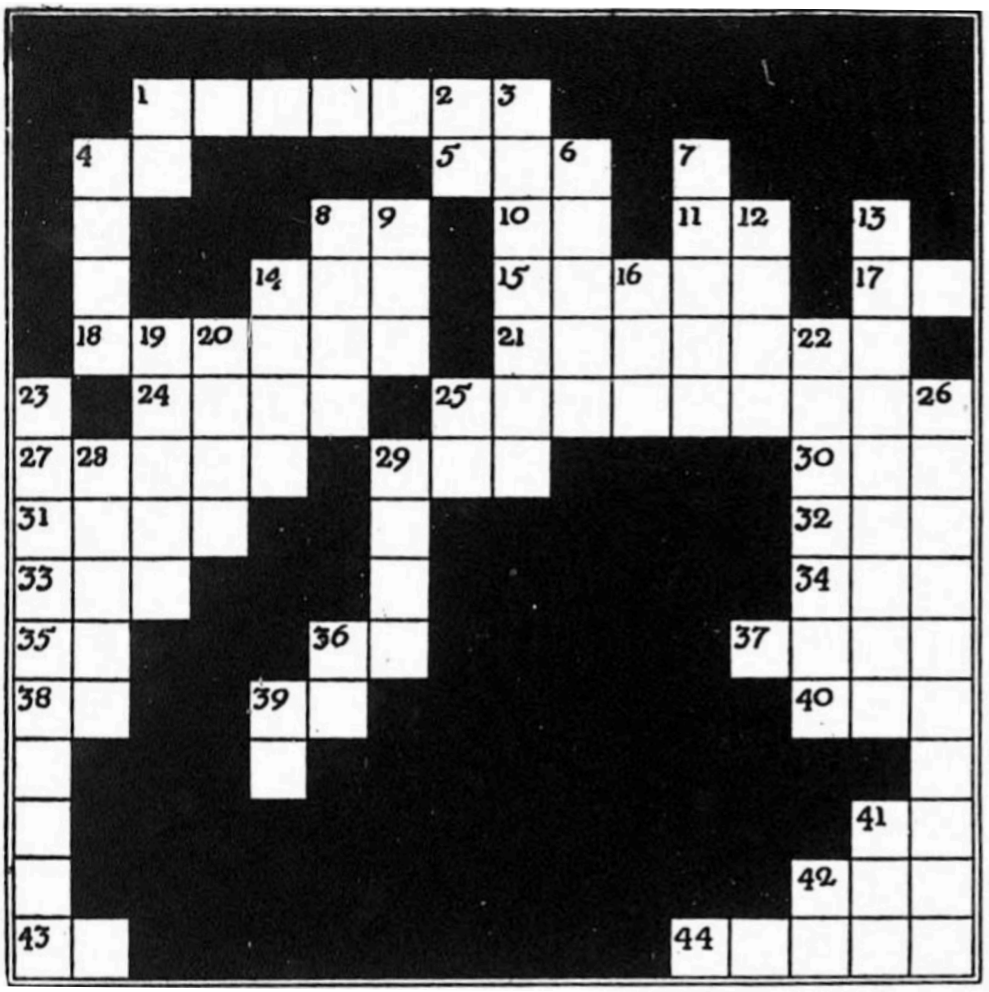
Faculty of English
University of Oxford

Cryptic Modernism:

Reading Puzzlement in Poetry, c. 1886–1966



Roddy Howland Jackson
Magdalen College
Candidate: 1074731

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
May, 2025

Declaration

The word count for this thesis, including footnotes but excluding bibliography, is 90,205.

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Abstract

This thesis considers how puzzlement was practised by poets and interpreted by readers between c. 1886–1966, with specific attention to the recreational word puzzles popularised in the period. The term 'recreational' is used advisedly: this thesis argues that word puzzles, too often described as mere playthings in critical accounts of the period, afforded poets a versatile medium for re-creating their objects both structurally and epistemologically. My date parameters take us from Lewis Carroll's *The Game of Logic* (1886) to Ximenes' *On the Art of the Crossword* (1966); that is, from an early experiment in gamifying cryptic syntax to its standard blueprint. Between these bookends is a period in which puzzles can legitimately be described as a preeminent Anglophone literary form, but a period whose puzzles have lacked serious discursive consideration. Consequently, this thesis tracks puzzlement as a neglected mode of textual production as it transitioned from fin-de-siècle ludolinguistics into 'modernist' complexity, and beyond. Exploring the generative qualities of poetic difficulty against the historical backdrop of the word puzzle as a recreational activity, this thesis ultimately asks three key questions. How was puzzlement constitutive of, and constituted by, poets, poems, and readers? Why was puzzlement such a conspicuous and capacious model for contesting poetry in the period? Can puzzlement provide a lens for reading poetry that is sharpened by, rather than suspicious of, the wilful bafflement it harnessed? Through the cases explored in this thesis, I explore the poetic opportunities afforded by puzzlement, mapping out both homologies and influences on a period of poetry whose 'puzzle interest' (as Empson called it) has been critically missolved.

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the expertise and enthusiasm of my supervisor, Professor Robert Douglas-Fairhurst. I am grateful for his guidance in solving what was originally a puzzle in itself: a set of unruly and unsubstantiated ideas — 'a heap of broken images', as T. S. Eliot put it in *The Waste Land* — in need of thoughtful assembly. Robert has had a profoundly unifying effect on these ideas, not to mention his useful scepticism about cryptic crosswords, which has (hopefully) kept me from lapsing into mere monologue.

This thesis began as an opportunistic plot to convert a lifelong interest into a piece of MPhil coursework at the University of Cambridge. The work was spurred on by Dr Edward Allen, and shaped into seriousness by my supervisor Professor Steven Connor. I must also thank Hunter Dukes and Adam Green of *The Public Domain Review* for publishing the earliest version of this project, and for convincing me that there was plenty more still to say. Special mention must go to Ashley Smith, who first introduced me to cryptic crosswords during English lessons as a primary school student. I would also like to thank my Transfer and Confirmation assessors, Professors Kate McLoughlin and Marina Mackay, for their careful reading of my work. My college advisor, Professor Simon Horobin, has been a thoughtful guide — the puzzle-fond counterpart to Robert's puzzle-agnosticism — not to mention a diligent tester of my grids. I am the grateful beneficiary of the Oxford-Leon E and Iris L Beghian Graduate Scholarship, which was indispensable to my ability to complete this DPhil.

Thank you especially to Daisy Sankey for enduring my bafflement throughout this DPhil with patience and wit, not to mention admirable reserves of support. In a (frankly ill-advised) manoeuvre shortly after we met, I embedded Daisy's name within a published crossword. Her passion for and assistance with my work certainly runs through this thesis.

My grandfather, The Rev'd Dr Andrew Macintosh, passed away during the final year of my thesis. A passionate advocate for my extracurricular education as a child, he once gave me a full mock tutorial on the concept of aetiology — the investigation of causes — over some biscuits while I was a primary school student. In the aetiology of my own academic work, I attribute the cause of much of my curiosity to him. Whether as a patient teacher, or more recently as a collegial ear to my grumbles about textual scholarship, he was always graciously and generously interested in my work. This is dedicated to him.

I must finally thank my parents, Rachel and John, for their enormous support throughout all of my education. Allegedly, as a speech-shy toddler, I would garble 'that's a maze' when I found something 'amazing'. Whether printing off cryptics for me to solve when travelling, donating scrap paper for me to doodle labyrinths, or bailing me out of impasses in the *Professor Layton* games, my parents have always encouraged me to read the maze in amazement.

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Blessings on the head of whoever first gave us crosswords! It would be difficult to calculate how many poems they have saved from wreckage.

'Boom of Crosswords', *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, 7 March 1930, p. 8.

7. In shape nothing more than a poet (5)

Torquemada, 'Puzzle 246', *Observer*, 27 May 1934, p. 27.

Introduction

i. Monkey Puzzles

> "An interwoven somewhat", it will not come out.
>
> Marianne Moore,
> 'The Monkey Puzzler' (1924)[1]

> P. P. S. I have always heard the tree referred to in this country as 'Monkey Puzzle' not puzzler [...] It will be a looovely book.
>
> T. S. Eliot, letter to Moore (1934)[2]

As you leave the T. S. Eliot Theatre in Merton College, Oxford, and peer across Rose Lane into the Botanic Garden, the first thing you will see is a monkey puzzle tree. *Araucaria araucana* was so nicknamed because of the conundrum its brambly, spiralling branches were imagined to pose to even the most dextrous primates. It must, after all, be puzzling to navigate a tree of such 'porcupine quilled, infinitely complicated starkness', as Moore had described it in 'The Monkey Puzzler', a poem first published in *Observations* (1924). In 1958, the species would inspire the pseudonym for the cryptic crossword setter John Graham (Araucaria), who had grown up a short distance from the gardens. Eliot, too, during his brief period of study at Merton College between 1914–15, would have noted the tree on leaving the grounds: it had been planted from a seed collected from Valparaíso by James Macrae in 1825, and grew to a conspicuous twenty metres before it was felled and replaced in 1950.[3] In 2024, in a fitting blow to the iconography of my ongoing thesis about modernism's puzzles, the Eliot-facing Araucaria succumbed to a mysterious disease.[4] Its branches were severed; the stumper became a stump, the puzzler a puzzle no more.

