Empson the Space Man: Literary Modernism Makes the Scalar Turn
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ABSTRACT
In my essay, I document how the literary modernist critic and poet, William Empson (1906–1984), modeled his theoretical positions in the decades following the Second World War upon precedents found in the English Renaissance poetry of John Donne. After 1955, Empson emerged as a leading skeptic of literary “high” modernism by means of the novel analogy argued in his essay, “Donne the Space Man” (1957): namely, that literary depictions of space in Donne’s early poetry, athwart high Church doctrine, paralleled contemporary skepticism, in Empson’s own time, about interpretive orthodoxies within Eliotic criticism and among the American New Critics. With its focus upon what he calls “space travel,” Empson’s exegesis in “Donne the Space Man” (1957) pioneered what today one may call the scalar turn in literary modernist criticism. In Empson’s case, a scalar criticism endorsed Donne’s search for a more generous plurality of critical worlds and embraced cosmological scale irreducible to the more dogmatic worldview of Christian-inspired theorizations then prevailing. Re-reading the “Donne the Space Man” essay today—and when applying approaches inspired by the phenomenology of the contemporary built environment, object-oriented ontology, and unseen “lifeworlds”—allows for a more meaningful treatment of Empson’s criticism in its historical context, and when using scale as an heuristic to broaden our understandings of cosmologies, near and far, vastly different from our own.

KEYWORDS
William Empson; space travel; scale; John Donne; cosmology

中文摘要
本文记述了二战后的几十年中，文学现代主义评论家及诗人威廉-燕卜薇（1906-1984）如何基于约翰-唐璜文艺复兴诗中所载先例构建自身的理论立场。1955年后，燕卜薇通过其论文“太空人唐璜”（1957）的新颖对比，以文学高度现代主义的怀疑者姿态出现：即尽管受到教堂教条的高压阻扰，唐璜早期诗歌中太空的文学化描写与燕卜薇所处时代的怀疑论相似，两者都对艾略特式批评内部及美国新批评主义中的阐释正统心存疑虑。其论文“太空人唐璜”（1957）集中探讨其所谓的“太空旅行”，由此开辟了我们现今所谓的文学现代主义批评标量化转向的先锋。在燕卜薇的讨论中，一种标量化批评支撑者唐璜寻找一种更为广阔多量化批评世界的动力，并且采用了一种宇宙标量化模式。此模式无法还原更为根化的基督式理论化的世界观，虽然后者在当时很流行。现今重读此文，并结合当代建筑环境现象学、以目标为导向的本体论及不可见的“生命世界”等启发下的方式，让我们得以更有序地理解当时历史语境下唐璜的批评。再者，亦可以借助标量来拓宽我们理解宇宙的探索，不管这样的世界是远还是近，是否与我们自己的相同。

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We discover that we have never begun to enter the modern era.
– Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern (Latour, 1993, p. 47)

As a poet he was very free from intellectual snobbery about his authorities.
– William Empson, “Donne the Space Man” (p. 106)

In On Literary Worlds (2014), Eric Hayot reminds us that the contemporary theoretical turn toward literary scale is, in fact, a return. With the advent of the “New Philosophie” and emerging scientific method after 1600, early modern forms and versions of world system-building resulted in the gradual retreat of metaphysics and scholasticism; the material world, discovered anew by the New Science, became “describable, fungible, transactable, translatable, and finally, knowable” (p. 101). Much as our contemporary reconsiderations of them do, these older meaning- and world-making systems imposed orthodoxies – preferred regimes of interpretation – alongside asymptotic resistances arising. Dissonant and contrarian counter-readings of the world-system tugged at its margins, and, by virtue of such pull, necessarily expanded its epistemological field through acts of agonistic reinterpretation. Such acts were not inherently rebellious or heretical, so much as creatively world-forming in terms inherited from the tradition of late medieval skepticism.¹ In what follows, I briefly document how the literary modernist critic and poet, William Empson (1906–1984), modeled his own theoretical positions based upon precedents found in the English Renaissance poetry of John Donne and, by means of such interpretive parallax, emerged as a leading skeptic of literary “high” modernism in the decades following the Second World War. Beyond this, I shall argue that Empson’s interest in literary depictions of space in Donne’s poetry allowed him to achieve separation from his peers brilliantly, as he pioneered, over 50 years ago, what today one may call the scalar turn in literary modernist criticism.

The consideration of literary scale, then, is hardly new; although the question of its reappearance in our own age of skeptical literary hermeneutics bears some scrutiny. When precisely did literary modernism make the scalar turn? How may we understand modern treatments of literary scale as, equally, the outcome of specific methodological inquiries and innovations of a given period, and, likewise, as the necessary continuation of far older ontological investigations concerning existence throughout history? (Humans have always gazed upwards at the stars, planets, and constellations in the effort to know.) How, indeed, do we understand scale in literary terms? Is there a scale for scale? Any decent treatment of these broader questions of scale and metascale, especially when addressing how scalar preoccupations have recurred historically in support of (or deference to) the human category, certainly exceeds the scope of the present essay.

