partake in the creative process of imparting meaning to poetry. This effect will be seen in the Chapter Two, which focuses on close reading of modernist poems.

*The Locus of Meaning*

This study has thus far discussed certain semantic bases for ambiguity that lie in the use of language, such as lexical and syntactic ambiguity. It has also described pragmatics as taking into consideration context, both as a means of resolving ambiguities and as a source of ambiguity. These topics relate to a common issue in linguistics regarding where meaning resides—with the speaker, the reader, or somewhere else. Marsen summarizes the different approaches to the locus of meaning:

> For some, meaning is an inherent property of a perceptible sign—our sensory apparatus allows us to perceive what exists in the mind-independent world. For others, it is attributed to the sign by the perceiver—we see what our minds, ruled by beliefs, expectations and assumptions, and, in more recent approaches, by genetic coding and brain structure, lead us to see. For yet others, meaning is a dynamic and negotiable phenomenon, formed by social factors and contextually situated. (Marsen 204)

These concepts are relevant to the discussion of ambiguity in poetry, particularly where part of the project involves identifying and playing with ambiguities in poems, as in the case of this thesis. Indeed, a common critique of Empson's interpretations in *Seven Types* was that he took certain lines of poetry out of context and then ran wild with his interpretation and that "his readings therefore owed more to his own ingenuity than to the actual texts themselves" (Ossa 7).

Whether the "true meaning" of an ambiguous word, phrase, or poem resides with the poet, the reader, or elsewhere is hardly a settled question in any field of study. This thesis does not presume to the have the answer but accepts as a premise that in the context of poetry, neither the poet nor the reader has exclusive control of meaning. If H.D. rose from the dead and pronounced that the ambiguity of the title "Oread" and the poem itself meant nothing—that she just threw words haphazardly onto the page to confuse readers and generate any kind of reaction, that would do nothing to change the fact that for more than a hundred years, readers have received very specific meaning from it. Such a statement would also have to contend with the fact that signs, whether intended or not, communicate meaning to observers. On the other hand, a reader who insists that "Oread" is a critique of the industrial slaughter of pigs because they associate the word "pines" with "pigs" and "whirl" with "kill," would appear to be deeply

misguided and lack substantial supporting evidence in the text itself.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to disprove speaker-controlled and reader-controlled theories of meaning. Instead, this study will take for granted that the exploration of ambiguities in poetry, taking into consideration the language itself, author intent, and potential interpretations based on context and variable reader perspectives, will produce nuanced interpretations supported by textual and contextual evidence.

## Ambiguity in Modernist Poetry

### *Thematic Currents in Modernism*

Academia has spilled plenty of ink attempting to delineate and define the boundaries of cultural and literary "modernism" (Możejko 11).[3] Despite that, scholars generally talk about "modernism" as a discernable phenomenon and a useful categorization to discuss art from sometime in the second half of the nineteenth through the first half of the twentieth century, but that is roughly where agreement ends (Boyers 209-210, Lewis 1-12, Beebe 1065-1066). This is in part because modernist artists were diverse in their techniques, ideologies, aesthetics, and aims. As summarized in an introductory essay to a compendium of articles on modernism:

> It seems, however, that the difficulties of defining [modernism's] essence, of marking out its territory and chronology reflect in a metaphorical manner the pluralistic nature of art in the twentieth century, which is characterized by an hitherto unprecedented multidirectionality (multidimensionality), and its

[3] Możejko notes the substantial body of research concerning modernism, citing pp. 2-3 of Fokkema, Douwe, and Elrud Ibsch. *Modernist Conjectures: A Mainstream in European Literature 1910–1940*. London: Hurst, 1987.

> ambiguity caused by the progressing disintegration of traditional ethic and aesthetic values. (Możejko)

Despite the difficulties in encapsulating western culture during a century-long period under one "-ism," there are common themes that recur in the analysis of modernism. For example, it is generally accepted that modernist art reacted in part to "modernity," the vast social, economic, and technological changes that began with the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution (Weller 2, Schulte 6). Elements of modernity include:

> rationalism, liberalism, secularization, individualism, and capitalism, the cult of progress … urbanization and industrialization … bureaucratization, revolutionary developments in communications and transport … and ever more powerful technology and technocracy. (Weller 2)

It is only natural that writers during these dramatic changes would be influenced by them in a way that affected their art (Pryor 2). Writing specifically about poets H.D., Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens, Schulze writes that the poets' unique styles were each in their own way "responding to the social and political shifts they felt everywhere around them" (Schulze 768-770). The decline of religion as the moral anchor of society in combination with mechanization and industrialization, created an "age of crisis marked by a shared sense of loss, exile, and alienation" (Beebe 1068). As Bradbury summarizes it in the opening chapter of his seminal collection of essays on modernism:

> [Modernism] is the art consequent on Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty principle', of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of capitalism and constant

> industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity. It is the literature of technology. It is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions. (Bradbury 27)

Another related theme across descriptions of modernism is that the artists' response to the pressures and changes of modernity was to break existing conventions and create new forms and styles of artistic expression (Schulze 770, Miller 1-2, Beebe 1067, Bradbury 26). It is particularly this experimental attitude and concern with upending exiting forms that distinguishes modernist styles from everything that preceded them (Lewis 210).

*Modernism as a Fertile Ground for the Study of Ambiguity as a Literary Tool*

To the extent the paradigmatic changes brought on by modernity inspired artists to experiment with language and question their assumptions and certainties about nearly everything, modernist literature is a particularly interesting subject for the analysis of ambiguity. For example, modernist poets sought to create poetry that was intentionally difficult to read and resisted directly naming the thing referred to (Perloff 330-332). The confusing use of language is itself an opening for all manner of ambiguity. The themes and subject matter of modernist poetry would seem to naturally reflect in language the confusion and unsettled ideas of poets.

Considering Empson's project in *Seven Types*, one might have imagined that he would apply his close reading and analysis of ambiguity to modernist poets, his contemporaries in 1930 when he first published *Seven Types*. However, *Seven Types* excludes any substantial analysis of

modernist poetry, an omission that stood out even at the time. As contemporary literary critic John Crowe Ransom wrote in 1938:

> 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. (Clissold 110)

One of the aims of this thesis is to contribute to the scholarship after *Seven Types*, applying close reading to modernist poetry. In addition to reframing the categories of ambiguity examined, this study capitalizes on the historical context of the poems, written in a time of significant social, economic, cultural, and artistic transition.

Returning a final time to "Oread," the poem's historical context adds yet more layers to its meanings. The modernists, inspired to break from past artistic traditions and create innovative, new art, also repeatedly referenced and alluded to antiquity (Kolocotroni). To take a few notable examples, James Joyce pays direct homage to *The Odyssey* in the title and myriad allusions in *Ulysses* (Norris); Alfred Döblin compares the plight of his protagonist to the tragedy of Orestes and Clytemnestra in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Döblin 87-88, 209); W.H. Auden references Greek mythology in poems like "Calypso" and "The Shield of Achilles," and Pound and Eliot frequently embrace references to antiquity (Kolocotroni 12). Kolocotroni, addressing the modernist nostalgia for antiquity in "Still Life: Modernism's Turn to Greece," writes:

> Woolf goes back to Greece repeatedly in her writing, invariably suggesting that the desire to possess the past is but lack of understanding of the present. "I intend to come to Greece every year so long as I live," Jacob Flanders, the protagonist of

> Jacob's Room, writes to a friend: "It is the only chance I can see of protecting oneself from civilization." (Kolocotroni 12)

H.D. also invokes this connection between modernism and antiquity through an Oread, a character of Greek mythology. By considering the context of "Oread" within the modernist current, the ambiguity of whether the Oread is calling to the sea or the sea to her, conjures the relationship of modernist art to antiquity. Modernists hear the Oread, a symbol of classical art, call to them to mix their innovation into the old, mixing "pines" into "sea." Simultaneously, the modernists, represented by the sea, call back out to antiquity in their own art through reference, allusion, and homage. But even an interpretation of "Oread" that eschews the ambiguity of the poem's title benefits from considering the context of "Oread" as a modernist poem. The image of the sea mixing with the mountain, the crossing of boundaries and melding of landscapes, mirrors the beauty of mixing artistic styles, harmonizing dissonant aesthetics, and finding connection where others see boundaries.

In the following chapter, this thesis applies a close reading to English-language modernist poetry with a focus on identifying various types of ambiguity that create meaning in the poems. This analysis will also highlight in certain poems the ways in which ambiguity resonates with themes and conditions of modernity that the modernists reacted to.

## CHAPTER 2

This chapter identifies different types of ambiguity in a selection of English-language modernist poetry. For each poem presented, this thesis analyzes how that ambiguity contributes to the potential meanings of the poem. The chapter sections are organized by types of ambiguity, but this is not meant to be a strict division since many poems feature more than one type. Shorter poems are reproduced in their entirety within the chapter sections, but all poems are reproduced in the appendix for ease of reference.