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[1] Marianne Moore, 'The Monkey Puzzler', l. 6, in *Observations* (The Dial Press, 1924), p. 30. All subsequent references according to *MHRA Style Guide*, 4th edn (Modern Humanities Research Association, 2024).
[2] T. S. Eliot, letter to Marianne Moore (20 June, 1934), in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot,* ed. by Valerie Eliot, Hugh Haughton, and John Haffenden, VII, *1934–1935*, ed. by Eliot and Haffenden (Faber, 2017), p. 236. Hereafter *TSEL*.
[3] David Geyde, 'The Introduction of *Araucaria araucana* into the British Isles', *International Dendrology Society Yearbook* (2017), pp. 59–78 (p. 66).
[4] Mark Brent (Curator of Oxford Botanic Gardens), email to the author, 21 May 2024.

In January 2023, Robert Crawford gave a lecture on Eliot and biography in the theatre opposite the monkey puzzle; the stone doorway provided an inadvertent frame for the towering tree as the audience left the venue.[5] In the introduction to his biography *Young Eliot* (2015), Crawford assures readers that 'the verse is nowhere here treated merely as a crossword puzzle,' only six pages after confessing that the defining feature of his forty-year specialism in Eliot is that 'there are still things about the poetry that puzzle me.'[6] Crawford makes a methodological distinction between Eliot the puzzle-lover and Eliot the poet. This thesis will instead consider why, to borrow the terms of Eliot's editorial intervention in the run-up to Moore's *Selected Poems* (1935), a 'puzzler' might not also be a 'puzzle'. According to East Anglian folklore, monkey puzzles were planted at the edge of graveyards to prevent the devil from climbing in to attend burials.[7] The monkey puzzle's proximity to the T. S. Eliot Theatre, perhaps, has had something of a comparable effect on his many biographers: often relishing anecdotal flourishes about Eliot's obsession with puzzles from afar, but rarely getting in on the ground level.



Figure 1: Photograph of Oxford's *Araucaria araucana*, behind a statue of a boar (c. 1939).[8]

[5] Robert Crawford, 'T. S. Eliot and Biography', unpublished lecture (University of Oxford, 25 January 2023).
[6] Crawford, *Young Eliot: From St Louis to The Waste Land* (Jonathan Cape, 2015), p. 8; p. 2.
[7] Enid Porter, *Cambridgeshire Customs and Folklore* (Routledge, 1969), p. 63.
[8] Photograph of Araucaria Araucana in Oxford Botanic Gardens (c. 1939), provided by Mark Brent (Curator of Oxford Botanic Gardens), email to the author 24 May 2024.

Eliot's advice stuck, and Moore's poem was retitled 'The Monkey Puzzle' in all subsequent editions, both British and American.[9] If Moore's original title, as Ange Mlinko has argued, wilfully changes 'object into agent', then Moore's amenity to Eliot's postscript demonstrates how changeable a delineation this was in the first place.[10] In Emma Felin's reading of the poem's first line, the tree is ambiguously a puzzle to monkeys and itself a 'kind of monkey or pine-lemur / not of interest to the monkey'.[11] Object and agent, monkey and tree, are simultaneously puzzles and puzzlers to one another, each engaged in a process of reciprocal solution that 'will not come out'. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, the imaginative contagion of the tree results in a 'monkey puzzle rocket' (firework) 'spluttering in darting crackles. Zrads and zrads, zrads, zrads', as if the fractal branches of the tree permeate language itself in the form of neologism.[12]

Responses to Moore's poetry have often evinced this readerly sensation with some unease. Eight years before the publication of 'The Monkey Puzzler', Hilda Doolittle spoke for readers of *The Egoist*: 'They have read Miss Marianne Moore's poems again and again, and questioned, half in despair — is this a mere word-puzzle, or does it mean something? Does it mean something?'[13] Weighing it up, Doolittle adjudicates that 'I think it does mean something,' ruling out the word puzzle as a justifiable point of comparison before again valorising Moore's ability to 'baffle' her readers. In his introduction to Moore's *Selected Poems* (1935), Eliot likewise praises the 'metaphysical' strength of Moore's knack for 'bewilderment', noting the poems' ability to produce perplexity as a 'gift' worth reading.[14]

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[9] Andrew J. Kappel, 'Presenting Miss Moore, Modernist: T. S. Eliot's Edition of Marianne Moore's *Selected Poems*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 19.1 (Summer 1994), pp. 129–50 (p. 138).
[10] Ange Mlinko, 'Willing to Be Reckless', *Poetry*, 211. 3 (December 2017), pp. 289–302 (p. 294).
[11] Emma Felin, 'A Peculiar Kind of Particularity: Plants and Animals in Marianne Moore's Early Poetry', *Modernist Cultures*, 18.1 (2023), pp. 1–30 (p. 14).
[12] Joyce, *Ulysses* (Shakespeare and Company, 1922), p. 355.
[13] Hilda Doolittle, 'Marianne Moore', *Egoist*, 3.8 (August 1916), p. 118.
[14] Eliot, 'Introduction to *Selected Poems* [Marianne Moore]', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard, 8 vols (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), V, *Tradition and Orthodoxy, 1934–39*, ed. by Iman Javadi and Jayme Stayer (2017), p. 232. Hereafter *TSECP*.

In even his most deprecating manoeuvre, Eliot likens the effect of Moore's poetry on an 'unwary' reader to 'the pleasurable astonishment evoked by the carved ivory ball with eleven other balls inside it, the fully-rigged ship in a bottle, the skeleton of the crucifix fish.' The first two referents are manufactured puzzles: on the one hand, a *guǐ gōng qiú* (a so-called 'devil's work ball') that nests impossibly concentric spheres, and on the other, the trick mechanism of a concealed hinge. The third, however, is the saltwater catfish, whose skeleton uncannily resembles a tableau of the crucifixion. Eliot's metaphor for Moore's poetry is mixed: the conflation of natural and artificial puzzles spotlights her verse's ability to engage its readers as puzzlers (but also deny them the fixity of a solution) using words rather than ivory, wood, or bones.

Moore flirted with the charge of puzzlingness in the *ars poetica* that faced 'The Monkey Puzzler' in the second edition of *Observations*, a poem continually revised and restructured throughout her career.[15] 'Poetry' ends with a declaration:

> It may be said of all of us
> that we do not admire what we cannot understand;
> enigmas are not poetry.

Moore's 'enigmas' replace 'The bat / holding on upside down' from the 1921 iteration, a change Bonnie Costello explains as 'a frustration with ambiguities and an attempt to silence them'. Manuscript revisions to the poem, however, ultimately denigrate 'misled literalists of the imagination' and celebrate 'misrule' as a valuable poetic principle.[16] Suggestively, Eliot's adjustment to the running order for *Selected Poems* placed these poems apart, promoting 'The Monkey Puzzle' to an earlier position.[17] Eliot admired Moore's poetry precisely for its enigmatic ambivalence: for its ability to thwart strict comprehension by subordinating 'emotional unity' to a unity of 'minute detail', letting the imagination misrule.

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[15] Moore, 'Poetry', ll. 11–13, in *Observations*, 2nd edn (Dial, 1925), p. 30.
[16] Bonnie Costello, *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions* (Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 25.
[17] Kappel, 'Presenting Miss Moore', p. 138.

It is not the argument of this thesis that (to tamper with Moore's equation), 'enigmas are poetry', but rather that these two genres evince, like the monkey puzzle, 'an interwoven somewhat': a liminal and reciprocal affinity that speakers like the one in 'Poetry', or critics like Doolittle, are often too hasty to describe as separate. Though it is critically standard to venture that poetry adds up to more than the sum of its parts, many are reluctant to assent to this idea when it is presented using the lexicon of the puzzle. Despite being a natural homologue for the poem, the word puzzle has often been viewed as either unliterary or simply unlikeable. Moore's 'Monkey Puzzle' exemplifies the double life that the puzzle led in the modernist literary imagination. At once a readily available model for contesting poetic ideas, and a supposed product of poetry at its worst, the puzzle stumped and spurred its solvers in equal measure.

ii. The Rules of the Game

In this thesis, I will take Eliot at his word when, in the introduction to Paul Valéry's *The Art of Poetry* (1958), he pondered 'the puzzle of how poetry gets written.'[18] Far from being peripheral to verse in the early- to mid-twentieth century, I argue that puzzles were constitutive of, and constituted by, an evolving model for poetry. The scope of my thesis sets three key constraints: the period 1886–1966, cryptic puzzles, and poetry.