But one may still make a beginning in the case of Empson, and in the context of his famous clash with Eliotic literary criticism and the American New Critics after 1955. Writing against such orthodoxies, Empson sought inspiration – refuge – in the Renaissance literature of Christopher Marlowe, Donne, and John Milton. Armed with heterodox re-readings and contrastive epistemologies attributed to these fellow-travelers as he found them, Empson launched into other spaces in search of a more generous plurality of critical worlds, and embraced cosmological scale irreducible to the more dogmatic worldview of Christian-inspired theorizations as he saw them. By reminding the field of the origins of philosophical skepticism found in the early poetry of Donne, Empson hewed to a position notably distinct from his peers, askance any
strict periodization or “progress” of the human sciences, in precisely the way Bruno Latour demands in the epigram earlier: “we have never been modern” (pp. 46–47). Empson’s assertion of Donne’s “modern” outlook rightly made the hermetic formalism of the Anglo-American literary critics of his own day seem staid, if not reactionary. And, as odd as the title may have seemed at the time, Empson’s essay, “Donne the Space Man” (1957), emerges decisively, and unequivocally, as the *classicus locus* of literary modernism at scale. “Donne the Space Man” involves Empson’s reintroduction of Renaissance treatments of outer space by requiring us to read cross-wise: Donne’s creative discrepancies athwart Church doctrine parallel neatly Empson’s own *agon* with the high Modernist establishment of his own day. For Empson, reading Renaissance space against the high modernist literary theories constitutes a potent critique on behalf of “worlded” precepts for right and ethical action in a pluriverse transformed by the existence of other worlds, subjectivities, and godheads. (Empson’s considerable time spent in Asia had afforded him practical knowledge of these different cosmologies, such as Buddhism, first-hand.) Otherwise abstract, space as a literary theme becomes more meaningful – more measurable – using scale as an heuristic by which the readers of literary modernism may broaden their understandings of cosmologies, near and far, vastly different from their own.

The notion of scale may be considered simply in operational or instrumental terms. Scale serves, for example, when measuring the “condensation and compression” (Hayot, 2014, p. 98) of masses redistributed in varying forms and sizes. Scale governs the potential, equally, for miniaturization – the ancient Greeks called the *microcosm* (μικρός + κόσμος [*kόσμος*, “world”]) – as well as for expansion and alignment of what is known, beyond the unit one, at greater degrees (or correspondences) of meaning and substance. As the system organizing and aligning microcosmic and macrocosmic registers, scale likewise rationalizes shifting schemas of the perceived world, individual and collective, governing the relations of perceived objects – parallax – as they interact. Achieved by means of scale, such elasticity of perception, linking the local particular to the abstract infinite, was salutary to Empson. “Donne the Space Man” restages for a twentieth-century readership the early modern problem of scale as it had presented itself, “that Copernicanism puts Heaven farther off” (Empson, 1993, p. 113).

As presented later in greater detail, Empson’s solution to this problem (as he attributed it to Donne’s best love poems) was to argue that the use of scale might just as well bring heaven closer. In a formal (and latterly empirical) discourse, scale and space are mutually corroborating terms. As far back as Aristotle’s “Great Chain,” scale has served as the instantiation of Logos (Gr: λόγος), its ordering principle as world-forming, world-creating, and calling forth regimented instantiations of the Absolute. Making his own tremendous contributions to the popularization of scientific knowledge at around the same time Empson entered Cambridge as an undergraduate, Arthur Eddington first made a *scalar* understanding of matter and creation, formerly mystical in outline, accessible to large audiences. As recently demonstrated by means of Einstein’s theory, Eddington had marshaled powerful rhetoric in support of the findings that space and scale, and hence the capacity of humanity to measure them, were coextensive:
[The universe’s] vastness appalls the mind; space boundless though not infinite…. The world was without form and almost void. But at the earliest stage we can contemplate the void is sparsely broken by tiny electric particles, the germs of the things that are to be; positive and negative they wander aimlessly in solitude rarely coming near enough to seek or shun one another. They range everywhere in space so that all space is filled, and yet so empty that in comparison the most highly exhausted vacuum on earth is a jostling throng. In the beginning was vastness, solitude, and the deepest night. Darkness was upon the face of the deep, for as yet there was no light. (Eddington, 1929, p. 9)

Combining Book of Genesis allegory with metaphors derived from recent Bohr-model discoveries, Eddington’s syntax here, like the “appalling” space it describes, conjoins the vastness of primordial being to infinitesimally small charges of the individual electron. Space seems “boundless” but is not: the “infinite” is measurable (“filled and yet so empty”) and requires the application of new registers twentieth-century scientific discoveries made necessary, new scalars conjoining vastness to the unseen world.⁴

Explicitly, scale may also be understood as the underlying architecture from which space is derived — in the way of an elongating site, prosthesis, or extension through and across time. Temporally motile, scales achieve what Henri Bergson called duration (la durée), the status of being (or the passage of being) conferred through the act of extending from here to there, from high to low, from near to far. As such, scale imparts ontological supposition — the probability of existence — by means of transit. Such extensions are, it follows, assembled. Closer to our own theoretical day, high theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari privilege the theoretical term assemblages which, in French and English, means conventionally “to join, to gather, to assemble.” Notably, however, Deleuze and Guattari’s term, in the French original, is not “assemblages” but agencement which term conveys an entirely and distinctly different etymology and meaning: “to arrange, to layout, to piece together” (Nail, 2017, p. 22). Neither connotation, indeed, addresses the scalar implications of the layout, the assembly, as a kind of joining. For that matter, all scales, clearly, are assemblages, but not all assemblages necessarily scale space. The theory of the assemblage, then, serves well primarily as a heuristic to divine narrative potentials for construction, building, and connectivity; it serves less well as a basis for understanding how, in Eric Hayot’s analysis, during the shift from Ptolemaic to Galilean world systems in the early modern era, “the expansion of the realm of human cosmological engagement in spatial terms amounted to a reduction of that engagement in allegorical and symbolic ones” (p. 99; emphasis in original).