### Lexical and Syntactic Ambiguity

*"Morning at the Window" (T.S. Eliot – 1917)*

T.S. Eliot's "Morning at the Window" blends lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic ambiguities that generate layers of meaning in the poem. The action of the poem ostensibly describes a passerby observing housemaids at work in kitchens, preparing for the day ahead. The first stanza of the poem reads:

> They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens,
> And along the trampled edges of the street
> I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
> Sprouting despondently at area gates. (Eliot 22)

The title and first stanza set up several ambiguities that create a dual perspective throughout the poem. In the title, the word "morning" presents a lexical ambiguity with its homonym, "mourning." This initial ambiguity makes it unclear whether the poem will present a neutral perspective, one from fresh eyes at daybreak, or a kind of lamentation. The word "window" in the title can also be read as a metaphor, creating an ambiguity between a literal window and a metaphorical glimpse into a different life. If "morning" is interpreted as "mourning," and the

window is interpreted in its metaphorical sense, there is a further pragmatic (or arguably syntactic) ambiguity as to the operation of the preposition "at." It could mean that one is mourning in the vicinity of, or around, the window or that the mourning is about or concerning the window (e.g. to mourn *at* the loss of a beloved pet).[4] The significance of this interpretation will be more impactful when considered in context with the remainder of the poem and this analysis will return to the title at that time.

Already rich with interpretive possibility, the poem's first line begins with pragmatic and syntactic ambiguities. The first word, "they," presents a pragmatic ambiguity because it is unclear who or what the pronoun refers to, though the end of the third line appears to provide the context that "they" are the housemaids. The role of this ambiguity, which plays a less critical part in the analysis, will be addressed further below. In terms of the syntactic ambiguity, it is unclear whether the verb in the first line is the word "are" or the verbal phrase "are rattling." The more natural reading seems to be the latter, which would mean that the housemaids are manipulating plates, causing a rattling sound. But if the verb is the word "are" on its own, the first line would mean that the housemaids are themselves metaphorically no more than mere objects rattling in the basement kitchen. Thus, in the first line, the housemaids are presented as busily at work in the kitchen and as mere objects for conveying food to their masters and mistresses. The former interpretation is neutral and the latter is condescending and objectifying. It is also significant that

[4] Although the preposition "at" is less commonly used with the verb "to mourn," it is grammatically correct. Citing William Congreve's *The Mourning Bride: A Tragedy*, the Oxford English Dictionary provides the example: "Some Here are who seem to mourn at our Success!" ("Mourn," *OED*, def. 3d).

the reader need not choose between the two. The housemaids can both be making noise with plates as they prepare for the day while also being characterized as lifeless objects that serve others.

The third line presents another syntactic ambiguity in the phrase “damp souls of housemaids.” Here, the words could combine to form one of two compound noun phrases. It could be the case that “damp souls” forms a compound noun and “of housemaids” would then be its prepositional phrase. By this interpretation, the poem would be referring to the housemaid’s souls, as in their spirits or essence. This would fit with the interpretation of the title as kind of mourning for these lifeless people whose souls are “sprouting despondently at area gates” like weeds over a grave. Alternatively, the compound noun phrase could also be construed as “souls of housemaids,” with the meaning that the housemaids are soul-like, as in the construction “he is a mouse of a man,” meaning the man is mouse-like. This interpretation in turn presents different meanings based on the connotative associations with the word “soul.” It could imbue the housemaids with an ethereal, pure, or even angelic aura, or it could conjure an image of tired, emaciated bodies, reduced to nothing but their core. Either way, it presents the housemaids in a more sympathetic light—the suffering and pure—as they emerge from the basement kitchens onto the ground level. There is also another lexical ambiguity in the word “souls,” which is a homonym of “soles,” as in the bottom of feet or shoes. Again, this potentially creates different interpretations of the housemaids as being soul-like or sole-like. The former imbues them with a purity and innocence, while the latter with the association of being rough, dirty, and beaten-down.

These ambiguities in the title and first stanza show a duality of the speaker’s judgment of the housemaids. On one hand, the speaker might mourn the servants busily at work for the

wealthy, confined to damp basements, and figuratively already dead. In this way, the "window" he/she sees them through is an empathetic perspective into the drudgery of their lives. Alternatively, the speaker might view them with detached indifference verging on condescension, looking down (figuratively and literately) on despondent workers who are mere objects designed to serve their employers.

The second stanza, with which the poem concludes, is consistent with either of these two interpretations:

> The brown waves of fog toss up to me
> Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,
> And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
> An aimless smile that hovers in the air
> And vanishes along the level of the roofs. (Eliot 22)

The scene depicted in this stanza reinforces the poem's connection to social class, placing the speaker in a physically higher position than the housemaids who are at the "bottom of the street." Eliot, an American who spent most of his career in England (Cooper 2, 4-15), would have been familiar with the low social status of housemaids on both sides of the Atlantic (Sarti 284-285). From this elevated position, the speaker gets a whiff of the housemaids' condition from the image of their "twisted faces." Depending on the interpretation of ambiguities in the first stanza, the word "twisted" could express disgust at faces deformed from years of hard living or sympathy for faces struggling with hard work. In this way, "twisted" presents a pragmatic ambiguity that depends on the context of the first stanza and the readers' sense of the speaker's judgment of the housemaids.

This poem is susceptible to two vastly different interpretations, each supported by textual

evidence, which are created by a handful of linguistic ambiguities. Importantly, one need not resolve the ambiguities to choose a "correct" interpretation. Rather, the tension between these perspectives may reflect the duality of perspectives that people have regarding those less fortunate or in a lower social position than them. Feeling sympathy for someone might inherently imply condescension because it sets out a relationship in which the sympathizer is in an elevated state compared to the sympathized. Thus, the ambiguity in the poem reflects the complexity of mixed emotions and the difficulty of separating feelings of sympathy and condescension. In this way, the unresolved ambiguity itself may properly reflect the emotional reaction at the heart of the poem.

The duality of perspective embedded in Eliot's poem resonates with the modernist preoccupation with the effects of industrialization and class. It reflects the view that modernity created a "world of ugliness, suffering, and injustice," and the art depicting that condition is powerless to do anything about it and is therefore essentially voyeuristic (Pryor 2). The futility of documenting the plight of the lower class includes a measure of irony because many modernist writers, like Eliot, grew up in wealthy families surrounded by opportunity and comfort (Cooper 2). The modernist "identification" with urban "lowlife was both a political stance and an artistic gesture" from artists who came from a "prosperous bourgeois background" (Samuels 15). Though he ultimately turned down wealth to pursue his artistic aims, Eliot shows self-awareness in this poem by reflecting on his status as a mere voyeur into economic and social inequality. This harkens back to one of the initial ambiguities identified in the title. The word "at" does not mean only that the mourning occurs physically next to the window. Rather, the speaker mourns the window itself as a metaphor for a glimpse into another perspective. It is a kind of mourning

at seeing the housemaids while also being disconnected from them and incapable of helping them.

Of course, Eliot could have simply said all of this in less ambiguous terms if it were in fact what he intended to communicate. But part of the power of ambiguity is that it compresses complex meaning and interpretative potential into just a few words. There is an aesthetic appeal to this conciseness, but in addition, the reader's role in unpacking these ambiguities allows the reader to take part in the creative process of the poem. Like H.D.'s "Oread" creating an image of the sea as waves of pine trees, the ambiguity of a poem gives the reader the power to meld their own impressions and experience onto the words presented by the author.

To review the types of ambiguity at play in "Morning at the Window," there are lexical, semantic, and pragmatic ambiguities that give the poem different layers of meaning that the reader must contend with. The ambiguities explored work together to create different potential perspectives of the speaker. However, there are other ambiguities that seem not to contribute the same level of complexity. For example, the pronoun "they" in the opening line is a pragmatic ambiguity in that its referent is unclear. Although this is largely clarified in the third line with the reference to the "housemaids," one could argue that "they" is still ambiguous. However, it would be up to the interpreter to offer a compelling alternative referent to make this into a meaningful ambiguity that adds to the richness of the poem. In this way, not all ambiguities are created equal and part of the interpretive process is to analyze how far each one can carry the poem.

The types of ambiguity considered here were framed by linguistics terminology, rather than Empson's types. This is in part because these ambiguities do not fit neatly into Empson's categories. The closest Empsonian type is Type Four, where multiple meanings of a statement are contradictory, but the contradictory meanings "combine to make clear a more complicated

state of mind in the author" (Empson 133). However, it is imprecise to say that the ambiguities in "Morning at the Window" are contradictory. As discussed above, the different meanings of the ambiguities are not opposites and complement more than contradict each other. Moreover, the types of ambiguity discussed in this poem do not necessarily reflect the author's state of mind but invite the reader to grapple with the relationship between condescension and sympathy generally. The inadequacy of the Empsonian types to cover all variations of ambiguities will become more apparent in the remainder of this Chapter, as most poems do not fall neatly into his classification of types.