My date parameters take us from Lewis Carroll's *The Game of Logic* (1886) to Ximenes' *On the Art of the Crossword* (1966); that is, from one early effort to gamify cryptic syntax to the convention-building thesis that would ultimately standardise it. While much valuable research has been conducted on the literary history of puzzle forms, it almost invariably ends with Lewis Carroll, thus leaving unstudied the wealth of such forms that flowered following the turn of the twentieth century. Jason Rosenhouse's *Games For Your Mind* (2020) has insightfully

[18] Eliot, 'Introduction to *The Art of Poetry*, by Paul Valéry (1958)', in *TSECP*, VIII, *Still and Still Moving, 1954–65*, ed. by Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard, pp. 261–74 (p. 264).

explored the complex puzzle structures endemic to late-nineteenth-century studies of logic, but the ripples left by these works in twentieth-century poetry have been neglected.[19] Eleanor Cook's *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (2006) remains the most comprehensive chronological survey of puzzles to date, and valuably tracks their evolution out of classical rhetoric into liturgical traditions.[20] However, Cook scarcely discusses any poetry beyond the nineteenth century, instead assenting to Northrop Frye's selective characterisation of riddles firstly as an archaic textual genre that has become a mere plaything in recent centuries, and secondly as hermeneutically 'opposite' to the phenomenon of a poem.[21]

Indeed, though a great deal of critical attention has been paid to the riddle in its global and transhistorical guises, it typically follows Frye in figuring modern iterations as fallen imitations, betrayals of a cloistered enigmatic tradition, rather than nuanced and hybrid forms in their own right. While valuable sociological work has been conducted on the cultural significance of puzzles, for example in Anthony Ossa-Richardson's *A History of Ambiguity* (2019), C. Thi Nguyen's *Games: Agency as Art* (2020), and Robbie Kubala's 'The Aesthetics of Crossword Puzzles' (2023), the attention of such studies is unmoored from the literary, and more confident when making theological, philosophical, and aesthetic arguments respectively.[22] Even works that are highly sympathetic to the cultural valence of puzzles, such as Tony Augarde's *The Oxford Guide to Word Games* (1986), argue that the riddle tradition has been entirely transposed into the playground, absent from any kind of serious literature. If puzzles are 'restyled by each generation to fit the prevailing mood,' as Augarde argues, then his ruling that 'word games can never compete with the arts' is rather emblematic of modernity's apparently low regard for the puzzle.[23]

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[19] Jason Rosenhouse, *Games for your Mind: The History and Future of Logic Puzzles* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
[20] Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[21] Northrop Frye, 'Charms and Riddles', in *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 124–47 (p. 145).
[22] Anthony Ossa-Richardson, *A History of Ambiguity* (Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 285. C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art* (Oxford University Press, 2020). Robbie Kubala, 'The Aesthetics of Crossword Puzzles', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 63.3 (July 2023), pp. 381–94.
[23] Tony Augarde, *The Oxford Guide to Word Games* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 2.

In addition to considering the puzzle as an important touchstone for twentieth-century poets, I aim to redress this critical blindspot by focusing on a period in which, paradoxically, puzzles are thought to have become uninteresting, and yet are at their most popular. These dates span a period riddled, as it were, with textual puzzles. It is worth taking seriously a textual form that, far from fizzling out into irrelevance in the twentieth century, became one of its preeminent genres. The claim is not hyperbolic: *The New York Times* estimated in 1925 that five million hours in total were spent by ten million Americans each day reading puzzles (a figure now closer to 50 million), while in the UK today, around 12 million people make a daily ritual of word puzzles.[24] Both then and now, there is a legitimate argument to be made that word puzzles eclipse the draw of conventional literary modes by some margin. I aim to track these critically neglected modes of textual production as they transitioned from Victorian playfulness into mass-circulated twentieth-century forms, focusing on the crosspollination of poetry with puzzles when they were at their most popular.

Crucially, and in addition to covering the so-called 'Crossword Craze' of the 1920s, these dates allow me to study cryptic puzzles before the age of 'Ximenean' regulation; in other words, while they were riotously heterodox, textually hybrid, and structurally experimental forms. I make an important distinction between puzzles at large and *cryptic* puzzles. There is no formal definition of a cryptic puzzle, but it is distinct from a standard word puzzle because it instrumentalises verbal ambiguity to make multiple concrete possibilities available to a solver simultaneously.

Though this thesis will consider many types of word puzzle, the cryptic crossword inevitably looms large in discussion because it is not one genre so much as an amalgam of these varied forms of word puzzle, particularly in the pre-Ximenean time span of my thesis, where types of clue are often opaquely combined. While a jigsaw puzzle mechanises fragmentation (being one version of what Eliot called 'a heap of broken images'), and chess

[24] 'Cross-Word Puzzles: An Enslaved America', *The Times*, 9 December 1924, p. 17. Martin H. Levinson, 'Crossword Puzzles: Mapping the Territory', *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 77 (2020), pp. 232–9.

problems such as those featured in Nabokov's *Poems and Problems* (1969) are puzzles of adversarial strategy, cryptic crosswords invisibly leverage a broad range of word puzzle techniques in both their clues and construction.[25] If a list of crossword clues epitomises 'the revenge of the stanza in the era of free verse,' as Beci Carver has suggested, then the cryptic displays a stanza in which the genre unpredictably changes line by line.[26]

It is useful at this stage to offer a beginner's guide to cryptic clues. A standard crossword, which I shall here call a *plain* crossword in accordance with the puzzle writer Torquemada, is a genre where the answer is based on the transactive exchange of synonyms. A word like THESIS might be clued in a plain crossword as '[Paper]', '[Senior project]', or '[Grad student's bane]'.[27] The definition is straight rather than cryptic. A cryptic puzzle, by contrast, might render THESIS as any of:

> In street he's issuing paper (6)
> Subject of article poses, wasting time (6)
> Actor, half-cut, is creating argument (6)
> Essay is written on the first of September (6)
> He sits composing dissertation (6)

Each clue combines a definitional component with a wordplay component, the order and delineation of which is hidden on first reading. There is an unannounced caesura in each line dividing these two halves. In the first example, THESIS ('paper') is hidden sequentially inside 'street he's issuing'.[28] In the second, THESIS ('subject') is a charade of THE (a grammatical 'article') and SI[t]S, a synonym for 'poses' getting rid of ('wasting') the standard physical unit for 'time'.[29] The third is an alternative charade of THES[pian] ('actor, half-cut') with IS to make

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[25] Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 22, in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Jim McCue and Christopher Ricks, 2 vols (Faber, 2015), I, p. 55. Hereafter *TSEP*. Vladimir Nabokov, *Poems and Problems* (McGraw-Hill, 1969).
[26] Beci Carver [@becimay], 'Isn't it sort of stanzaic? I wonder if it's the revenge of the stanza in the era of free verse', Twitter, 9 October 2022, <https://x.com/becimay/status/1579084788555816960> [accessed 6 February 2025].
[27] [20A], Helen Fasulo, in *New York Times*, 4 October 1956); [81A], Natan Last, in *New York Times*, 3 April 2016); [91A], Peter Gordon, in *New York Times*, 17 March 1996). As there is no standard referencing convention for crossword clues, I will give them in this format. When a puzzle is named or numbered, or a constructor includes their name or pseudonym, this will be included; otherwise, the clue, publication, and date will be given. Clues quoted in the text will be placed in square brackets.
[28] [27A] in 'No. 26,442', in *Daily Telegraph*, 1 June 1 2011.
[29] [22D] in 'Toughie 1271', 8 October 2014.

THESIS ('argument').[30] In the fourth, THESIS ('essay') is written in plain sight, stacked out of IS ('is') written underneath THE ('the') and S ('first of September').[31] In the final example, THESIS ('dissertation') is an anagram (or 'composing') of the letters in 'he sits'.[32] Taking heed of Ezra Pound's definition of poetry in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910) as 'a sort of inspired mathematics', we might write each clue as a lexical equation:[33]

> In {[stree]T HE'S IS[suing]} = PAPER
> SUBJECT = THE + SI[t]S
> THES[pian] + IS = ARGUMENT
> ESSAY = THE + S[eptember] + IS
> HESITS* = DISSERTATION

Each of these clues exhibits a form of 'double syntax', a term I take from Empson's introductory definition of ambiguity in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930).[34] The clue can be read in at least two ways: there is a so-called surface reading that one must read beyond in order to unlock the answer. One useful instruction, always given in the prefatory material to cryptic puzzles written by Richard E. Maltby Jr. for *Harper's Magazine*, is that a reader must enact a kind of 'mental repunctuation' in order to progress.[35]

This is the unique mechanism of a cryptic crossword clue: it can only be solved one way precisely because it can be read in multiple ways. While a plain clue is only validated by the letters that intersect it — when you define THESIS as '[Graduate student's bane (6)]', say, the solution could just as easily be other six-letter words like INCOME, PSYCHE, CAREER, or TENURE — the double syntax of a cryptic clue permits only one solution. As Chapter 2 will discuss, the inchoate parameters of cryptic puzzles before Ximenes published his regulatory *On the Art of the Crossword* (1966) means that clues were not always so neatly, or fairly, constructed, but it suffices at this stage to understand that cryptic puzzles are pitched in hermeneutic contrast to plain puzzles.

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[30] [22D], Flimsy, in 'No. 15,556', in *Financial Times*, 23 April 2017.
[31] [31A], Mudd, in 'No. 16,472', in *Financial Times*, 21 May 2020.
[32] [3D], Vulcan, in 'No. 28,076', in *Guardian*, 9 March 2020.
[33] Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1910), p. 5.
[34] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2nd edition (Chatto & Windus, 1949), p. 2.
[35] Richard E. Maltby Jr., 'Matched Sets', in *Harper's Magazine* (June 2024), p. 81.