In this direction, Hayot’s work certainly provides a useful starting point. Benefiting from the pioneering spade work found in earlier, useful collections such as Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell’s Shades of the Planet (2007), Hayot’s turn toward planetary scale deserves credit for adding urgency and cogency to the claim, previously scattered and more diffusely secreted across the disciplines, that cosmologies are inherently, if not necessarily, scalar. Hayot’s interest is stated most clearly in his commitment to “metadiagesis”: that is, the distribution (or in Latour’s terms, the “delegation”) of meanings clustered around (rather than merely inhering in) representations of the human:
[Metadiagesis] mark[s] not only the labor of the fiction but also a theory of the world as among other things an arrangement of significances and relations, meagerly or generously distributed, and open (or not) to the possibility of communication among their levels. (On Literary Worlds, Hayot, 2014, p. 72)

Subtended by means of metadiegetic “world-space,” Hayot’s language of scale ruptures diegesis as conventionally understood. His rhetoric is at once totalizing and flexible: telescopic interconnections and rearrangements distribute the “labor” fictional worlds impart “among their levels,” linking all agents and actors constituting a given system. Hayot links past cosmoologies – whether in the Chinese context (p. 72) or the Platonism found in early John Donne (p. 98) – to contemporary and dynamic renderings, in life and art, of the “world picture” (p. 102).

Bracketing Hayot’s claim, however, one readily sees how narrative engagements in the direction of space and scale may not, in fact, reduce the commitment to narrativization of different types (such as allegory and symbol) so much as extend, distend, and distort their reach. Hayot’s resulting observation that “narrative relations organized around ideas of sequential, physical cause and effect supplanted the dominance of a set of largely allegorical relations” (Literary Worlds 99) captures one conventional understanding since, clearly, the decisive, early-modern reorganization of “narrative relations” was scalar. Still, I am not entirely convinced that such emerging causality “supplanted” earlier cosmological modes for “worldedness” tout court. As he returned to orthodox faith, for example, Donne’s “New Philosopher” readily allegorized and absorbed the newer mechanics of causality, too, as have champions of the faith everywhere since then.4 For Isaac Newton, early modern geometry served as evidence of divine intentionality, even if a fallen (or theistic) one. Early-modern metadiegetics rightly establish the relationality between competing modes, allegorical and scientific, of worldedness, but the relation of modernity to scale Hayot posits is, it seems, primarily an adversarial one. It need not necessarily be so, unless one unduly privileges the “modern” category proper.

Himself pressing upon the apparent limits of the diagetical, a young Charles Altieri first theorized narrative “action” as the consequence of the spring, or bounce, of narrative “middles” in the 1970s. Indeed, the return to systematic structure in narrative, to the “narratology” that Altieri and Peter Brooks made paradigmatic as literary theoretical practice (in the wake of Kermode’s The Sense of an Ending and the New Eschaetologists) was based upon a fundamentally metaphysical proposition Empson would not only have recognized but most likely applauded: namely, that to be placed in the “realm of the middles” of any experience (and its textualizations) is effectively to be transported through that experience in space and time (in situ) as a function of situated discovery:

Wisdom or intuition may help one envision new … causal structures, but these psychological features have no authority in determining the validity of the enterprises they initiate. That authority resides in rational coherence and, for science, the possibility of exactly repeating the causal chain. […] But a concept like middles allows us to propose another kind of knowledge, one that is less concerned with references to a world that can be tested as propositions or causal hypotheses than it is with dramatizing the ways men respond more or less adequately to specific situations. Discourse in the realm of middles is
dramatic, not referential or propositional, and hence it asks to be assessed in different terms than those of truth and falsity. (Altieri, 1977, pp. 325–326; emphasis in original)

An untested “world”: the “adequacy” of Altieri’s critique of the diegetic here lies in the direction of “another kind of knowledge” challenging positivism in the context of the “responsiveness to situations.” As such, Altieri’s language is explicit and preforges by decades the contemporary New Geography, as in Seamon and Lundberg, whereby lived ontologies subtend hardened facts (and their textualizations) in favor of more dynamic, (Seamon and Lundberg, 2017). To achieve a situational understanding of one’s position in the middle of a living world is to achieve scale.5

I suspect that Empson would have understood Altieri’s theory of the “middle” to be the common-sense application of historical and exegetical method: that one must always inhabit his or her biography as experience and that biography is always in the middle of being lived, dynamically and ecstatically, in the very bustle and midst of the experienced pluriverse. Indeed, all Altieri’s narrative “middle” of the text – or perhaps Kermode’s or Brooks’ – requires is to be flipped along its vertical axis, thereby achieving the “essentially infinite and homogenous extension” afforded by Koyré’s “geometrization of space,” the shift from Ptolemaic to Galilean systems required (quoted in Hayot, 2014, pp. 98–99). Once flipped, the “middle” of any narrative becomes a ladder, or a staircase, of whichever scale, to the cosmos. The boost is not found in the putative allegorization – although the aim of the journey out may matter – but in the mechanics, the narrative processes, that generate motion and movement propelling the story forward in time.