*"Night" (H.D. – 1916)*

Lexical ambiguity plays a similar role in H.D.'s "Night." On its surface, the poem depicts the image of a night chill stripping away layers of petals from a rose, leaving only the "stark core of the rose to perish on the branch" (H.D. 33). The first stanza reads:

> The night has cut
> each from each
> and curled the petals
> back from the stalk
> and under it in crip rows (H.D. 33)

On one hand, a reader might find that the poem is valuable for the aesthetic merit of its imagism alone. However, the subject of the poem also presents a pragmatic ambiguity as to the symbolism of the night and rose. The relationship between a threatening force acting on a delicate life could conjure many different associations in the mind of the reader, depending on their subjective experiences and impressions. For example, the night could represent death which slowly works away at life over time. Such an interpretation resonates with a phrase in the third

stanza, stating that the rose petals curl back "at a grave pace." By this interpretation, "grave" is a pun (i.e. lexical ambiguity) that evokes a sense of death while also describing the slowness of the night's effects on the rose.

Although pragmatics plays a role in deciphering the symbolism of the poem, a lexical ambiguity suggests a specific interpretation of "night" as its homonym, "knight." It may seem at first a stretch to conceive of the poem as literally describing the exploits of a medieval knight because there is no obvious textual evidence to reinforce that connection. However, the knight is historically a symbol of masculinity, and it is in that sense that the interpretation has more validity. In his study on violence and manliness in the poetry of Lord Tennyson, Machann describes the emphasis on the warrior knight as a model of manliness in Arthurian mythology that pervaded the culture of nineteenth century England (208). Meanwhile, in her study on the use of knights in World War I propaganda, Claxon cites a plethora of sources on the significance of knights in stirring cultural associations with masculinity and chivalry that were used to motivate young men to join the war effort in the early twentieth century (2, 4).

Thus, the lexical ambiguity of "night" could be interpreted to direct the focus of the poem onto the notion of masculinity. This interpretation is supported by context and history related to knights as symbols of masculinity, as well as the internal context of the poem. For example, the principal action concerns the relationship between the night and roses. Throughout history and across cultures, flowers have symbolized femininity, women, and female sexuality (Seaton 680; Stott 6; Tyler 83). Combined with the symbolism of the knight, the poem may depict the dynamics or interaction between the sexes. In this way, when the knight "cuts each from each" and the petals of the rose are curled back from their stalk, the poem accentuates the association between the violence of masculinity and the burden they impose on women. This also gives

another layer of meaning to the word “stalk,” used twice in the poem in the first and second stanzas. In both instances, the night/knight cuts back rose leaves and petals from the stalk of the plant. The word “stalk” is lexically ambiguous as well, with its homonym, “stock,” referring to the family that one comes from (“Stock”). Thus, the poem could represent the unsettling way women are wrenched from their birth families by men, leaving behind only the memory of who they were before. As expressed in the poem, the night leaves “the stark core of the rose to perish on the branch” (H.D. 33).

The lexical ambiguity in “Night” is more than just a Type 3 Empsonian pun (Empson, 102) because it directs the interpretation of the entire poem through other key elements, like the symbolic meaning of the rose and the stalk. In this example, one finds an entire interpretive angle that rests on the lexical ambiguity of the word “night.”

Much like the ambiguities of “Morning at the Window,” the ambiguity here does not necessarily need to be resolved. Not knowing what the night and roses symbolize is itself a potentially meaningful tension in the poem. The reader is made aware that the “night” is a threat to vulnerable “roses.” But perhaps a more profound terror comes from not knowing specifically what the threat and targets are. The darkness of night could represent death, the passage of time, the unknown, or masculine domination. Meanwhile, the roses could represent life, innocence, or femininity. Although a reader could settle on one of these interpretations, they could also settle on an overall uneasiness from all the various dangers they see within the ambiguities of the poem’s symbols.

*“O where are you going?” (W.H. Auden – 1931)*

Eliot’s “Morning at the Window” and H.D.’s “Night” are examples in which multiple ambiguities combine to create pervasive tension in the poems. However, lexical ambiguities are

not necessarily so comprehensive and can also function to add subtle nuance to a poem or suggest one of multiple interpretations without creating any overarching ambiguity. For example, Empson's Type 3 ambiguities concern puns in which both meanings are relevant in the context of the literary work (Empson, 102). We can see this at work in W.H. Auden's "O where are you going?" The first stanza reads:

> "O where are you going?" said reader to rider,
>
> "That valley is fatal where furnaces burn,
>
> Yonder's the midden whose odours will madden,
>
> That gap is the grave where the tall return." (Auden 21)

Here, the person posing the question is the "reader" speaking to the "rider." The second and third stanzas pose similar questions, first from "fearer" to "farer" and then from "horror to hearer." The pattern of the stanzas presents a timorous speaker posing questions that signal potential dangers to someone willing to venture beyond a place of safety. In the fourth stanza, the addressee of each of the prior stanzas responds:

> "Out of this house"—said rider to reader
>
> "Yours never will"—said farer to fearer
>
> "They're looking for you"—said hearer to horror
>
> As he left them there, as he left them there. (Auden 22)

One of the critical tensions of this poem is the pragmatic ambiguity of who the referents are. To the extent the poem is a defense of pushing boundaries and conventions generally, the addressees of the first three stanzas could refer to explorers, people who break social conventions, or anyone who takes a risk. However, a subtle lexical ambiguity in the first line suggests one interpretive direction over others. Specifically, the word "rider" is a homonym of "writer" (this could also be

categorized as a phonological ambiguity depending on the pronunciation of the two words). A Type 3 Empsonian ambiguity, this operates as a pun in which both meanings of the homonym are relevant to the interpretation of the work as a whole. The speaker in that line is the "reader." Paired with a "rider" as the addressee, it juxtaposes a person who passively observes (the reader) versus one who ventures out to experience things firsthand (the rider). However, paired with "writer" as the addressee, it juxtaposes the reader and writer of poetry, the latter pushing the boundaries of art, culture, and social convention. Both interpretations fit the poem overall, with "rider" being general and figurative and "writer" being specific and literal.

**Pragmatic Ambiguity: Deictic Words and Ambiguous Referents**

*"along the brittle treacherous bright streets" (E.E. Cummings – 1926)*

A frequently used pragmatic ambiguity in modernist poetry is the deictic word for which it is unclear what it refers to. The most common instances of this involve deictic pronouns (e.g. I, we, you, he, she, it, they), spatial deixis (e.g. here, there), discourse deixis (e.g. this, that), and temporal deixis (e.g. now, then, yesterday). This tactic calls upon the reader to sort out what the referred to thing or person is based on the context of the poem, though the clues are often scarce, forcing the reader into the uncomfortable position of having to speculate what the referent is. In some poems, this ambiguity also invites the reader to then analyze the relationship among the different possibilities of what the deictic word refers to.

An example of this type of pragmatic ambiguity can be found in E.E. Cummings' poem "along the brittle treacherous bright streets." The poem reads:

along the brittle treacherous bright streets
of memory comes my heart,singing like
an idiot,whispering like a drunken man

who(at a certain corner,suddenly)meets

the tall policeman of my mind.

awake

being not asleep,elsewhere our dreams began

which now are folded:but the year completes

his life as a forgotten prisoner

—"Ici?"—"Ah non,mon chéri;il fait trop froid"—

they are gone:along these gardens moves a wind bringing

rain and leaves,filling the air with fear

and sweetness....pauses. (Halfwhispering....halfsinging

stirs the always smiling chevaux de bois)

when you were in Paris we met here (Cummings 66)[5]

This poem is packed with aesthetically charged imagery, symbolism, and metaphor. The description of the "brittle treacherous bright streets of memory" beckons the reader to analyze the image of the "streets of memory" and to consider the ways in which memory is "brittle," "treacherous," and "bright." Mixed into the densely symbolic images of the poem is a pragmatic ambiguity that generates multiple potential meanings and has particular significance to the poem's overall meaning. Specifically, the poem ends with the deictic word "here," whose signified place is ambiguous. Importantly, an ambiguity like this one is subtle and on a first

[5] The various errors in spacing and punctuation presented in this poem are errors in the original, reproduced here.

reading might not draw much attention to itself, especially because the rest of the poem is filled with flashier symbolism and images for the reader to dissect. However, once the initial shock of the poem's obscurity settles in, the critical role of these deictic words becomes clearer. Indeed, all the rest of the poem can be interpreted as creating the backdrop for the speaker's meeting with an unspecified "you," at the unspecified location "here," both introduced only in the final line of the poem.

Focusing on the ambiguous word "here," there are at least three interpretations of its referent that fit within the context of the poem. The first location cited in the poem is the "streets of memory" in the first stanza. Within that, there is the place where the heart first appears, "singing like an idiot," and the spot where the heart meets "the tall policeman of my mind." For this analysis, the streets of memory will be treated as one location, although one could also break it down further. The second location in the poem is where "dreams" begin. This location is introduced as "elsewhere," making clear that it is distinct from the streets of memory. The third location of the poem is "these gardens," in which there "moves a wind bringing rain and leaves,filling [sic] the air with fear and sweetness."