The distinction between cryptic and plain puzzles is not only important to the remit of my thesis, but also to my intervention in a critical tradition that often misconstrues its object. Adrienne Raphel's 'The Crossword Mentality in Modern Literature and Culture' (2018) remains the most ambitious literary account of the proliferation of word puzzles in the twentieth century, and goes a long way in addressing the dearth of critical attention paid to the fate of puzzles beyond mere ludic Victoriana. Raphel's account, however, is almost entirely anchored in a narrow notion of the word puzzle that is both geographically landlocked to the United States, and generically restricted to the plain puzzle. This would be entirely appropriate if Raphel did not make significant claims about the interrelation of puzzles and the poetry of writers such as T. S. Eliot and William Empson, and indeed use the plain crossword as a framework for considering their output. Furthermore, it is the basis of her hierarchising pronouncement that 'the crossword isn't itself literature'.[36] Yet Eliot and Empson, among many poets I consider, were uninterested in the plain style of puzzle, and cleaved to cryptic varietals throughout their lives. It is important that any claims made about the intersection of puzzles and poetry are based, at the very least, on the right puzzles.

Contrastingly, though a small handful of studies have considered cryptic forms of the puzzle in the context of literature, they remain tentative about asserting anything other than an affinity between the two, defined only loosely. David Ben-Merre, for instance, likens the cryptic clue's propensity for 'double meaning' to the multigestural qualities of poetry, but uses largely plain clues to furnish an argument about Emily Dickinson, a writer for whom the comparison is both geographically tangential and anachronistic. His notion that cryptic puzzles and poetry are often alike in their use of 'semantic and graphic/phonetic aspects of language' is convincing, but there are comparatively few examples given to test it out.[37] Laura

[36] Adrienne Raphel, 'The Crossword Mentality in Modern Literature and Culture' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Harvard University, 2018), p. 4. Later published in an abridged form as *Thinking Inside the Box* (Penguin, 2020).
[37] David Ben-Merre, '"The Moon Slides Down the Stair / To See Who's There": The Poetics of the Crossword and the Cross Words of Poetics', in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 64.2 (Summer 2022), pp. 115–43 (p. 128).

Lorhan's 'Puzzling Modernity' (2016) likewise assesses Pound and Eliot on the basis of their fondness for 'a distinctly British variant of the crossword puzzle, the "cryptic"', while never quoting from a cryptic puzzle.[38] This thesis, then, will explore the affinity between poems and puzzles using writers for whom the link is not abstract, but concretely and demonstrably appropriate. Whether it is Eliot confessing that he needed cryptic crosswords to surpass his writer's block, Pound abhorring Torquemada's versified puzzles, or Empson spending hours a day solving them, there is a much more natural argument to be made about the influence that poems and puzzles had over each other in the period.

The third constraint placed on this thesis is that I will specifically consider poetry. Puzzlement is evidently manifest in diverse kinds of prose in the twentieth century, whether whodunits, detective fiction, ergodic novels, or simply works such as *Finnegans Wake* that were so difficult as to be often compared to puzzles. Rosenhouse, for instance, interestingly compares Lewis Carroll's syllogisms with the process of readerly inference in novels by Agatha Christie, but limits his focus to 'certain works of fiction that, in my opinion, should be viewed as literary logic puzzles.'[39] If Hercule Poirot exemplifies the 'hypothetico-deductive model of scientific reasoning,' then what might we call the reasoning of a puzzler of poetry? Franco Moretti's 1983 essay on 'Clues' gestures at answering this question when he compares the clue with the lyric, both standing for 'the particular element of the story in which the link between the signifier and the signified is altered.' The criminal, by extension, 'has created an audacious poetic work' out of verbal procedures.[40] The assertion that all clues necessarily evoke poetry, even if they appear in prose, is the discursive climax of Moretti's essay, but the affinity is never explored further.

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[38] Laura Lorhan, 'Puzzling Modernity' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 2016), p. 24.
[39] Rosenhouse, *Games For Your Mind*, p. 308.
[40] Franco Moretti, 'Clues', in *Signs Taken for Wonder: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Form*, trans. by Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller, 3rd edn (Verso, 1997), pp. 130–57 (p. 146).

Rather than offering cross-genre coverage of 'England's glum and puzzled land' — as Joyce put it in a letter to T. S. Eliot in 1936, parodying William Blake's 'Jerusalem' — which would involve retracing more conventional arguments about narrative forms made by, say, Rosenhouse and Moretti, I will specifically consider the less intuitive, less discussed, but no less lively entanglement of puzzlement with poetics.[41] Hannah Sullivan argues that the revisional process for twentieth-century prose predisposed it to elongation, whereas poetry tended towards excision; to extend this idea, while prose often yielded puzzles of excess, poetry instead generated puzzlement by elliptical means.[42] It is important to note that there are poets whose works fruitfully explore these ideas (such as Veronica Forrest-Thomson, J. H. Prynne, Paul Muldoon, and James Merrill) who are not included in my discussion, with some of their puzzle-inflected writings postdating my parameters. Rather than offering coverage of the period, I aim to examine a series of interlinked case studies that instantiate puzzlement in interrogative ways in poetry, chosen because they attest to the puzzle as a commodious form for staging debate about poetry's remit, means, and limits.

Critical responses to poetry in this period, after all, have readily assented to the idea that 'modernist' poetry was puzzling, but with conspicuously little regard for the actual puzzles that informed the adjective. Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé's *A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature after Wittgenstein* (2020), for instance, valuably posits that the defining structural conceit of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) is that it throws down a 'formidable exegetical gauntlet' to achieve the 'salutary purpose of prodding us towards the activity of achieving the kind of ethical clarity that will help us in our struggles with linguistic confusion.'[43] Though persistently comparing Wittgenstein's aphorisms to a 'complex modernist puzzle', an 'ethical-aesthetic puzzle', or a 'consciously crafted puzzle', Zumhagen-Yekplé does not actually examine contemporaneous puzzles, instead making

[41] James Joyce, letter to Eliot (September 5, 1936), in *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–1938*, p. 998.
[42] Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 4.
[43] Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé, *A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature After Wittgenstein* (Chicago University Press, 2020), p. 9.

persuasive but curiously unevidenced claims about the ubiquity of the form in the abstract. Instead, 'an obsession with the transformative power of puzzles' is labelled as 'the definitive aspect of secular modernism' without cross-reference to the quotidian transformations made possible in the contemporary puzzle.[44]

Leonard Diepeveen's *The Difficulties of Modernism* (2003) likewise persuasively argues that modernism prized bafflement as an abundant literary resource, but other than echoing caricatures about the so-called 'crossword craze' that ultimately serve to exclude them from serious consideration, only briefly entertains the notion that puzzles might be more than 'trivial'.[45] This is the same approach that sees Raphel analyse the crossword through the prism of its versatility as a 'heuristic of difficulty' in critical discourse, thus enforcing a binary between poem and puzzle that was far less rigid in the period.[46] Puzzles were a lightning rod for a host of poetic anxieties, whether in Louis Untermeyer skewering the 'Cross-Word Puzzle School of poetry' in 1923, the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* denigrating Gertrude Stein's seeming ciphers in 1926, Dudley Fitts mocking Ezra Pound's *Cantos* as 'incomprehensible' puzzles in 1931, or Basil de Sélincourt ruing Empson's 'puzzle interest' in 1940.[47]

Rather than being merely synonymous with, heuristic of, or subordinate to the one-size-fits-all difficulty that often takes centre stage, I argue that puzzles brought together the dual possibilities of impasse and imaginative union, and as such were a naturally resonant model for a literary period often thought of as unusually combinatorial, elliptical, and experimental. In 1711, Joseph Addison complained in *The Spectator* that word puzzles exemplified 'false wit' because they consist in the 'Resemblance and Congruity sometimes of single letters' rather than 'of Ideas', instead calling puzzlers 'Blockheads' sullying the 'true wit' of poetry.[48] Beyond the irony of *The Spectator*'s later thriving puzzle section — the natural

[44] Zumhagen-Yekplé, *Different Order*, p. 85.
[45] Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (Routledge, 2003), p. 145.
[46] Raphel, 'The Crossword Mentality', p. 108.
[47] Louis Untermeyer, *American Poetry Since 1900* (Henry Holt & Co., 1923), p. 153. 'Georgian Stories', *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 8 November 1926, p. 2. Dudley Fitts, 'Music Fit for the Odes', *Hound and Horn* (November, 1931), p. 10. Basil de Sélincourt, 'Poetic Black-Out', in *Observer*, 6 October 1940, p. 3.
[48] Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, 60, 9 May 1711.

point of comparison for Empson's poetry by Julian Bell in 1930 — this thesis considers how puzzling poetry might wilfully use lexical units specifically to harness the 'Ideas' relegated by Addison.[49] Poems were self-consciously grappling with questions of hermeneutics, aporia, and ambivalence; reciprocally, puzzles turned to verse as pattern-rich fodder for allusion, subversion, and misdirection, taking Pound's famous injunction to 'make it new' not only as a mandate for renovation, but also for nuts-and-bolts syntactic reassembly.