Before turning our gaze to specifics of Empson’s own language and interpretations from the “Donne the Space Man” essay, it is appropriate to tidy up one or two loose strands which, if left alone, might set the whole exegesis to unraveling.

One should be aware, initially, of a creeping conflation, sometimes helpful and sometimes not, between abstract (or absolute) “space” as Empson clearly understood it for the early seventeenth-century; and our own turn, across the past decade, toward alternative understandings of the “spatial.” These more recent theorizations have been expressed in terms of the vibrant revisiting of phenomenological space and situation the New Geographers refer to as a “lifeworld”: “the everyday realm of experiences, actions, and meanings typically taken for granted and thus out of sight as a phenomenon” (Seamon). Empson, I suspect, would have had little difficulty in squaring the increasing scientific evidence suggesting the likelihood of off-world existence as an analogy for the presence of the unseen “lifeworld” closer to home; an analogy upon which the weight of my argument concerning the shift from space to scale heavily depends. Defining “space” as such, as an “out of sight” lifeworld, may seem initially crude or even simplistic. But the notion is tractable, since it conveys potential for the plurality of lifeworldedness, the contiguity (if not proximity) of seen and unseen worlds, by rebutting the notion of empirical privilege which would assert that the only world extant is the one we presently perceive.

Additionally, the out-of-sight “lifeworld” is constituted via the blindspot – the narrow perimeter of being – subjectivity imposes. To become a subject is made possible only through the excising of the object-world apart, which apartness, once expressed as a “must be,” is the “lifeworld” which Seamon (quoting Edmund Husserl) cites as a “natural attitude [that acknowledges] … the way that life is and must be” (Seamon, in press,). Our unawareness of that unseen lifeworld – the life wherever we are not – is, in
fact, a necessary projection arising from our own necessary limits, housed as we are in fleshly envelopes, tailored to size and dreaming of “life” beyond the unit one and exceeding any reckoning of the life others are living someplace else. In the English language, we do not even possess the word which Empson, at least conceivably, could have coined when cheerfully undertaking his strident critique of the “neo-Christian” critics of Donne: what the unseen lifeworld “is and must be” can, and should, encompass the lives that other beings living on other unseen lifeworlds may be living somewhere else.5

Chasing the tail of our own immediate (phenomenological) world, so to speak, we become naturally oblivious – not only to an entire population of subjectivities sharing our lived world, chasing their own tails apart, and equally heedless of our own (personal and dizzying) spin, but also, far out in interstellar space, heedless of all other systems, in parts and in wholes, also making their diurnal round beyond the ken of the most refined telescopes. Just because we are currently unaware of these independently spinning systems, however, does not disprove them; nor the founding postulate which makes the heretic Giordano Bruno’s thesis cogent: namely, that the infinite space of the universe is constituted through such myriad, self-encompassing twirling along the entire scale of being. There remains, even today, no stable parallax (apart from the Absolute) from which to view the object-ontology of an entire universe in motion. And certainly Seamon is right when he asserts, again after Husserl, that our “natural” unawareness of the unseen “lifeworld” privileges our own lived world’s uniqueness, such that “we habitually assume that the world as we know and experience it is the only world” (emphasis in original). Clearly, when arguing stridently on behalf of the pluriverse, Empson identifies Donne’s pluralistic “world-picture,” rightly or wrongly as a homology of his own.7

Which leads us, inevitably, to another wayward strand. Historically minded critics must certainly be disappointed by the collapsing of historical specificities required when linking Donne to Empson by means of such scalar relationality, homologous or not. What happens to the intervening history when – to borrow another of Seamon’s usages – one compares their respective architectures, and “atmospheres,” side by side and finds them mutually supporting and inhabitable? The imposition of scale – and I should stress that, like any architecture, scale is a great imposition – bears significance which is not strictly allegorical, insofar as any given allegory signifies truths within its Weltanschauung only as subordinated to the congruence, limits, and containment of a particular worldly design. Nor does scalar relationality make biographical method comparable on its merits, apart from the two poets’ shared interest in a common theme, the poetry of skepticism, since the biography of the one has no necessary or inherent relation, expression, or culmination in the biography of the other. Nor, again, do narratological ties necessarily bind in scalar terms, as in my brief treatment of Charles Altieri’s “realm if the middles” earlier: the distortions and distensions introduced by space and scale into plot – Seamon & Lundberg call these “emplacements” of a lived reality – create infinite potentials for creation and its asymptotic bendings (tropes) through time. Donne’s beginning in scale does not presuppose Empson’s end in it; their story bolsters the narrative middle unfolding indefinitely and as if forever.

The point, rather, would seem to be not to diminish narrative potentials – allegorical, biographical, narratological – leveraging cosmological scale with an eye to blasting them into stardust. Instead, the scalar turn should aspire to resituate narrative practice in
scalar terms such that representations of being and emplacement (currently lorded over by the sovereignty of textuality) can extend beyond the domain of the written. Doing so, as Empson well understood, requires space travel.