Turning back to the final line of the poem ("when you were in Paris we met here"), the reader can now assess with these three locations in mind, whether any one is the referent to the deictic word, "here." For example, "here" could refer to the streets of memory. To meet someone on the streets of memory poetically expresses that they are remembered and that moments spent with them are repeatedly relived in the mind. There is a sentimental gloss to that interpretation because the poem references the "corner" among the streets of memory where the carefree heart meets the "policeman" of the mind. Incorporating that description, the speaker might reflect on how their rationality limits the sentimental inclinations of their heart. The speaker's emotional

side may think fondly of the past and romanticize it, while the rational mind acts as a counterweight of realism and cynicism. The interpretation of "here" referring to memory might seem initially counterintuitive because the speaker would then be saying that when they were in Paris together, their meeting was already a memory. But one generally thinks of memory as something experienced in the present about an action that took place in the past. It is almost paradoxical to talk about memories of the present. That said, it is poetically meaningful to conceive of the present as part of memory, recognizing that our experiences are immediately and constantly being converted into memory as they occur. In this way, experience and memory are intertwined, and every moment the speaker and "you" passed together in Paris was simultaneously experienced and transformed into memory.

The second location of the poem is in dreams, another potential referent of "here." As opposed to memory, dreams can be forward looking. For example, one dreams of the future or an idealized state that does not exist yet. There is an incongruence of this interpretation that is like that of the interpretation of "here" as memory. When the speaker met "you" in Paris, they ostensibly met there in person, not in a dream. But again, on a poetic level, even as the speaker met with "you," he/she could have simultaneously been filled with future-oriented thoughts—dreams, hopes, and desires related to that meeting and the unspecified "you."

The third location is a literal garden where there is a "chevaux de bois" (literally "horses of wood" in French, but also meaning a "merry-go-round") with the wooden horses "always smiling." This location is the last one mentioned before the speaker states that "we met here," which supports an interpretation of the garden as the referent. Indeed, because the deictic word "here" typically refers to a physical place, this interpretation is the most natural. It also evokes a heartfelt sentimentality, as the speaker reflects on a past interaction, looking upon the same place

where they shared a memory with another person and remarking on the significance of the location. It also seems the most natural fit with the dialogue in French between two speakers. Translated into English, the first says, "—Here?" to which the second responds, "—Oh no,my dear;it [sic] is too cold." This exchange is followed immediately by the introduction of the physical gardens. A natural interpretation of "here," is that it is the same place referred to by "ici" ("here" in French)—in other words, the garden.

The textual evidence of the poem does not definitely resolve what the referent to "here" is, but that persistent ambiguity is itself potentially meaningful. The uncertainty of "here" may reflect that whenever people meet, they meet in all three places of the poem: in memories that are being formed even as events unfold, in dreams and aspirations for those interactions, and at the physical place. This interpretation of "here" plays on the pragmatic ambiguity of what it refers to, alluding to the multiplicity of planes on which we connect with others. Thus, the combination of possible meanings is doing significant work, just as in Empson's Type 4 ambiguity. This interpretation is further supported by the imagery in the physical place in the poem, which evokes elements of memory and dreams in its description, mirroring the union among those places as the combined referent of "here." Specifically, a merry-go-round, such as the one depicted in the gardens, is a dreamlike object. In the poem it is "halfwhispering" and "halfsinging," and merry-go-rounds are generally adorned with bright lights, colors, and a disorienting spin. It also evokes the notion of memory, as the horses come around to the same point over and again, as one does when ruminating on an experience.

"Along the brittle treacherous bright streets" is a prime example of how pragmatic ambiguity invites the reader to participate in the creative process of the poem by exploring the possible referents of deictic words. Part of the nature of ambiguity is that often there is no

objectively correct interpretation, only multiple valid interpretations supportable with textual evidence. Indeed, even if Cummings had a particular idea in mind about what "here" referred to, by leaving that term sufficiently ambiguous, he ceded some of the control over the poem's meaning to his readers.

*"who sharpens every dull" (E.E. Cummings – 1950)*

"Who sharpens every dull," presents a different kind of pragmatic ambiguity of referent than "along the brittle treacherous bright streets." Rather than a deictic word at the root of the ambiguity, the poem's subject is introduced as "the only man" (Cummings 4). The verses describe what the man does in phrases charged with symbolic meaning. For example, he "sharpens every dull [life]," "[reminds] with his bell to disappear a sun," "sharpens is to am," "sharpens say to sing," "sharpens wrong [to right]" and "[reminds] with his bell to reappear a moon" (Cummings 4-5). These phrases, along with other passages of the poem, provide context for who the man is, but his identity ultimately remains ambiguous because the information is insufficient to narrow it down to a definite single answer.

Unlike in the poem "Along the brittle treacherous bright streets," the ambiguity in this poem is not subtle. The poem's opening line challenges the reader to guess whom it is referring to, while the rest of the poem is practically a riddle in the way it provides vague descriptions rather than just saying who it is. The first stanza reads:

> who sharpens every dull
> here comes the only man
> reminding with his bell
> to disappear a sun (Cummings 4)

The identity of the poem's subject is a focal point from the very first line, which asks "who" the man is. The first line also ends on an incomplete adjectival phrase that forces the reader to ask, "every dull *what*?" The omitted word introduces a pragmatic ambiguity that can only be resolved with context provided in the poem. That context indicates that the omitted noun in the first line is "life." This interpretation is supported by the second, fourth, and fifth stanzas. The second reads:

> and out of houses pour
> maids mothers widows wives
> bringing this visitor
> their very oldest *lives* (Cummings 4, emphasis added)

In this stanza, women bring the man their "very oldest lives" to sharpen, which happens in the fourth and fifth stanzas:

> he sharpens is to am
> he sharpens say to sing
> you'd almost cut your thumb
> so right he sharpens wrong
>
> and when their *lives* are keen
> he throws the world a kiss
> and slings his wheel upon
> his back and off he goes (Cummings 5, emphasis added)

Thus, women bring the man their lives, which he "sharpens" and "makes keen" with a figurative grinding wheel. Thus, with respect to the omitted noun in the first line of the poem, the pragmatic ambiguity is resolved with context. However, by omitting the word in the first line and then supplying the resolving context in the subsequent stanzas, Cummings lets the reader know

that this is a poem that requires the reader to fill in certain blanks and that he will provide textual evidence to work with.

The key features of the man that the reader must square with their interpretation of his identity is that he sharpens the old, dull lives of women. Several candidates might fit this criterion, including artists/entertainers, religious figures, or Casanova-like seducers. The reader can compare these and other different options against the poetic descriptions of the man that generate different potential meanings depending on his identity. For example, the lines "he sharpens is to am / he sharpens say to sing," fits with an interpretation of the man as a poet or artist. By this interpretation, the artist offers a perspective on life that shows the audience the value of asserting personal agency. In this way, the artist transforms the third-person verb "is" to the first-person verb "am." He also transforms mere words into song, introducing artistry to interrupt the mundane. Thus, instead of merely saying things, the artist shows people how to rejoice in song.

Other lines might seem to some readers to align more closely with other potential identities of the man. For example, the description is consistent with a messianic figure, with the power to dismiss the sun and summon the moon (Cummings 4-5). Notably, in the fourth stanza, the poem reads, "you'd almost cut your thumb / so right he sharpens wrong" (Cummings 5). These lines carry a moral implication that fits with the interpretation of a religious figure who sharpens life by showing people how to live righteously. However, this same line could also be interpreted to support an interpterion of the man as a seducer of women. By this interpretation, he does not bring moral righteousness, but instead sexual liberty. Sexual freedom is regarded in many religious traditions as a moral wrong, but the man in the poem makes that moral wrong feel right or irresistible. Indeed, that interpretation fits more squarely with the warning of the

exciting danger of sexual liberty, such that “you’d almost cut your thumb” on the edge that the man changed from “wrong” to “right”.

In any of these interpretations, the reader must contend with the fact that only women, “maids mothers widows wives,” bring their dull lives to the man. This fits with the interpretation of the man as a seducer of women but also potentially with the notion that women are the ones most open to receiving poetry, art, and religious salvation. There is a certain chauvinistic undertone to that interpretation, but that does not make it less valid in reading the poem—a poem, like any other communication, can be chauvinistic. The imagery of the man reminding with a bell “to disappear a sun” and “to reappear a moon” in the first and sixth stanzas can also fit with multiple interpretations of the man’s identity. The power to move of celestial bodies and push time forward fits with an interpretation of the man as messianic. However, it may also suggest that he comes by in the night, as a seducer might. Or it may allude to the fact that artists take reality and reflect it back to us as artistic interpretation, just as the moon does not create its own light but instead reflects the light of the sun. By this interpretation, the poet takes reality (the sun) away for a moment to show us an artistic representation of it (the moon) that reflects reality.