This thesis aims to redress this blindspot, then, by offering an account of puzzlement that is commodious towards its renegade cryptic forms rather than hamstrung by any hyperfixation on one singular type. This risks sounding like a contradiction in terms — to diversify our understanding of puzzles by focusing on one puzzle in particular — but the cryptic crossword is better understood here as an umbrella category for all manner of word puzzles. It combines the transactive synonymising of the plain clue with elements of jigsaw, anagram, acrostic, rebus, homophone, Spoonerism, charade, substitution, and deletion, and has since its inception nurtured structural and semantic experiments in theming. In other words, the cryptic puzzle is not one form but many, mischievously constellated around constraints it must simultaneously obey and transcend.

iii. 'England's Glum and Puzzled Land'

What is a puzzle? Appropriately, the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s entry ends in a shrug: the etymology 'remains no more than speculation', generously padded out with caveats and conditional verbs about the word's mysterious pedigree.[50] Among its mooted antecedents are the Old English *puslian* (to select), the Dutch *peuzelen* (to pick at one's food), the German *pöseln* (to toil), and the Danish *pulse* (to busy oneself). 'Perhaps,' the dictionary guesses, the

[49] Julian Bell, 'The Progress of Poetry: A Letter to a Contemporary', *Cambridge Review*, 7 March 1930.
[50] *puzzle,* n. *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (first entry 1595; revised entry 2007) [accessed March, 2024].

word puzzle may have evolved from the notion of selection, to the idea of dithering over selection, and ultimately to the idea of choice paralysis when confronted with tricky stimuli.

As a noun used to describe something devised as an exercise in ingenuity, the earliest attestation of 'puzzle' occurred in 1781 in reference to a wooden jigsaw; before that, it referred to an abstract state of bafflement since its first recorded use in 1595, with metonymic puzzle-objects arriving later. Such objects began to proliferate in the nineteenth century as new manufacturing possibilities emerged: the snowball of compound nouns attests to the diversification of commercial puzzle items, whether *puzzle-locks* (1831), *puzzle works* (1834), *puzzle maps* (1853), *puzzle books* (1845), *puzzle-pictures* (1865), or *puzzle pieces* (1888).

Since its coinage, however, 'puzzle' has been used both nominally and verbally, both transitively and intransitively, and both to describe confusion ('it puzzled me') and solution ('I puzzled it'). A 'puzzle' is definitively soluble, and simultaneously describes the impossibility of solution; it disrupts the binary drawn by E. M. Forster in *A Passage to India* (1924) between the 'muddle' (something chaotically meaningless) and the 'mystery' (a muddle that resolves).[51] In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein concluded aphoristically that '*The riddle* does not exist' because its solubility reveals it never to have been a riddle in the first place.[52] Fifty years later, the so-called 'father' of *sudoku* Maki Kaji ventured a definition that disputes the idea that solution is destructively circular, instead celebrating its ultimate transformativity: '? -> !'[53]

The 1755 edition of Samuel Johnson's dictionary confirms this variety of connotation, defining puzzle both transitively ('to perplex; to confound; to embarrass; to entangle; to gravel; to put to a stand; to teaze') and intransitively ('to be bewildered in one's notions; to be aukward').[54] For the noun, Johnson illustrates his definition with recourse to Francis Bacon's

[51] E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (Edward Arnold, 1924), p. 69.
[52] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), 6.5, p. 89.
[53] Maki Kaji, quoted in Henry Hitchings, 'Surface Innocence', in *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 May 2022.
[54] *puzzle*, n.s., in Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1773), available online at <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1773/puzzle_ns> (accessed 7 April 2025).

Essay 'Of Great Place' (1597), in which the 'puzzle of business' is said to place people at a distance to their own minds, a device for defamiliarisation: while in the 'puzzle of business', people become 'strangers to themselves'.[55] As Chapter 4 will later discuss, Empson likewise spied in poetic puzzles the opportunity to 'tease [readers] out of thought' strategically, suspending brittle hermeneutic mechanisms in order to capture the 'strangeness' of the world more authentically.[56]

When we solve a puzzle, we cry 'Aha!' and 'Eureka!', speak of lightbulbs turning on, pennies dropping, and hear twigs and clicks. When a puzzle frustrates us, we scratch our heads, cross our wires, lose threads, are unable to make head or tail, get the wrong end of the stick, and fail to remain on the same page. English is rife with metaphors used to delineate between different kinds of puzzle, and there is an instinctive qualitative distinction between being 'stumped' and 'clueless', or between being 'at sixes and sevens' and 'at cross purposes.' The variety of figures available in English for puzzlement is somewhat apt, since according to Aristotle, riddles grew out of humanity's habit of constructing likenesses between disparate objects, of seeing one thing as another. Indeed, the classical trope of the enigma, one of many rhetorical cognates under the umbrella of the puzzle, was expressly based in incongruity, in synthesising metaphors to remake one idea as another: 'the essence of a riddle is to express true facts under impossible combinations' through metaphor.[57]

Though the proliferation of puzzling textual forms in the twentieth century was certainly an international phenomenon, as Chapter 1 will discuss, there are two key qualities of the English language that, I argue, predisposed it to cryptic syntax. The first is technical. In a 1948 paper titled 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication', the so-called 'father of information theory' Claude Shannon set out his notion of redundancy in different languages in order to devise more efficient mechanisms for communication. Shannon experimented with

[55] Francis Bacon, 'Of Great Place', in *Bacon's Essays*, ed. by Sydney Humphries (Adam & Charles Black, 1912), p. 54.
[56] William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, ed. by Helen Thaventhiran and Stefan Collini (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 331. Hereafter *SCW*.
[57] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (Macmillan, 1895), p. 77.

English by applying successive probability filters to seeming gibberish, illustrating that it only takes remarkably few orders of approximation before quasi-English emerges:

1. XFOML RXKHRJFFJUJ ZLPWCFWKCYJ FFJEYVKCQSGHYD QPAAMKBZAACIBZLHJQD
2. OCRO HLI RGWR NMIELWIS EU LL NBNESEBYA TH EEI ALHENHTTPA OOBTTVA NAH BRL
3. ON IE ANTSOUTINYS ARE T INCTORE ST BE S DEAMY ACHIN D ILONASIVE TUCOOWE AT TEASONARE FUSO TIZIN ANDY TOBE SEACE CTISBE
4. IN NO IST LAT WHEY CRATICT FROURE BIRS GROCID PONDENOME OF DEMONSTURES OF THE REPTAGIN IS REGOACTIONA OF CRE.
5. REPRESENTING AND SPEEDILY IS AN GOOD APT OR COME CAN DIFFERENT NATURAL HERE HE THE A IN CAME THE TO OF TO EXPERT GRAY COME TO FURNISHES THE LINE MESSAGE HAD BE THESE.
6. THE HEAD AND IN FRONTAL ATTACK ON AN ENGLISH WRITER THAT THE CHARACTER OF THIS POINT IS THEREFORE ANOTHER METHOD FOR THE LETTERS THAT THE TIME OF WHO EVER TOLD THE PROBLEM FOR AN UNEXPECTED.[58]

English, Shannon ventured, has a natural redundancy of approximately 50%; that is, 'when we write English, half of what we write is determined by the structure of the language and half is chosen freely.' A language like Latin, which is highly inflectional (that is, it insists on conjugation, declension, and agreement) has high redundancy because there are too many linguistic and syntactic restraints. By contrast, English permits both a large range of word choice and does not mandate their visible coordination.

Shannon uses the model of the crossword as a way of speculating on the redundancy value of different languages. A language with a redundancy of zero would make 'any two-dimensional array of letters' a crossword, whereas a high redundancy value makes crosswords very difficult to achieve. This may account in part for the quasi-magical status held by the Sator Square, a palindromic Latin proto-crossword that has long been highly revered as a magical artefact, for instance being inscribed on disks used to extinguish fires in mediaeval Germany:

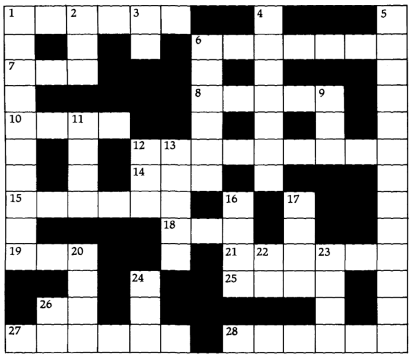
S A T O R
A R E P O
T E N E T
O P E R A
R O T A S

The farmer Arepo holds a plough

[58] Claude Shannon, 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication', in *The Bell System Technical Journal*, 27 (July–October 1948), pp. 379–423 (p. 7).

Shannon's poles are literary: 'Two extremes of redundancy in English prose are represented by Basic English and by James Joyce's book *Finnegans Wake*.' Shannon calculates that 'large crossword puzzles are just possible when the redundancy is 50%', as with English 33%, a 'three-dimensional crossword puzzle' might be possible.[59]

In other words, you can't make a complicated crossword out of Basic English, but *Finnegans Wake* lends itself to multidimensionality (aptly, for a writer who joked about 'insuring one's immortality' [sic] through the integration of literary 'puzzles', and had been nicknamed 'Crossword-Joys' by Wyndham Lewis precisely for his style in *Finnegans Wake*).[60] With some irony, when *James Joyce Quarterly* first published a '*Finnegans Wake* Crossword' by Duncan Mallam in 1981, the design was asymmetric and truncated, as if failing to exploit any of the low redundancy in Joyce's lexicon. The design is all the more surprising for the close involvement of Ruth Von Phul in *James Joyce Quarterly*: a Joyce scholar and contributor who had also won the inaugural 1924 *New York Herald Tribune*'s National All Comers Crossword Tournament in 1924.[61]



CLUES
ACROSS

1 Mrs., leading lady, a poophead?
6 Anshee lispes. . . ?
7 All the rivers?
8 Publish at your peril!
10 Sometimes criss, sometimes cross?
12 We all know her!
14 Ouer little chap Helly Babbau?
15 A true Irish colleen!
18 Thank you, as some say it?
19 All or. . . ?
21 My stars, how strict!
25 Of old, a monarch's seat in Ireland?
26 A singular neuter, in ancient Rome?
27 Daughter of the household?
28 He would awalking go?