**Empson the Space Man**

Within Empson Studies, the critic’s cosmological maneuver after 1955 has been fairly well researched in recent years. Placing Empson in orbit, athwart the major field tendencies of his time, allows us to understand better how he imagined – rebuilt – the literary world of the Modernist 1950s. Indeed, even from his perch in Sheffield, Empson saw this world of literary criticism as if from a great distance, a perspective which had been hard-won by his travels during the 1930s and 1940s and which had required the at times rough traversal of newer geographical spaces (he knew China and Japan rather better than most foreigners). Empson’s present battle with the Miltonists also betrayed a by now more nuanced tug and pull of skepticism proper which, in Katy Price’s lovely phrase from *Loving Faster than Light* (2012), mandated “a form of aliveness” (p. 13) to multiplicity and contradiction when undertaking critical exegesis, which is a much loved feature of Empson’s late style. Long before *Milton’s God* (1962), Empson had abjured not God’s love in principle but torture in His name. And, as Price argues in her fine volume, the Modernist reconsideration of scale thus required a potent reconsideration of ethics – of God as Love – under rapidly changing circumstances of material change and discovery. Empson’s scalar criticism, I shall argue, is not merely co-extensive of space and writing, but also attends a resulting perspectival shift, a way of seeing, that presupposes consideration of – transport to – another ethical position elsewhere, at the verge of known meaning and representability.

Empson’s “Donne the Space Man” begins by registering surprise that the critical revisionists of the present day have forgotten a conceit that was “taken for granted” during his generation at university, in the 1920s, namely that

> [F]rom a fairly early age [Donne] was interested in getting to another planet much as the kids are nowadays; he brought the idea into practically all his best love-poems, with the sentiment which it still carries of adventurous freedom. But it meant a lot more to him than that; coming soon after Copernicus and Bruno, it meant not being a Christian. (p. 78)

For all the lightness of tone, Empson’s commitment to what he calls “space travel” is not merely frivolous or fashionable, casting ephemeral metaphors in the era of Sputnik and Explorer 1. Nor, as the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union heated up, did Empson’s contrarian stance – drawing, as we have seen, upon a far older tradition of early modern skepticism – constitute theoretical vacuity. Empson’s position on space meant a lot more to him than that.

Via his admiration for Donne’s poetry, Empson’s spatial critique of literary modernism took up space. It meant “not being Christian,” yes, but it was also world-forming and pluralistic, which is to say that it was heretical much as Giordano Bruno’s plurality of worlds thesis (first published, in 1584, as *On the Infinite, Universe and Worlds* [de l’Infinito, Universo e Mondi]) had been. Like Bruno, Empson believed in more than one world and more than one saving creed. His space-traveling heresy accordingly sought to achieve separation from the present dispensation of the literary knowable as Eliot’s
high-priests had catechized it, reaching instead toward the “unseen” Eddington had theorized, at scale, when Empson was young. Empson’s sporting willingness to give heresy a rethink on the merits does not fully justify his life-long animus against Christianity’s institutionalized torture-worship. He would, nevertheless, have been delighted to learn that his hunch about Milton’s creeping Arianism (it girds the main thesis in Milton’s God: namely, that Christ the Father, and not Satan, is the tyrant unjustly sacrificing Christ) was eventually substantiated.8

As Graham Harman has likewise argued, deprivileging “human access” to the world of objects, seen and unseen, reaps real rewards esthetically and philosophically. Constituting the substance of lived experience (and not merely accidental to it), object-oriented ontology diminishes humanist prerogatives and perspectives as equated, no more and no less, with “the duel between canaries, microbes, earthquakes, atoms, and tar” (Harman, 2007, p. 189). Such radical equivalency asserted among a universe of multitudinous objects, the interplay between seen and unseen worlds, and an acknowledgement of their plurality in contiguity according to verifiable geometric laws demonstrated by Einstein and Hermann Minkowski after 1908. Indeed Empson’s was the first generation which, having been gifted “spacetime” by means of mathematical proof, was fully capable and confident when representing the formerly metaphysical irruptions of time onto narrative experimentation as a more truthful fulfillment of multi-dimensional experience.9

Reducing humanist prerogatives relative to an object-oriented ontology also correlates to their enlargement beyond the human along the same imaginary scale. Reduction and enlargement, while redistributing mass and forms variably, are functionally (and formally) constant. We remember, as all young children enjoying basic geometry do, the thrill of observing the twinned legs of a compass inscribing a circle for the first time (as in Donne’s “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”: “And though it in the center sit, / Yet when the other far doth roam, / It leans and hearkens after it”); and, if we were lucky in our teachers, the reliability, at scale, of the slide rule. In his interpretations of Donne’s “tribulations of the Spheares,” Empson found similar, and ample, scope for the assertion of object-based ontology at macroscales (suns, orbs, stars, planets). But he also delighted in evidence of similar processes at work in microscales, too. In a deceptively simple passage, Empson recalls

A son of my own at about the age of twelve, keen on space travel like the rest of them, saw the goat having kids and was enough impressed to say “It’s better than space travel.” It is indeed absolutely or metaphysically better, because it is coming out of the nowhere into here; and I was so pleased to see the human mind beginning its work that I felt as much impressed as he had done at seeing the birth of the kids. (p. 79)