Of course, Cummings could have replaced the words “the only man” with specific identifiers and labels for the subject. However, just like the omission of the word “life” in the first line, by omitting that information, he invites the reader to fill in the proverbial blank for themselves. For example, a reader, by the context of their personal experiences, might find no credibility to the notion that a religious savior can sharpen a dull life, while another might find it especially convincing because they have undergone a spiritual awakening of their own. By allowing each reader to arrive at an interpretation through their own reflections, the poem’s meaning becomes personalized. In this way, the ambiguity in the poem functions as a medium of

self-discovery in the sense that it prompts the reader to examine who fulfills the role of "the man" (or *could* fulfill that role) in the context of their own life.

*"The Road Not Taken" (Robert Frost – 1916)*

Robert Frost's 1916 poem, "The Road Not Taken," is one of the most celebrated American poems of the twentieth century (Wilcox 1, 210-211). There is no shortage of interpretations of its twenty lines and this study does not pretend to offer a novel one. However, the iconic poem makes its way into this study to highlight an important pragmatic ambiguity on which certain interpretations turn. If "who sharpens every dull" presents a blatant challenge for readers to unpack the ambiguous referent, "The Road Not Taken" sits at the opposite extreme, presenting a poem that practically hides its ambiguity from detection on a first reading. In the concluding stanza, the poem reads:

> I shall be telling this with a sigh
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
> I took the one less traveled by,
> And that has made all the difference. (Frost 105)

In the action of the poem, the speaker describes coming to a split in the road. The speaker looks down one road, "Then took the other, as just as fair, / And having perhaps the better claim, / Because it was grassy and wanted wear" (Frost 105). This is consistent with the speaker's claim in the concluding stanza that he "took the one less traveled by." Read this way, the poem is often interpreted as a celebration of choosing one's own path in life that differs from the stereotypical or archetypical life trajectory. Of course, equating the choice of roads to choices in life is itself a metaphor—a kind of ambiguity—but one that does not require much work to unpack. However,

a closer reading of the poem reveals that it is in fact ambiguous which road the speaker traveled. Immediately after asserting that they took the path that "was grassy and wanted wear," they add "Though as for that, the passing there / Had worn them really about the same, // And both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black" (Frost 105). If the roads were indistinguishable in terms of the wear on them, it makes it ambiguous which was "the one less traveled by."

This ambiguity gives rise then to suspicion of the speaker's reliability. Their claim is that they will tell others in the future that they took the road less traveled. But knowing that is not true, it invites the reader to explore why the speaker would tell this falsehood. In the future, they might want to present themselves as the kind of person who took adventurous decisions in life and did not live in a boring or predictable way, even if that is not true. Another potential interpretation is that they are aware that they have the tendency to romanticize their own life and they will remember the choices they made in a self-aggrandizing light. In this way, they would not be lying but would simply inaccurately recall what they did in a way that portrays them more heroically than they were. It would be somewhat odd for the speaker to be self-aware that in the future they will misremember which road they took, but it would also be odd for them to admit that they will lie about it in the future. In this way, the poem is partly a commentary on the way people reflect on and describe their past choices. Either by editorializing the past or lying about it, people also have a way of dramatizing the significance of their past decisions. Hence, the speaker tells their future audience about their choice with a dramatic "sigh," they pause with an hyphen for dramatic effect when telling their story ("and I— / I took the one less traveled by"), and they proclaim that their choice "has made all the difference," when really the two roads they chose between "equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black."

The ambiguity of which road the speaker refers to with the phrase, “the one less traveled by,” is resolvable within the context of the poem, as it apparently refers to whichever road the speaker ultimately took. However, what makes it initially ambiguous to the reader is that the road the speaker took does not correspond with the label he uses to describe it, as both roads referenced are similarly traveled. Only by circling back to the earlier stanzas and the descriptions of the two roads can the reader dissect this ambiguity. In doing so, it becomes apparent that the poem is more an examination of how choices are remembered or retold than about the choices themselves. Notably, “The Road Not Taken” provides an example of a particularly subtle ambiguity. If the reader simply takes the speaker’s word for granted and does not scrutinize their assertion that they took the road less traveled by, the ambiguity could be overlooked. It is the process of ruminating over the referent of that phrase that the reader begins to unpack layers of additional interpretations of the poem.

**Pragmatic Ambiguity: Insinuation, Irony, and Sarcasm**

A broad category of practical ambiguity occurs when a speaker’s feelings, opinions, or mood do not match or sometimes even contradict the literal meaning of the words uttered. This type of ambiguity can be described as insinuation, irony, or sarcasm, depending on the context in which it arises. Because the mood created by the words contrasts with their literal meaning, this kind of ambiguity is particularly susceptible to varying interpretations depending on the reader. In oral communication, intonation, accents, gesticulation, facial expressions, and other cues can be used to convey whether a phrase is meant sarcastically. Even then, it is not unusual for a speaker’s sarcasm to be missed by a listener depending on how attuned the listener is to sarcasm and how clearly the speaker signals their conflicting meanings with other communicative tools. When reading poetry (as opposed to hearing it), there are no oral linguistic tools available to the

poet, introducing a unique challenge to tease out these subtle contradictory meanings. The following examples show instances of where this pragmatic ambiguity adds layers of meaning to modernist poems.

*"England" (Marianne Moore – 1920)*

Marianne Moore's poem, "England" has been interpreted as a defense of America's perceived lack of culture vis-à-vis the Old World (Slatin 287-88, Gregory 212-13). The poem juxtaposes various features of Old-World culture against the plainness of Americana. However, even in these depictions, the poem subtly betrays a critique of supposed high culture and a celebration of American plainness. The opening stanza begins:

> England
> with its baby rivers and little towns, each with its abbey or its cathedral,
> with voices—one voice perhaps, echoing through the transept—the
> criterion of suitability and convenience … (Moore 55)

In Slatin's study of Moore's poetry and its historical context, he observes that these lines allude to Henry James's list of civilized features of the Old World that are lacking in America. Quoting James, Slatin lists these purportedly absent features:

> No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools-Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class-no Epsom nor Ascot! (Slatin 288, quoting James 42-43)

In “England,” Moore acknowledges the absence of these features in America while subtly casting doubt on the value of them. For example, in the opening stanza, Moore’s characterization of England’s rivers as “baby rivers” and of its towns as “little towns” has an ambiguous insinuation. The descriptors could be perceived as terms of endearment, but they might alternatively add a diminutive, patronizing tone to the depiction of the supposedly erudite Old World. Instead of listing stereotypically refined features, such as great universities, museums, or political society (features from James’s list), Moore highlights unimpressive features (i.e. rivers and towns) and creates tension with ambiguous adjectives. Thus, from the start of the poem, Moore uses this pragmatic ambiguity to bring into question the superiority of the Old World.

The features from James’s list that make it into Moore’s description of England are abbeys and cathedrals. However, in describing them, Moore writes that there are “voices—one voice perhaps, echoing through the transept” (Moore 55). It is pragmatically ambiguous whose “voices” or “one voice” Moore refers to here. A positive interpretation could be that the many voices of the people share a common voice in the church—a unified and superior moral voice guided by religious inspiration. However, it could also refer to the stifling pressure of a “cultured” society to conform to received wisdom and customs. The one voice could represent a hive mentality that comes from a society that believes it has the right answers to the complexities of life. This ambiguity of referent matches the ambiguous irony that could act either as praise or critique of England.

Moore continues with these ambiguous descriptions of other Old-World countries throughout the poem. She describes Italy as “contriving an epicureanism from which the grossness has been // extracted” (Moore 55). Here, a lexical ambiguity combines with pragmatic ambiguity, obfuscating whether this is a positive or negative description of Italy. “Grossness”

could mean the vulgarity and commonness from an uncultured society ("Gross," *OED*, def. IV.20). In this sense, the extraction of grossness from Italy would be a positive description. However, "gross" can also mean "considering or including the main features or elements of something" ("Gross," *OED*, def. III.11). Thus, Moore might be commenting that by extracting the vulgar and common, one also extracts its main features and elements—the heart and soul of a place—its humanness and its relatability. In addition, Moore describes Italy's epicureanism as being contrived, which also bears the double meaning, "to invent…with ingenuity," but also "to make up, concoct, fabricate…" ("Contrive," *OED*, defs. 1 and 5). Thus, Moore portrays Italy as either a sophisticated invention of refinement or an overly manufactured society lacking real substance. These lexical ambiguities, in turn, add to an overall context within the poem that might influence the reader's interpretation of "baby rivers" and "little towns" as either complimentary or condescending.