Solutions will appear in JJQ (Spring 1981).

CLUES
DOWN

1 Kidsnapped children?
2 Don't give one, except with a gavel!
3 Cock. fem. acc. sing., do you ear?
4 Maybe a spotted pony?
5 Pronounced r as w?
6 Once a kingdom in eastern Europe?
9 Makes the world go round?
11 Very, very Scottish!
12 Only a goat would have done it to a bible!
13 Miss Hanks? or Hands?
16 Better than better!
17 As good as ale or porter?
20 Nothing, in Barcelona?
21 Holy one, abbr.?
22 Bye bye, as we sometimes say!
23 Avoid it, just hang your hat on it!
24 Sigla of Haromphey's holographs?
26 Predicates existence!

Figure 2: Duncan Mallam, 'A *Finnegans Wake* Crossword' (1981)[62]

[59] In fact, three-dimensional crosswords are entirely possible in English. See, for example, Charlie Methven's 'Chameleon No. 29' (2021), formed of a 5x5x7 cube with clues on the axes 'Across and back', 'Up and down', as well as 'Away and towards.'
[60] James Joyce, quoted in Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, rev. edition (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 521. Wyndham Lewis, *The Childermass*, rev. edn (Jupiter Books, 1965), p. 174.
[61] Von Phul, for instance, postulated that *Ulysses* had influenced 'I Am The Walrus' by The Beatles in 'Not A Leetle Beetle', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 6.7 (Spring 1969), pp. 265–6. Lennon had been an early subscriber to the journal.
[62] Duncan Mallam, 'A *Finnegans Wake* Crossword', in *James Joyce Quarterly*, 18.2 (Winter 1981), p. 222.

We might infer that despite the flexibility afforded by the vocabulary of *Finnegans Wake*, part of the success of a word puzzle's design relies on finding the biting point between high and low redundancy. In conversation with Jan Panrandowski in 1937 (a year after he had denigrated 'England's glum and puzzled land' to Eliot), Joyce described the prevailing semantic conceit of his *Wake*-in-progress:

> And perhaps it is madness to grind up words in order to extract their substance, or to graft one onto another, to create cross-breeds and unknown variants, to open up unsuspected possibilities for these words, to marry sounds which were not usually joined before, although they were meant for one another, to allow water to speak like water, birds to chirp in the words of birds, to liberate all sounds of rustling, breaking, arguing, shouting, cracking, whistling, creaking, gurgling — from their servile, contemptible role and to attach them to the feelers of expressions which grope for definitions of the undefined.[63]

Though the orthographic fireworks of *Finnegans Wake* offered Joyce one engine to 'grind up words', and in so doing, 'grope for definitions of the undefined', the emergent class of cryptic word puzzles were reverse-engineering the process. Cryptic puzzles used word-grinding and definition-scrambling to 'open up unsuspected possibilities', not by 'allow[ing] water to speak like water' but instead by letting water disguise itself in other forms. Words could moonlight as each other, free to jump ships and 'cross-breed' new forms. Martin Gardner has assiduously categorised puzzle references in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, suggesting that Joyce's 'puzzle interest' was more than frivolous; he was a keen reader of Henry Ernest Dudeney, and in 1905 he considered cheating in the 'poet's picture-puzzle' contest in the magazine *Answers*.[64] Tellingly, one of several references to crosswords in *Finnegans Wake* sees a character deemed 'a crossroads puzzler' turn, metamorphically, into 'so many square yards', as if actuating the grid design biologically.[65]

The second reason for English's natural candidacy for cryptic puzzles is its syntactic laxity. It is no coincidence that while *The Times* publishes a Latin crossword puzzle once a

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[63] Joyce, quoted in Jan Parandowski, 'Meeting with Joyce', in *Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, ed. by Willard Potts (University of Washington Press, 1977), pp. 153–65 (p. 160).
[64] Martin Gardner, 'The Puzzles in *Ulysses*', *Semiotica*, 57.4 (2009), pp. 317–30 (p. 317). Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 272.
[65] Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 8th printing (New York: Viking Press, 1966) p. 474.

week called 'O Tempora!', the clues (a hybrid of English and Latin) are at best mildly cryptic and normally plain, because it is very difficult to have any kind of ambiguity when the endings of each word are carefully coordinated. By contrast, the combination of inflectional and phrasal freedom in English means that words can be contained, inserted, reversed, blitzed up, and otherwise quarried without jeopardising the integrity of a surface reading. Thus, in a cryptic clue like [Saw a team keeping two metres apart (5)], each component part means precisely two things at once, neither side of the 'double syntax' violating the other.[66]

Jorge Luis Borges in 1977 described the preeminent strength of the English language as its prepositional liberty: 'In English, you can do almost anything with verbs and prepositions. For example, to 'laugh off', to 'dream away' [...] You can't say those things in Spanish. They can't be said. Or really in any Romance language.'[67] The peculiar quiddity of English makes it a natural candidate for syntactic mischief because its prepositions can be read spatially and conceptually at once; crucially, too, they can be included inconspicuously in sentences without disclosing their purpose by virtue of being included at all. This is, of course, not to say that other languages cannot meddle around with words in the same way, but it is demonstrable that though almost every modern language has variants of the crossword, advanced cryptic crosswords have remained a primarily Anglophone phenomenon.[68] It is striking, too, that perhaps the closest genre — the תשבצי הגיון (Hebrew for 'logic crossword'), which leverages the variable markings of the *niqqud* to create multiple definitions — immediately occurred to T. S. Eliot when he first composed multilingual crosswords in 1934: 'Hebrew we had some difficulty in completing.'[69]

My first chapter, 'Gossamer Chessboards: The Counter Poets', considers the logical, philological, and poetic contexts out of which cryptic puzzles sprang at the beginning of the

[66] [11D], Bluth, *Independent*, 20 June 2020. MAXIM ('saw') = A ('a') + XI ('team', 11 in Roman numerals) between two Ms ('keeping two metres apart'). The 'surface' evokes coronavirus rules contemporaneous to the puzzle.
[67] Jorges Luis Borges, in '*Firing Line*: interview with William F. Buckley' (February 1, 1977), <https://www.openculture.com/2014/02/jorge-luis-borges-chats-with-william-f-buckley-on-firing-line-1977.html> (accessed 10 February 2025).
[68] Beyond the United Kingdom, cryptic crosswords in English are particularly popular in Australia and India.
[69] Frank Morley, quoted in *TSEL*, VI, *1932–33*, p. 673.

twentieth century. I begin by arguing that late-nineteenth-century wordplay popularised an atomistic approach to language, specifically when it came to the combinatorial and syntactic possibilities granted by writing puzzles in verse. Fin-de-siècle wordplay laid the groundwork for early-twentieth-century poets raised on a diet of Victorian mischief to deploy puzzling strategies in their verse. This chapter continues by considering the philological interests of poets including Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound whose elliptical poetry was nurtured, I argue, by the popular metaphor of poems as counter games. This capacious metaphor (made expansive by the sheer variety of popular puzzles in the period before the crossword's proliferation) allowed poets to coordinate their poetics around a logical but freely ludic framework.

My second chapter, 'Square Dealing: Cryptic Poetics', argues that early cryptic crosswords played on a form of writing that William Empson would characterise as 'double syntax', both structurally and epistemologically. Qualifying narratives of 'puzzlemania' homogeneously modelled on American paradigms, I closely examine the influential British cryptic puzzles that so many eminent writers of the period were enjoying over their breakfast tables. In particular, I consider Torquemada's hybrid puzzles (versified crosswords, gamified anthologies, and paratextual poems) and discuss the participatory hermeneutics of 'solving' them. I then argue, with attention to Afrit and Ximenes, that cryptic clues partly modelled themselves on syntactically mischievous poetry, and in so doing, subverted literary expectations around allusion, interpretation, and reading itself.

Chapter Three, 'Thinking of the Key: Playing Dead with T. S. Eliot', examines the unruly influence of the cryptic puzzle in the work of a writer whose 'puzzle interest' has been critically understated, despite himself declaring that puzzles were the engine of his poetry. Querying Robert Crawford's notion that Eliot's verse shared little with his beloved puzzles, I trace Eliot's obsession with cryptic crosswords and Patience. Ludic puzzles represented for Eliot both a way of rehearsing theological impasses and of how poetry might hurdle them. I

combine the close reading of major works with unpublished manuscripts, private correspondence, and philosophical writing to demonstrate that puzzlement was not an impediment to Eliot's poetics, but one of its most necessary preconditions.

Finally, Chapter Four, 'Alphabet Soup: Empson's Puzzle Interest' considers the role of cryptic puzzles in shaping the poetry and criticism of William Empson, another puzzle addict whose polymathic interest in interpretation borrowed from the worlds of logic and literature alike. Disputing John Haffenden's argument that Empson's comparison between the hermeneutics of poems and crosswords was merely playful, I build on recent work by Helen Thaventhiran and Stefan Collini to show that 'puzzle' was one of Empson's key metaphors with particular reference to his poetry, criticism, and his call for 'a dictionary for the tricks a word might play' in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951).