It is a remarkable passage on several levels. Not least among these is Empson’s clear admiration for the turn of his son’s emerging intellect appearing as if out of nowhere; which, in his son’s presumably being unaware of the commonplace fact (and mechanics) of biological reproduction, uses the conceit of space travel to understand how, in the corresponding truth Empson highlights, something does indeed emerge from nothing and nowhere in time. It is a fabulous, and to my mind, marvelous abstraction in the interest of a better theory about existence. Why else would Donne, alongside Empson, be “keen on space travel unless he had a serious reason for it” (p. 79)?
Again, the light tone masks an underlying seriousness. I will take the nanny-kid thesis, illuminated by means of the space travel conceit, over the darker, fundamentalist cosmologies of the present time which, when returning us to presumably more reliable, bunker-hardened truths of established religions, never permit different kinds of truths to emerge. (Empson’s view of “official religion” sharpens to a point: “fully equipped with rack, boot, thumbscrew, and slow fire” [1993, pp. 92-93].) By contrast, Empson’s literary theory of space travel was, it seems, a kind of gamified theory of emergence seeking to push knowledge forward beyond present limits. His impetuousity in the undertaking – the largest of human monuments looks miniscule from space – was also a kind of largesse or magnanimity. Why else would Empson risk such otherwise reductionist claims on behalf of early-modern skepticism such as “[Donne’s] rather accidental position [of a plurality of Christ’s] probably had a decisive effect, because anything else would have made Newton impossible” (p. 83).

What, indeed, is the eccentric Bill Empson doing here? He is, in fact, illustrating what Hayot has all along instructed us to recognize as metadiegesis (“narrative relations organized around ideas” which “supplant” a prior set of narrative or cosmological givens); only, in this case, it is Empson, as in his reading of Donne’s poem, “The Sunne Rising,” who is doing the supplanting:

[1]Instead of dignifying the individual by comparison to the public institution [of the Christian religion], [Donne] treats the institution as only a pallid imitation of the individual. All the imaginative structures which men have built to control themselves are only derived from these simple intimate basic relations. (1993, p. 86; emphasis in original)

By means of such inversions at scale, Empson invites us (much as Donne did) to turn the telescope around and asks that we peer through to the other side. Doing so, we note, does not fundamentally change the relation between observing subject and the object observed; nor does the resulting reorientation diminish the “control” all “imaginative structures” exert over us. But reversing the priority of the relation – the enlarged becoming diminished, and the diminished enlarged – allows the achieved “private religion” (p. 92) among lovers, their microcosm, sufficient separation from more massive, official institutions presently appearing as mere shadows. Intimate love provides not only scale and relationality, indeed, but restores coherence to a set of imaginative structures sundered by the “New Philosophie.” Empson quotes from Donne’s “An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary”:

’Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation:
Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot.

Intimate love, and the personal cosmologies or “private worlds” (p. 94) it creates, restores memory to matter and meaning to relationality. Empson continues: “it is the whole point of a microcosm to be small; it is cosy to have your own island, cave, house in a tree; this ancient sentiment is one of the reasons why the kids like space travel” (pp. 97–98). For Empson, the microcosm is, finally, best achieved by two lovers inhabiting their own proper planet (p. 104). Indeed, it is their love that has transported them to it, in the guise of a representation, at scale, they uniquely recognize: “just as any ball can be made into a map of the world … so any tear of [the poet’s] with [the beloved’s] reflection on it will take rank as a planet” (p. 106).
We realize, suddenly, that Empson’s fight for the microcosmoids of lovers everywhere in all possible worlds, alongside his fight for disestablished Love (with a capital “L”) on our own planet, makes space travel necessary, even as he is wrestling it forcibly from the Pauline gospels of the New Testament (p. 93). Empson’s Absolute Love at an interstellar scale returns us to the intensity of his own personal agon at the unit one, his willingness to be personally wrong, if being wrong means being passionately and searchingly right:

[The] mystical doctrine [of the great love poems] was always a tight-rope walk, a challenge to skill and courage, and after all it never pretended to offer any hope, only an assurance that people who called [Donne] wrong were themselves wrong. (p. 93)

To recap: in the name of the disestablished religion of Love, Empson was deeply committed to arguing Donne’s interest in parallax, the microcosm, and the plurality of worlds as mutually supporting, as well as axiomatic components of a scalar system which required the diminution of man’s prerogatives at the cosmological scale. Such cosmology was equally humbling and bracing, as a heuristic countering positivism and the lust for modernity in its more vulgar forms. Empson’s scalar response was also therefore therapeutic: a means of clearing space, at once philosophical and material, with which to begin our curious exploration of the pluriverse using systems of measurement other than those provided by organized religion, its machineries, and preferred representations.

Now for the space-landing. As we have seen, when linking Donne’s skepticism to his own Empson makes a fascinating orbital turn, Möbius strip-like, returning to his present by means of a circuit through the Renaissance literary past. He is the spaceman. The trope is not only narrative but scalar.