Moore continues this combination of praise and critique of the Old World with Greece, which she describes as "the nest of modified illusions" (Moore 55). Like the descriptor for England, this phrase can be read either positively or negatively. Ancient Greek philosophy, math, science, and mythology can be seen as a starting point of Western intellectualism, culture, and art. In this sense, it is a figurative nest where abstract concepts—the "modified illusions"—were born. On the other hand, the descriptor also insinuates mockery of high culture for lacking genuineness. Specifically, the term "modified" might evoke the sense of something pure being polluted and "illusions" unfavorably imply fakeness.

Moore's descriptions of France and "the East," are less ambiguous in that they appear more one-dimensionally critical of these places. Moore describes France as: "the 'chrysalis of the nocturnal butterfly', in / whose products mystery of construction diverts one from what was

originally one's / object—substance at the core" (Moore 55). A diversion from "substance at the core" appears to be purely critical, particularly because it attacks the same point made against Italy and Greece. Specifically, in each there is a sense that something artificial distracts from the genuine. Similarly, the description of "the East," with "its emotional shorthand," and "imperturbability" attacks the veneer of sophistication and culture that comes at the expense of raw emotion and true feelings (Moore 55). Though none of the descriptions of the Old World are a scathing attack, taken together, there is an ambiguity between the admiration of its sophistication, mixed with a critique that it is removed from the rawness of vulgar human experience.

Moore then compares the Old World with America:

> where cigars are smoked on the / street … there are no proof-readers … no digressions … the wild man's land; grassless, linksless, languageless country in which letters are written … in plain American which cats and dogs can read!" (Moore 55)

This description offers contrasting impressions from those that Moore created about the Old World. The country is less refined, but this is not necessarily portrayed as a negative quality. There are no "digressions" in the way that France "diverts" from substance at the core. And people speak without sophistication, but with an animal plainness that evokes a feeling of genuineness and honesty.

The middle part of the poem challenges the negative evaluation of America vis-à-vis the Old World. Specifically, Moore questions why these differences should cause "continents of misapprehension" (Moore 56). She posits that "[t]o have misapprehended the matter is to have confessed / that one has not looked far enough" (Moore 56). Thus, the structure of the poem up

to this point presents ambiguous descriptions of the Old World. However, the overall impression leans negative, in part because the descriptions of France and "the East" are lumped in with the rest of the Old World and are more unambiguously critical. It then contrasts the plainness of America with the Old World and argues that one should not come to conclusions based on these differences. This general mood, subtly created by ambiguities, might be the reason why the poem is often interpreted as a defense of America against its perceived cultural inferiority to the Old World (Slatin 287-88, Gregory 212-13). However, the end of the poem introduces additional ambiguity, bringing that interpretation into doubt. The poem concludes: "the flower and fruit of all that noted superi- / ority—should one not have stumbled upon it in America, must one imagine / that it is not there? It has never been confined to one locality" (Moore 56). On one hand, this ending contributes to the defense of America because it argues that the superiority of the Old World can be found in America as well. However, if prior to these concluding lines the poem is interpreted as a critique of Old-World sophistication and praise of the plainness and authenticity of America, the ending clashes with that interpretation. For all the critiques of the Old World, the speaker appears to be saying at the end that America can be civilized because we might one day find the Old-World sophistication in America as well. This is an ambiguous signal that the speaker in fact admires and envies the Old World, and criticized it only out of defensiveness, revealing an inferiority complex. In other words, the speaker might have initially critiqued the Old World only because America could not live up to the Old World's enviable standard of sophistication and the speaker did not want to acknowledge America's inferiority.

The tension in the speaker's characterization of America and the Old-World and the ambiguity of which qualities they admire lies at the crux of the poem. If the poem were intended as a defense of American plainness, the speaker should not claim one of its merits is that we

could discover Old-World sophistication there later. And if the poem were intended as a defense of America's potential to be a site of Old-World culture in the future, it makes no sense to have mocked Old-World sophistication in the opening stanzas of the poem. This contradiction of feeling may fall into Empson's Type 7 ambiguity: The "meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind" (Empson 192). In other words, the ambiguity with which the speaker describes the Old World reflects their inner conflict of opinion, whether America is better off being the opposite of the Old World or aspiring to become more like it. This duality is reflected also in the way the poem abruptly splits the word "superi- / ority" in the final stanza. The unnatural fracture of the word by a hyphen and line break resonates with the ambiguity of whether the speaker admires or mocks the supposed superiority of the Old World. By questioning what it means to be culturally superior, the poem literally and figuratively breaks the word.

*"A Few Rules for Beginners" (Katherine Mansfield – 1923)*

The previous section discusses Moore's "England," which presents an exceptionally complex example of pragmatic ambiguity with layers of sarcasm, irony, and the development of a mood in tension with the literal meaning of the words. However, the type of pragmatic ambiguity discussed in this section does not always generate that level of complexity. Katherine Mansfield's 1923 poem, "A Few Rules for Beginners," is an example of a poem in which the language itself is straightforward, but whose potential meanings reside in its subtle implications and insinuations, as interpreted by each reader. The poem reads:

Babies must not eat the coal

And they must not make grimaces,

Nor in party dresses roll

And must never black their faces.

They must learn that pointing's rude,

They must sit quite still at table,

And must always eat the food

Put before them—if they're able.

If they fall, they must not cry,

Though it's known how painful this is;

No—there's always Mother by

Who will comfort them with kisses. (Kimber 48)

On a first reading, there does not appear to be significant ambiguity in the language of the poem. In simple phrases, it sets out a few common rules or guidelines for babies. However, much of the poem's work happens at the level of implication and context. Here, the perspective and experience that each reader brings to the poem has particular importance. For example, there is nothing objectively concerning about the opening rule: "Babies must not eat the coal." But the rule is so absurdly obvious that it might lead the reader to many different conclusions about the speaker and the poem. The obviousness of the statement implies that the speaker might not be well acquainted with child-rearing and therefore they might be unfit to offer any rules or advice. This is followed by an equally questionable rule: "And they must not make grimaces." This rule is equally absurd but for a different reason. While it is obvious that a baby should not eat coal because it would poison them, it is not possible to prevent a baby from grimacing, crying, or

otherwise expressing their displeasure or discomfort. Indeed, unable to speak, a sour facial expression is an essential communicative tool for a baby to let its caretaker know that something is wrong. Moreover, the rule has a strong implication of parents needing to control the emotional reactions of children, which is questionable advice. The absurdity of these first two lines of the poem, considered together and with basic knowledge of child-rearing, might lead a reader to suspect the poem has a measure of irony or sarcasm to it. It invites suspicion that there is something off about the advice of the poem and the reliability of the speaker.

The second stanza adds additional rules that suggest a stifling environment for a baby—they must not point, they must sit still, and they must eat whatever food is put before them. Although these are not objectively bad rules, they reveal an indifference to the needs of the baby and a concern for the caretaker's comfort. Babies point at what they want because they cannot otherwise communicate, they move their bodies when they are uncomfortable, and they have food preferences. Thus, these rules are not in the babies' interest, but rather that of the caretaker, who would not need to respond to what the baby asks for by pointing or prepare different food that the baby likes. How each reader internalizes the rules depends on their personal experiences. Some might agree with these rules, others might consider them the epitome of bad parenting, while others might see the poem as mocking conventional advice for new parents. Thus, the pragmatic ambiguity arises from the differences in reader perceptions, as opposed to something intrinsic to the language itself.

By the time the reader makes it to the third stanza, they may have a variety of different attitudes toward the speaker and varying levels of skepticism about the rules being offered. The last stanza's call for babies not to cry even when they are in pain is a continuation of the pattern in the first two stanzas, where the rule is to repress the emotional reaction of the babies to spare

the caretaker from inconvenience. However, the final couplet breaks from this pattern and provides that the reason babies should not cry is because their mothers will be there to kiss them. This too is susceptible to different interpretations, based on the reader's perceptions, prejudices, and evaluations of the speaker up to the final couplet. A reader who had interpreted the prior lines of the poem as sarcastic could incorporate the final couplet into that interpretation—making the flippant solution of kissing the baby absurd given the callous rules for babies previously espoused. Alternatively, a reader who interprets the rest of the poem as simply bad advice for new parents might be negatively disposed to the speaker's advice by the time they get to the final couplet. Seen from this perspective, assuring babies with kisses when the rules of their lives are so constricting might seem to be more bad advice. A kiss arguably does little when the rules of life are oppressive. Yet another reader might interpret the poem as a lighthearted reflection on childrearing and consider the final couplet as appropriately trivializing the minor pains of infancy. Importantly, the poem does not give the reader any direction on how they are to read the poem—it offers no "rules for beginners" on interpreting poetry. It leaves itself open to interpretation based on the different experiences of each reader and is thereby focusing the pragmatic ambiguity on the readers' personal contexts rather than context around the poem itself.

*"Aunt Helen" (T.S. Eliot – 1917)*

Whereas "A Few Rules for Beginners" highlights the way in which the personal context of a reader's life and experience may influence the interpretation of a poem, the pragmatic ambiguity in Eliot's "Aunt Helen" arises more from the context within the poem itself. The effect of this is that the poem insinuates a particular meaning without directly stating it. The poem reads:

Miss Helen Slingsby was my maiden aunt,

And lived in a small house near a fashionable square

Cared for by servants to the number of four.