In considering the poetry of the period with puzzles in mind, I aim to answer three key questions. Firstly, how was puzzlement influential for, and influenced by, poets, poems, and readers? Secondly, why was puzzlement such a conspicuous and capacious model for practising poetry in the period? Thirdly, can puzzlement provide a critical lens for reading poetry that is sharpened by, rather than suspicious of, the wilful bafflement it harnessed? Through the cases explored in this thesis, I explore the poetic opportunities afforded by puzzlement, mapping out both homologies and influences on a period of poetry whose 'puzzle interest' (as Empson called it) has been critically missolved.

1. Gossamer Chessboards: The Counter Poets

Introduction

> There foam'd rebellious Logic, gagg'd and bound[1]

Far from being 'tamed' while 'fetter[ed] in verse', as John Donne had ventured in 'The Triple Foole' (1663), a personified Logic continues to foam rabidly in Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad* (1743).[2] Traditionally imagined as a constraining influence, here Logic's power is instead ironically inverted. Logic writhes angrily under the shackles of the goddess Dulness, who has usurped the ruling muses of Great Britain in Pope's mock epic. The adjective 'rebellious', however, stages its own miniature coup. As an ambiguously trisyllabic or quadrisyllabic epithet, it simultaneously obeys and overthrows the pentameter holding it in place.

Logic can occupy a double position in verse, at once a guardian of order and a disorderly rebel. The relationship between logic and verse, both adversarial and harmonious, is central to Lewis Carroll's *The Game of Logic* (1886), which takes Pope's line as its epigraph.[3] With a keen eye for the ludic possibilities licensed by putting logic in a bind, Carroll was perhaps struck by the opportunity to misread Pope's 'gag' anachronistically. Beyond a fetter, 'gag' could also refer from 1805 to the kind of humorous deception that Carroll would seize as the guiding conceit of his puzzles, whether in his work on logic or in his wider experiments with nonsense literature.[4] Writing his treatises on logic under his literary pseudonym, Carroll

[1] Alexander Pope, *The New Dunciad: As It Was Found in the Year 1741*, reprinted edn. (George Faulkner, 1742), IV. l. 23, p. 12.
[2] John Donne, 'The Triple Fool', l. 11, in *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. by Herbert J. C. Grierson (Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 16.
[3] Lewis Carroll, *The Game of Logic* (Macmillan and Co., 1887), i.
[4] *gag*, n. (sense 2a), in *OED Online* (accessed 28 October 2024) [first entry 1898].

was certainly alive to the imaginative opportunities enabled by writing about puzzles poetically.

This chapter will track the philological metaphor of words as 'counters' as it circulated from late-Victorian ludolinguistics towards syntactically experimental poetry in the early-twentieth century.[5] It begins by arguing that the fin-de-siècle vogue for puzzle books popularised an atomistic approach to language, specifically when it came to the combinatorial possibilities granted by writing puzzles in verse. Poetry's innate emphasis on using different units for meaning and prosody made it a natural candidate for lexical experimentation. Though instances of 'puzzle poetry' are widespread, I will focus primarily on Frederick D'Arros Planché, Tom Hood, and Lewis Carroll as illustrative examples. Although critical studies of these texts (as explored in my Introduction) have largely considered them either as the last dregs of a weary English riddle tradition, or as whimsical expressions of Victorian playfulness, these were not merely parlour games. 'Puzzle poetry' — first coined in 1880, one of many cryptographic compound nouns that emerged in the period — was a valuable resource for writers at the intersection of the literary and the logical.[6]

In turn, the logological experiments of these writers laid the groundwork for early-twentieth-century poets, raised on a diet of Victorian mischief, to deploy puzzling strategies in their verse. Chapter One will continue by exploring the philological interests of poets whose elliptical poetry was nurtured by the metaphor of poems as counter games. This capacious self-image, made versatile by the sheer variety of popular puzzles in the period before the crossword eclipsed them, allowed poets to coordinate their ideas around a logical but freely playful framework. The poetry and theory of T. E. Hulme, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound are taken as suggestive instantiations of this increasingly widespread metaphor.

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[5] The terms *logology* and *ludolinguistics* were coined by Dmitri Borgmann as a verbal analogue for the idea of 'recreational mathematics.' Borgmann, *Language on Vacation: An Olio of Orthographical Oddities* (Charles Scriber's Sons, 1965), p. 2.

[6] *puzzle poetry*, n., in *OED Online* (accessed 28 October 2024) [revised entry 2007]. See also: 'puzzle work' (1834), 'puzzle book' (1845), 'puzzlist' (1871), 'puzzle piece' (1888), 'puzzle-solving' (1889), 'puzzle word' (1990), 'puzzlewise' (1914).

Roger Caillois' scheme for interpreting games makes a valuable distinction between *ludus* (play within or against structure) and *paidia* (unstructured play).[7] If Victorian wordplay aspired to intellectual hygiene (playing with the boundaries of philological classification, akin to *ludus*), then early-twentieth-century poets instead delighted in taking words out of laboratory conditions (seeing what kinds of game might be played when philology goes haywire, akin to *paidia*). This chapter traces the volatile continuum between Victorian wordplay and syntactically experimental early-twentieth-century poetry, positing a relationship that is at once based in influence and homology.

Finally, this chapter will assess the emergence of the so-called 'Crossword Craze' of 1924–5, and the attendant crises of literacy that dogged it. The natural culmination of the puzzle's mass appeal, crosswords alarmed certain elites by appearing to threaten literary progress, instead transforming the public's attention like some kind of hermeneutic opiate. Puzzles risked becoming a modern version of Pope's 'Dulness', but one that wielded Logic to make literature its victim instead. Crosswords ultimately fulfilled both the anxieties and opportunities raised by Hulme's metaphor of the counter, and as such, were a lightning rod for contemporary discussions of the redemptive force that literature, and poetry specifically, might hold.

i. 'The Syllogistic Maze': Fin-de-Siècle Wordplay

Defining the enigma in his 1879 compendium *Guess Me*, Frederick D'Arros Planché states, with fitting ambiguity, that 'the enigma is often a real poem as well as a question for solution.'[8] Though a conundrum 'allows of but one answer', an enigma instead 'admits a variety of

[7] Roger Caillois, *Les Jeux et Les Hommes* (Gallimard, 1958), p. 23.
[8] Frederick D'Arros Planché, *Guess Me: A Curious Collection of Enigmas, Charades, Acting Charades, Double Acrostics, Conundrums, Verbal Puzzles, Hieroglyphics, Anagrams, etc.* (Pott, Young & Co., 1879), p. 99.

solutions.'[9] Planché swerves the difficulty of enforcing this delineation in a self-inspired enigma:

> Within the gorgeous halls of pride, where fashion holds her sway,
> And graceful forms from every clime their constant homage pay.
> I give to beauty its great charm — I give its power to pride;
> Yet with earth's lonely ones I'm found, I everywhere preside.[10]

The singular answer recorded for this enigma is 'Variety'. Structurally, Planché aggregates a rhyming sequence of dissimilar similarities which, in his words, 'signify to hint a thing darkly' by gesturing at paradox without foreclosing the possibility of reconciliation.[11] His near-anagrammatic trill on 'forms from' replicates this estranged familiarity in miniature.

Often, however, the available solution is metatextual. In one enigma, Planché raids the stock of poetic clichés to play on the variable aspiration of the letter 'H':

> 'Twill soften the heart, and though deaf be the ear,
> It will make it acutely and instantly hear:
> In the shade let it rest like a delicate flower;
> Oh! Breathe on it softly: it dies in an hour![12]

Like most enigmas, Planché structures a list of similes or metaphors which obfuscate an omnipresent but unspoken referent. Eleanor Cook aptly terms the enigma a kind of 'closed or hidden simile' in a rhetorical sense, since it accrues an array of vehicles for an invisible tenor.[13] The success of the enigma, then, relies on allowing this tenor (usually euphemised with the pronouns 'I' or 'it') to lead a double life. On the one hand, the enigma operates instrumentally as a bland grammatical component in the prosody: 'It dies in an hour!' On the other hand, it (the phoneme *h*) behaves like a syntactically mischievous shapeshifter: 'It dies in an hour!' The attentive reader will solve the enigma only by reading the poem bifocally; that is, by revealing it to have succeeded as a poem and a puzzle simultaneously.