At some point in the late 1940s, Empson rightly recognized that a specific and authoritative strain within Anglo-American literary modernism sought not only to correlate orthodoxy with critical thinking but to render such reading practices normative. He rejected the correlation, and its normativization, as dangerous and impractical for future generations of students of the English literary humanities. (In a far more muted discourse, he would caution his Chinese students at Beida along similar grounds following liberation in 1949.) Empson spent much of the rest of his career searching for means by which this by-now monstrous modernist establishment, called by him thereafter as “neo-Christian,” might be rendered visible, and bracketed, by a more robust literary-critical discourse. Nor, in its final stages, was Empson’s orbital path around the literary world of 1950s Modernism fully explained via the useful analytics provided by I. A. Richards’ “practical criticism” (as in Seven Types) or its further elaborations via Empson’s critique of the New Critics (as in his defense of intentionality in the Structure of Complex Words). He flew by these movements, bearing and battling their impressions, and pressing on.

Citing evidence from “Donne the Space Man,” I have argued that Empson’s understanding of a lived modernity was explicitly metaphysical in the direction of cosmological scale. As we have seen, the pretexts for his eccentric, orbital method of Modernist literary criticism were drawn from earlier traditions in late medieval and metaphysical thinking which, subsequently modified by enlightenment rationalism, remained fundamentally skeptical. Even so, Empson’s skepticism was also leavened – kept delicate and supple – by means of his ownership of (and delight in) persisting metaphysical urges, athwart rigid historicization, which also kept his views unorthodox and asymptotic of those systems he was so fond of orbiting.
On behalf of a rational approach to the unknown and unknowable, Empson battled on – his rationalist agon wrestling with the infinite – to aspire and imagine beyond the human category.\(^\text{13}\)

Nor, as we enter full stride into the new literary millennium, can the present critical dispensation fully explain Empson’s asymptotic criticism. Buoyed and reliant upon history as he was, Empson’s orbiting career of the field – its veering, its bounce – puts strain upon even the most astute and sophisticated readings of critical practice benefitting from the New Historicism of the 1990s, including the quite likely tug afforded to Empson’s vehicle via the after-burn of the Romantic-philological tradition, Goethe through Wallerstein, Hayot theorizes (Hayot, 2011, p. 134). As in “Donne the Space Man” Empson’s best criticism of the 1950s overshot such conventional modes of systemic literary thinking. It did so insofar as the diversity of his interests and capacities problematizes our own understanding of Empson’s own biography, as fitting neatly within this or that period of Modernist literary history. As we have seen, his increasingly strident demands for the scaling of structural method may also be considered in the context of the subsequent emergence of narratological critique in the 1970s and early 1980s. Much as Empson’s Complex Words had sought to do one generation prior, the rise of narratology after 1970 acknowledged not only the high mark of poststructuralist prestige in the literary academy, but also shaped contours of future rebellions against its aggressive hermeticism across the longue durée – including the fight (very much underground until recent years) for the return to a structure we can all believe in.

Today, over 30 years after Empson’s death, his orbital criticism continues to inspire. His work offers the salutary reminder that all systems of theory (past, present, and future) have the robust and noble striving for meaning in common – the search for mapping systematicity at scale – or, at least, they ought to. As Donne’s poem, “The Cross,” declares: “[a]ll the Globes frame, and sphæres, is nothing else / But the Meridians crossing Parallels” (Donne, 1965, p. 143). In situating the inquiring, individual mind as a necessary and integral component of any humane and functioning cosmology, Empson also returns us to ourselves. Space travelers no more, we have landed squarely back in our own time.

Notes

1. Such was the unfurling materiality, at scale, encountered by early modern interpreters who – pushing, experimenting, and sometimes transgressing prevailing epistemological boundaries – expanded the scale of the known world. Radically bounding the systematicity inherited from late medieval (Aristotelian) scholastic philosophy, Giambattista Vico’s methodology in the New Science (Scienza Nuova [1725]) eventually expanded and bolstered the otherwise competing claims of theistic and non-Christian skeptics throughout the eighteenth century.

2. As in the epigram, Latour acknowledges that the work of modernity has always, throughout the entire course of a troubled and yet transformative human history, been with us. Having never strictly begun the modernizing project, we cannot claim to have secured (or to have restricted) its epistemological perimeter within any given period. By extension, “modernity” inheres in and across all periods. See We Have Never Been Modern, Chapter 2.

3. Eddington’s Science and the Unseen World was originally delivered at Friend’s House, London, as the 1929 Swarthmore lecture on behalf of the Society of Friends. Eddington’s rhetoric on behalf of the new discipline of astrophysics offered a unique synthesis – an idiolect within the Modernist imagination of the time – combining legitimate scientific
content and writerly craft. He is rightly considered a pioneer in the history of the popularization of science, then previously little known or understood beyond the realms of government and the universities. In so small part due to his personal popularity, direct speaking and writing style, and busy touring schedule Eddington greatly facilitated the transfer of scientific knowledge and impact, on both sides of the Atlantic, throughout the 1920s.

4. Buoyed by Copernicus and the New Science, and the increasingly multitudinous “meta-data,” it gathered, philosophical nominalists sought to restore vastly expanding “scientific” taxonomies to the Christian tradition as Aquinas had so monumentally presented it. The new taxonomy emerged as a battle-ground for faith, as Christian scientism sought to absorb rapidly expanding domains of: the particular as “this” or “such” (particulari quadam consideratione, vel inquantum est hoc ens); the widening “procession” of discovered creatures (processione creaturarum) and other phenomena; as well as the increasing complexity and variety of material being, inspired by God, and hence of distinct substance (substantiae separatae) beyond the widening perimeter afforded by scientific method (Aquinas, 1947-1948).