Now when she died there was silence in heaven

And silence at her end of the street.

The shutters were drawn and the undertaker wiped his feet—

He was aware that this sort of thing had occurred before.

The dogs were handsomely provided for,

But shortly afterwards the parrot died too.

The Dresden clock continued ticking on the mantelpiece,

And the footman sat upon the dining-table

Holding the second housemaid on his knees—

Who had always been so careful while her mistress lived. (Eliot 24)

Many lines of the poem have clear literal meanings but their effect is apparent from the context of the poem. For example, the fifth line informs the reader that upon the death of Helen, there was "silence at the end of the street." The implication of the line is ambiguous as to whether the street was silent because people were mourning or whether no one said a word because they did not care that Helen died and no one attended her wake. The context of the poem does not definitively resolve this ambiguity but there are clues from which a reader might draw conclusions. For example, the poem provides the information that Helen was a "maiden." This implies a life of relative solitude and explains why she had no surviving spouse to mourn her. It also reveals that she provided for her dogs in her will, but it mentions no one else as a beneficiary, implying that she did not have any close human connections. In addition, the footman and housemaid are in her home, but rather than mourning, they are engaged in intimacy

that they would have been careful to avoid when Helen lived. This insinuates that Helen was a strict mistress who frowned upon intimate relationships among her servants. The fact that the footman and housemaid are not mourning, along with the information about how Helen oversaw her employees, implies that the silence on her street is because no one missed her, not because they were silently mourning.

Although it may be said of many poems that each of their lines relies on the others for context, in "Aunt Helen," many of the lines ambiguously insinuate something about Helen without saying it outright and the accumulation of these insinuations has the effect of directing the reader to a potential interpretation of each. In addition to lines already discussed, the poem states that she "lived in a small house near a fashionable square." The detail that her house was small implies that she did not have children or family around her. The fact that "[t]he Dresden clock continued ticking on the mantlepiece," insinuates that everything in the home continued no differently than when she was alive, highlighting again that nobody mourned her death. Again, any one of the lines in the poem alone is ambiguous regarding the life of Helen, but the internal context of the poem as a whole insinuates the meaning of each.

**Pragmatic Ambiguity: Imagery and Symbolism**

Imagery and symbolism are literary tools that work at distinct levels from ambiguity. Symbols forge connections between objects or concepts, creating aesthetic, socio-political, philosophical, and ideological meanings. Meanwhile, imagery offers an aesthetic value apart from any analytical connections or meanings. However, pragmatic ambiguity plays a role in generating meaning and value in these literary devices because a reader's personal experiences, their perspective, and the connotations and associations they draw from words shapes how they might interpret the poetry. The ambiguity that arises from these unique perspectives and

connections that readers bring to the text is a kind of pragmatic ambiguity.

*"Sea Poppies" (H.D. – 1916)*

In "Sea Poppies," H.D. describes yellow poppies on a beach by the sea. Although the imagery itself offers aesthetic value, the poem is also pragmatically ambiguous with respect to the symbolism and metaphor that the poppies convey. Published in 1916, in the middle of the First World War, the poem was preceded in 1915 by Major John McCrae's poem, "In Flanders' Fields," which also featured poppies. In its opening couplet, McCrae's poem reads: "In Flanders fields, the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row" (McCrae). McCrae, an Allied surgeon, witnessed the Second Battle of Ypres in Belgium, where some 87,000 Allied soldiers were killed or wounded (Pruitt). The poem alludes to the mass death in Ypres that was accompanied by the blossoming of red poppies on the same fields ("Poppies Grow"; Pruitt). As one analysis of the relationship between poppies and the war explains:

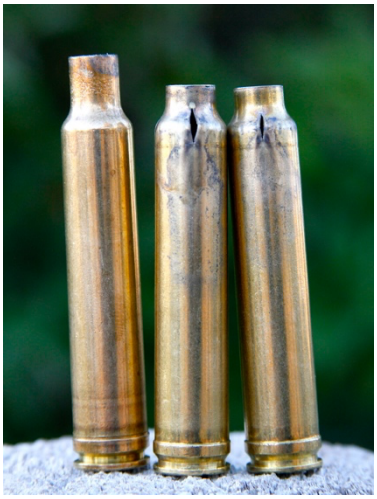
> The artillery shells that churned up the soil and maimed and killed soldiers, brought not only *Clostridia*, the deadly bacteria to the surface, but also encouraged the proliferation and growth of the dormant poppy seeds that later in their beauty, bloomed in profusion on the barren, scarred land, even in the cemeteries. (Holmes)

It is probable that H.D. was familiar with McCrae's poem, as she was living in London in 1915 (Downs 88; Zilboorg) when the poem was published in the magazine, *Punch*, and became "the most popular poem of the war" (Fussell 270). Indeed, McCrae's poem is credited with making the red poppy a symbol of remembrance of those who died in the war (Pruitt).

Apart from the historical context of the poem and potential inspiration from McCrae, the imagery of the poem is also itself suggestive of war and death. The first stanza reads: "Amber

husk / fluted with gold, / fruit on the sand / marked with rich grain" (H.D. 21). Although this description alludes to the amber color of sea poppies, an amber husk is also evocative of the brass cartridges of spent ammunition. These cartridges, which act as a "husk" to the bullet, are packed with gunpowder "grain" that explodes in the chamber of a gun, propelling the bullet out of the barrel while also marking the cartridge.

Yellow sea poppies (Vaslov)



Used and marked ammunition cartridges (Spomer)

Whereas the red poppies of McCrae's poem evoke images of the color of soldiers' blood, the color of H.D.'s sea poppies instead evoke the image of spent ammunition cartridges, which in turn represent the deaths of soldiers.

The second stanza adds more imagery that ambiguously refers to the sea poppy plants or to dead bodies on the beach: "treasure / spilled near the shrub-pines / to bleach on the boulders:" (H.D. 21). Literally, this could describe the vegetation and flowers on the beach. But, read from a wartime lens, the poem could refer to the bodies of the dead as "treasure" that begin to pale, or "bleach," as life fades from them. In the third stanza, these bodies are described as "stalk," a homonym of "stock," referring to the family that one comes from ("Stock"). The stalk/stock is

fixed to the beach—the soliders' hereditary lines dying there—surrounded by "wet pebbles," "drift flung by the sea," and "grated shells" (H.D. 21). These shells present another lexical ambiguity, simultaneously referring to seashells and ammunition shells. This description of the beach enhances both the purely aesthetic description of nature as well as the connection to war and death.

"Sea Poppies" is pragmatically ambiguous because context is the reason certain readers might glean from the imagist descriptions a sense of war and mourning while others might only take away an aesthetic experience. That context includes the poem's date of publication during the First World War, its parallel to the poppies of McCrae's poem, and the association of words and phrases like "amber husk," "grain," and "shells" with ammunition. However, a reader with a different knowledge base and sensibilities might miss or discount these connections in favor of a different interpretation. Indeed, "Sea Poppies" is commonly interpreted as a specifically non-metaphorical treatment of nature. In his study of H.D.'s imagist poetics, Hatlen writes that the collection of poems that includes "Sea Poppies," "gives us primarily 'things,' treated in accordance with imagist rules, 'directly'" (Hatlen 119). In other words, H.D.'s poetry aimed at conveying a brutalist depiction of nature that evokes strong emotion. Similarly, O'Connor writes:

> Sea Garden is often read for its Imagist credentials, H.D.'s crystalline verse being demonstrative of Pound's belief in direct and succinct poetry; many of the collection's poems can be read as illustrative of the 'new beauty' Imagism sought to find in precision. (O'Connor, *Some Terrible* 53)

The question of whether "Sea Poppies" communicates something about war, as opposed to being a purely aesthetic poem, thus depends in part on what the reader brings to the table.

*"The Red Wheelbarrow" (William Carlos Williams – 1921) and "In a Station of the Metro" (Ezra Pound – 1913)*

The previous section analyzed "Sea Poppies," which included elements of symbolism, and imagism. In particular, the study examined the poem's symbolic connection to war and how that ambiguous meaning depends in part on the reader's experiences and knowledge. But, even in the absence of symbolic meaning, pragmatic ambiguity arguably influences the feelings engendered by purely aesthetic imagism. Two poems that exemplify this concept are William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow," and Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro." The Williams poem reads:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens (Williams 56)

Although the literal meaning of these lines are practically unambiguous, their poetic significance is steeped in pragmatic ambiguity. This is in part because the connotations and emotional associations a reader might have with wheelbarrows and chickens can vary significantly. The poem conjures the image of being on a farm, possibly in the calm after a storm that has glazed

the wheelbarrow with rainwater. A reader might take from this a sense of tranquility in the idyllic scene. But these images can carry different meaning to one who has been on a farm and experienced scenes like these. For such a person, the image might inspire nostalgia for that experience, or resentment if that experience were negative. For example, someone who worked in an industrial slaughterhouse for chickens might have very different impressions of the scene than someone who has experience only with healthy, free-range chickens. For one who has no experience with wheelbarrows, chickens, or farms, a positive association with the image might come from romanticizing agrarian life, or a negative association might be driven by distaste for the unfamiliar. In this sense, it is true that "so much depends" on the image presented in the poem, because our reactions to it reveals volumes about our experiences, the associations we form with objects and places, and our sensitivity to a country scene.