5. Seamon and Lundberg do not cite or privilege the key term, scale, explicitly. Still, in their treatment of phenomenological emplacement they note two distinct, at times complementary, emphases upon “explications of experience” and “interpretations of social worlds” (p. 4). One of my central claims here is that any experiential interpretation of “wordedness,” like its explication, is necessary impinged upon by the function of scalar embeddedness and not only by the fact of spatial emplacement.

6. Seamon’s preferred terms correlating unseen lifeworld to phenomenological experience are “environmental wholes” and “architectural lifeworlds.” After Gamaliel Bradford, Seamon defines “architectural lifeworlds” as: “the lived quality of a building whereby it evokes a certain invisible character or ambience making the building unusual or unique as a place.” Seamon’s architecture (he means to correlate specific lived places to the other contiguous lifeworlds surrounding it) is clearly scalar insofar as architecture is a constituent of the surrounding “atmosphere,” and as experienced by the perceivers of objects and presences within and without: “qualities of the experiencer and qualities of the built world contribute [equally].” The application of such “architectural atmosphere” to Empson – or, for that matter, Donne – pertains, but with a twist of ontological significance: space cannot confer the “place” which, after Edward Relph, makes “place experience” palpable as a kind of “lived insideness.” Rather, space travel is by definition “new” in place terms, since it can hardly be revisited; hence the “architecture” (scale) Empson and Donne are contemplating is one of axial and orbital, rather than situated and emplaced, dimensions.

7. I will go so far as to suggest that Empson’s essay on Donne presents a kind of anterior instance, or illustration, of a still-extant metric for historical process, linking space to scale, and which occupies an important (syntagmatic) instance in a broader paradigm or “sequence homology” – the term is borrowed from genetic code-sequencing – by which the assemblage linking Donne to Empson to the “object-oriented ontology” of our own latter day becomes comprehensible.

8. Gregory Chaplin writes that Milton’s now-verifiable return to the Arian heresy, as it emerged in the context of the “radical republicanism” of the Civil War period, upheld “an idea of human dignity and agency antithetical to the tyrannical politics of torture and blood sacrifice” (Chaplin, 2010, p. 354).

9. Modernist literature is replete with examples, none lovelier than that uttered by Mrs. Swithin in Virginia Woolf’s Between the Acts: “There were rhododendrons in the Strand; and mammoths in Piccadilly” (p. 51).

10. Empson delights, for example, in the use of the indefinite article in Donne’s “The Relic” whereby, via a tidy substitution, “a Mary Magdalen” invites our consideration of the infinite potentials suggested by “a Jesus Christ,” any Jesus Christ, in a far away solar system (1965, p. 87). Such indefinite pluralities rupture the End by virtue of a rapture of
middles. No one story in narrative, indeed, can circumnavigate all stories; no one planet can share its orbit with another.

11. Empson achieved orbit by conquering the gravitational pull of the critical orthodoxy then prevailing – as evidenced by T. S. Eliot’s clearly reactionary critical tendencies and what one thinks of as an increasingly scripturalist criticism practiced by the American New Critics – using an analytic framework he had initially been attracted to and was subsequently repulsed by. Lecturing at summer sessions in 1948 and 1949 sponsored by Kenyon College, in Ohio, Empson saw the formation of this establishment in real time and up close. Note also the “later style” achieved by Empson’s animus as it matured which, in a representative example, may be found in his response to the “intentional fallacy”: “[i]f you dislike my claiming to know so much [about Donne], I have to answer that I think it absurd, and very harmful, to have a critical theory, like Mr Wimsatt’s, that a reader must not try to follow an author’s mind” (Empson, 1993, p. 124).

12. The final 15 years of Empson’s life as a productive literary critic consisted, to a great degree, of enjoining polemic in the editorial pages of leading field journals. He consistently and stridently sought means by which the “neo-Christian” monster might be chastened if not subdued. Admittedly, Empson’s thinking in this contest gets characteristically brittle and narrower-minded at times. There is something of the straw man about this enemy which, as probably even he understood, was comprised mainly of an otherwise very loose amalgam of contending historical forces and personalities. In retrospect, Empson’s own defining intellect may have contributed substantially to the contours and substance of the “neo-Christian” monster he regarded with such contempt. In the years immediately following his death, in 1984, the monster Empson had, in equal parts, designed and prophesied would indeed locate the spark in the surrounding ether and rise from the table. Particularly in the United States, the neoconservative movement, backed by orthodox thinkers in the mold of Harold Bloom and William Bennett, began to push back on the free-thinking academy. See Paul Dean (2001, p. 24).

13. In this broader cosmological context, Empson’s renewed interest in (and subsequent return to) the Face of the Buddha manuscript after 1945 – elements of which had been drafted by him far earlier, when lecturing in Japan and China in the 1930s – becomes more understandable. His pivot backward in time, toward the more “worlded” aesthetics he had discovered when upon Asian ground was, clearly, a reaction against Anglo-American critical orthodoxy (Christie, 2017). The return to an ancient Buddhist tradition was itself a kind of traveling return in space and time.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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