The same kind of pragmatic ambiguity is at work in Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," which reads: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough" (Pound 35). The images depicted in these lines and the meaning a reader might derive from them depends largely on each reader's experiences and sensibilities—in other words, the context of their own lives. The meaning of the poem depends on whether the reader has seen a crowded metro station or petals on a wet, black bough—or can imagine it from seeing petals and boughs separately. And among those readers who have the relevant experiences, the associations they draw from those experiences will vary, creating a different sense of the poem for each person.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed in Chapter 1, Empson's publication of *Seven Types* marked a significant departure in the way ambiguity has been analyzed in literature. Specifically, Empson treated it as a literary tool that opened vast possibilities of interpretation, rather than as a defect of language that writers and readers alike needed to avoid or definitively resolve. However, Empson wrote in the early twentieth century, before much of the research and development in linguistics formalized the study of ambiguity. Empson's types were also unstructured in the sense that some were focused on linguistic elements like puns, others concentrated on writer intention, and still others were based on the process of discovering meaning. Moreover, Empson did not apply his critical methods to much modernist literature, which was contemporary to *Seven Types*. This thesis expands on Empson's initial insights, accounting for more types of ambiguity at the level of language to account for the progress in linguistics over the last century.

By analyzing representative works of English-language modernist poetry, this thesis explores how ambiguity can be a source of interpretive meaning on numerous levels. In some poems, like "Oread" and "Morning at the Window," the ambiguity of language mirrors dual senses of the poems. Their ambiguity cannot be "resolved" in the traditional sense, but the fact of multiple possible interpretations is itself consistent with the themes of the poems. In other examples, ambiguity highlights an ambivalent feeling or contradictory set of feelings, as in "England." Yet other examples, such as "along the brittle treacherous bright streets" and "who sharpens every dull" explore how ambiguous referents can trigger a search for what the deictic or referential phrases refer to. In this way, the reader is led to explore various interpretations of the poem that can either contradict or resonate with each other. In the last section of Chapter 2, this thesis focuses on how ambiguity is also driven by reader experiences and perspectives. Even

seemingly unambiguous mental images formed by words take on different meanings depending on the reader's frame of reference and the experiences that they bring to the poetry.

In each of these types of ambiguity, interpretation depends on context—the context within the poem, the historical context of the poet and the poem, and the context of the reader's own experiences. In this sense, the reader always plays a critical role in creating and resolving ambiguity and participates in creating poetic meaning. By giving readers this participatory role in the poetic process, readers become personally invested in the poems' meanings, which contributes to the emotional level poetry strikes its audience.

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## APPENDIX OF POEMS

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## APPENDIX OF POEMS

A Few Rules for Beginners

Babies must not eat the coal
And they must not make grimaces,
Nor in party dresses roll
And must never black their faces.

They must learn that pointing's rude,
They must sit quite still at table,
And must always eat the food
Put before them—if they're able.

If they fall, they must not cry,
Though it's known how painful this is;
No—there's always Mother by
Who will comfort them with kisses.

(Kimber 48)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

along the brittle treacherous bright streets
of memory comes my heart,singing like
an idiot,whispering like a drunken man

who(at a certain corner,suddenly)meets
the tall policeman of my mind.
awake
being not asleep,elsewhere our dreams began
which now are folded:but the year completes
his life as a forgotten prisoner

—"Ici?"—"Ah non,mon cheri;il fait trop froid"—
they are gone:along these gardens moves a wind bringing
rain and leaves,filling the air with fear
and sweetness....pauses. (Halfwhispering....halfsinging

stirs the always smiling chevaux de bois)

when you were in Paris we met here

(Cummings 66)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

Aunt Helen

Miss Helen Slingsby was my maiden aunt,
And lived in a small house near a fashionable square
Cared for by servants to the number of four.
Now when she died there was silence in heaven
And silence at her end of the street.
The shutters were drawn and the undertaker wiped his feet—
He was aware that this sort of thing had occurred before.
The dogs were handsomely provided for,
But shortly afterwards the parrot died too.
The Dresden clock continued ticking on the mantelpiece,
And the footman sat upon the dining-table
Holding the second housemaid on his knees—
Who had always been so careful while her mistress lived.

(Eliot 24)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

England

with its baby rivers and little towns, each with its abbey or its cathedral,
with voices–one voice perhaps, echoing through the transept–the
criterion of suitability and convenience; and Italy with its equal
shores–contriving an epicureanism from which the grossness has been

extracted: and Greece with its goat and its gourds, the nest of modified illusions:
and France, the "chrysalis of the nocturnal butterfly," in
whose products, mystery of construction diverts one from what was originally one's
object–substance at the core: and the East with its snails, its emotional

shorthand and jade cockroaches, its rock crystal and its imperturbability,
all of museum quality: and America where there
is the little old ramshackle victoria in the south, where cigars are smoked on the
street in the north; where there are no proofreaders, no silk-worms, no digressions;

the wild man's land; grassless, linksless, languageless country in which letters are written
not in Spanish, not in Greek, not in Latin, not in shorthand,
but in plain American which cats and dogs can read! The letter *a* in psalm and calm, when
pronounced with the sound of *a* in candle, is very noticeable,

but why should continents of misapprehension have to be accounted for by the
fact? Does it follow that because there are poisonous toadstools
which resemble mushrooms, both are dangerous? Of mettlesomeness which may be
mistaken for appetite, of heat which may appear to be haste, no con-

clusions may be drawn. To have misapprehended the matter is to have confessed
that one has not looked far enough. The sublimated wisdom
of China, Egyptian discernment, the cataclysmic torrent of emotion compressed
in the verbs of the Hebrew language, the books of the man who is able

to say, "I envy nobody but him, and him only, who catches more fish than
I do"–the flower and fruit of all that noted superi-
ority–should one not have stumbled upon it in America, must one imagine
that it is not there? It has never been confined to one locality.

(Moore 55-56)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

(Pound 35)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

Morning at the Window

They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens,
And along the trampled edges of the street
I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates.

The brown waves of fog toss up to me
Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,
And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air
And vanishes along the level of the roofs.

(Eliot 22)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

Night

The night has cut
each from each
and curled the petals
back from the stalk
and under it in crisp rows;

under at an unfaltering pace,
under till the rinds break,
back till each bent leaf
is parted from its stalk;

under at a grave pace,
under till the leaves
are bent back
till they drop upon earth,
back till they are all broken.

O night,
you take the petals
of the roses in your hand,
but leave the stark core
of the rose
to perish on the branch.

(H.D. 33)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

Oread

Whirl up, sea—
whirl your pointed pines.
splash your great pines
on our rocks.
hurl your green over us—
cover us with your pools of fir.

(H.D. 55)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

Sea Poppies

Amber husk
fluted with gold,
fruit on the sand
marked with a rich grain,

treasure
spilled near the shrub-pines
to bleach on the boulders:

your stalk has caught root
among wet pebbles
and drift flung by the sea
and grated shells
and split conch-shells.

Beautiful, wide-spread,
fire upon leaf,
what meadow yields
so fragrant a leaf
as your bright leaf?

(H.D. 21)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

(Williams 56)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

(Frost 105)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

“O where are you going?” said reader to rider,
“That valley is fatal where furnaces burn,
Yonder's the midden whose odours will madden,
That gap is the grave where the tall return.”

“O do you imagine,” said fearer to farer,
“That dusk will delay on your path to the pass,
Your diligent looking discover the lacking,
Your footsteps feel from granite to grass?”

“O what was that bird,” said horror to hearer,
“Did you see that shape in the twisted trees?
Behind you swiftly the figure comes softly,
The spot on your skin is a shocking disease.”

“Out of this house”—said rider to reader,
“Yours never will”—said farer to fearer
“They're looking for you”—said hearer to horror,
As he left them there, as he left them there.

(Auden 21)

## APPENDIX OF POEMS

who sharpens every dull
here comes the only man
reminding with his bell
to disappear a sun

and out of houses pour
maids mothers widows wives
bringing this visitor
their very oldest lives

one pays him with a smile
another with a tear
some cannot pay at all
he never seems to care

he sharpens is to am
he sharpens say to sing
you'd almost cut your thumb
so right he sharpens wrong

and when their lives are keen
he throws the world a kiss
and slings his wheel upon
his back and off he goes

but we can hear him still
if now our sun is gone
reminding with his bell
to reappear a moon

(Cummings 4)