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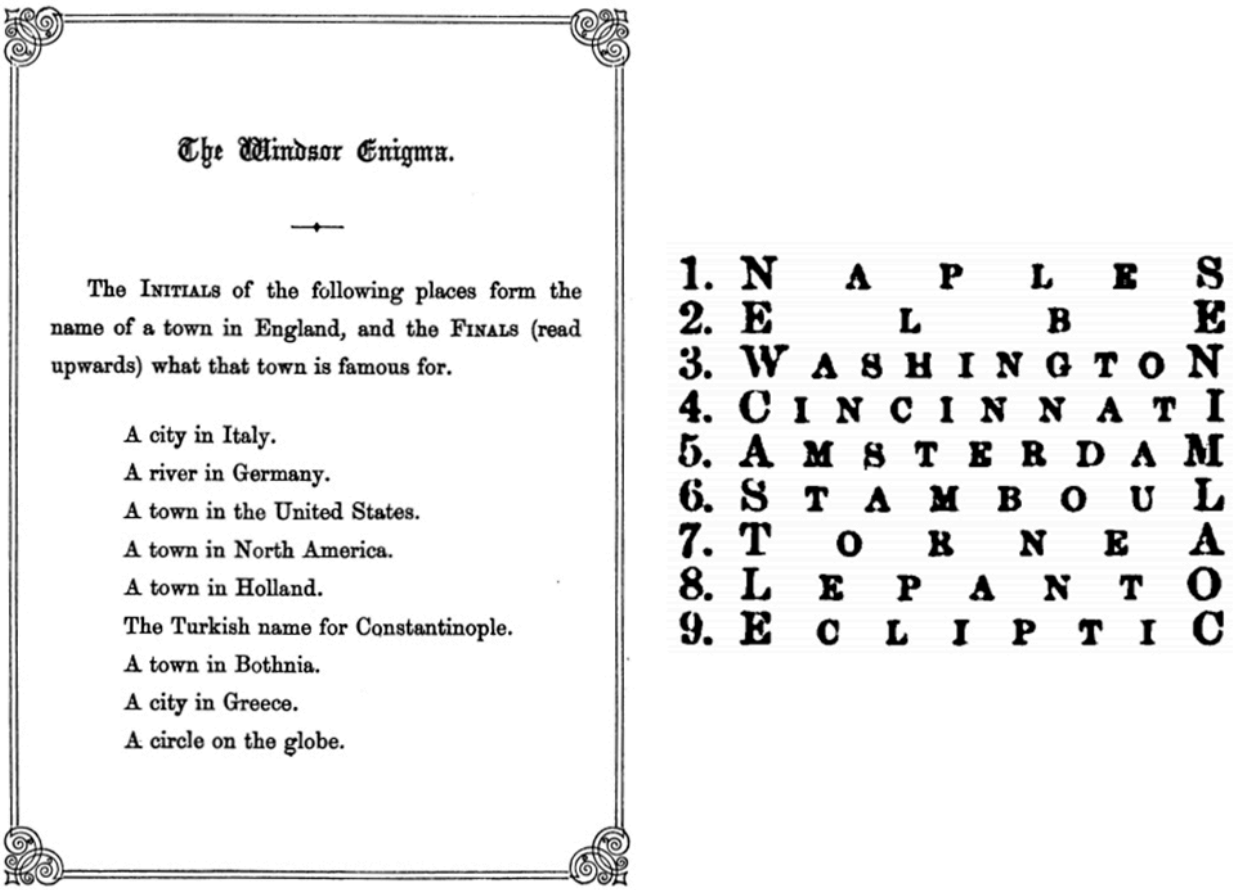
[9] Planché, *Guess Me*, p. 2.
[10] Planché, 'Enigma XXVIII', ll. 13–16, in *Guess Me*, p. 25.
[11] ibid, p. 3.
[12] Planché, 'H', ll. 19–22, in ibid, p. 4.
[13] Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 32.

Planché's poem is an instructive example of the aggregation of different literary units that made poems an appealing medium for puzzling writing. That is to say, poetry essentially overlays lexical and semantic elements in building blocks that do not match each other spatially. In prose, the convention dictates that lexical and semantic parts operate in harmony and at the same tempo. A clause contains the meaning of the clause. In poetry, by contrast, the lexical and semantic units are syncopated from each other. A poetic clause contains a meaning which (by virtue of arrangement, rhyme, metre, enjambement, caesura, or any other number of metaverbal inflections) is not uniformly calibrated with either the lexical or the semantic. Poetry is already in the habit of generatively restaging function as play, hence its natural candidacy for cryptic puzzles.

Planché was one of many of Carroll's contemporaries drawing from a storied riddle tradition that, by the late nineteenth century, had transitioned from its classical pedigree into a perceivedly lower form of wit. Eleanor Cook's chronology of the riddle, for instance, identifies how it was valorised in medieval and early-modern hands before falling out of favour in direct correlation with its popular availability.[14] By the mid-1850s, as Gregg Hecimovich has demonstrated, illustrated riddles could be purchased for approximately the same price as the latest fiction (around 2 shillings).[15] As soon as puzzles became less rarefied, they became less special. Louis XIII may have been able to hire a Royal Anagrammatist to decree prophecies for his court in 1624, but by the reign of Queen Victoria, puzzles supposedly penned by the monarch circulated among her subjects; her impatient passion for puzzles is thought, at least apocryphally, to have 'helped catalyse the genre's mid-century popularity.'[16] 'The Windsor Enigma' (Figure 1), a double acrostic attributed to Victoria by Charlotte Eliza Capel, gamifies the colonial apparatus, unveiling NEWCASTLE and COAL MINES

[14] Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles*, p. 32.
[15] Gregg Hecimovich, *Puzzling the Reader: Riddles in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Peter Lang, 2008), p. 8.
[16] Adam Mazel, 'The Work and Play of Rhyme in Victorian Verse Cultures 1850–1900' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Michigan, 2014), p. 101. See David M. Bryson, *Queen Jeanne and the Promised Land: Dynasty, Homeland, Religion and Violence in Sixteenth-Century France* (Brill, 1999), p. 226.

through clues pertaining to global supply chains. In turn, these chains are actuated in vertical strips linking supply with demand.



The Windsor Enigma.

The INITIALS of the following places form the name of a town in England, and the FINALS (read upwards) what that town is famous for.

A city in Italy.
A river in Germany.
A town in the United States.
A town in North America.
A town in Holland.
The Turkish name for Constantinople.
A town in Bothnia.
A city in Greece.
A circle on the globe.

1. N A P L E S
2. E L B E
3. W A S H I N G T O N
4. C I N C I N N A T I
5. A M S T E R D A M
6. S T A M B O U L
7. T O R N E A
8. L E P A N T O
9. E C L I P T I C

Figure 3: Queen Victoria's 'Windsor Enigma'.[17]

Planché's definition is modelled on the classical notion of dark congruency: in Aristotle's *Poetics*, enigmas are said to thrive on the incompatible combination of metaphors, whereas for Donatus Magnus in *Ars Grammatica*, they spotlight 'some hidden likeness of things'.[18] In this way, they were foundationally essential to literature's most basic imaginative

[17] 'Windsor Enigma', from Charlotte Eliza Capel, *Victorian Enigmas, or Windsor Fireside Researches* (Lockwood & Co., 1861), pp. 16–7.
[18] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (Macmillan, 1895), p. 77. Donatus Magnus, translation quoted from Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles*, p. 360.

units (the simile, the metaphor) as brokers of near equivalence between different things. Enigmas redemptively redescribe dissimilarity by creative means. If, as A. C. Grayling has put it, 'at what is apparently the simplest level of demonstratively linking a name with the object it is supposed to mean, there are puzzling difficulties,' then enigmas take the 'puzzling' dimension of signification seriously, inviting the reader in on the difficulty at hand.[19]

For Gregg Hecimovich, a historian of nineteenth-century riddles, this ultimately 'recovers the power of word magic' by renewing chains of signification that circumscribe a word and charm it with its meaning.'[20] The comparison with magic is judicious: in word puzzles, impossible things emerge from each other like rabbits out of hats, coins out of ears, or coal out of mines. Even one of the standard denigrations of this kind of writing — 'it's just a gimmick' — tacitly acknowledges this transformative power. Thought to have derived etymologically as a faulty anagram of 'magic', the 'gimmick' activates the sublimated potential otherwise dormant in language.[21] In either case, the audience is what we might call 'spell'-bound.

Planché's experimentation with triple acrostics reified this structural affinity between poems and puzzles, provocatively demonstrating how the canon might be refigured by a combinatorial approach to language. 'Poetical' is a puzzle that daisychains numbered clues to yield a textured solution:

1. If your boots are thus soled,
   They'll dry keep your feet.
2. One who holds a command,
   Both in army and fleet.
3. What each wishes to be,
   Whether peasant or peer.
4. When clouds precede rain,
   A word used by the seer.
5. To disgracefully flee,
   Like two thieves in the night,
6. An old Scottish saint,
   Whose name is a sight.

[19] A. C. Grayling, *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic* (Harvester Press, 1982), p. 36.
[20] Hecimovich, *Puzzling the Reader*, p. 1.
[21] *gimmick*, n., in *OED Online* (accessed 22 November 2024) [first entry 1972].

> The initials, the finals, the medials too,
> Each a famed English poet will bring to your view.[22]

In accordance with the promised poetry of the solution, the puzzle's clues rhyme with each other. Stacking the answers in the order prescribed by Planché's quasi-quatrains reveals three hidden poets, William Cowper, John Milton, and John Dryden:

1.	C	lu	M	pe	D
2.	O	ff	I	ce	R
3.	W	ea	L	th	Y
4.	P	or	T	en	D
5.	E	l	O	p	E
6.	R	o	N	a	N

A proto-crossword, the double or triple acrostic illustrated the possibilities lying dormant in otherwise innocuous units of language. The poem is solved by close attention, which in turn generates a secondary poem with a horizontal structure which, under close attention, rewards the reader with hidden vertical poetry.

Planché hails the 'inversion of the regular and ordinary meaning of the word' as the guarantor of 'kaleidoscopic changes of form and meaning.'[23] Planché's adjective is striking: as Susan R. Horton has demonstrated, the kaleidoscope was already a standard metaphor for the literary imagination following its invention by David Brewster in 1815, a device for defamiliarising static visual stimuli into shimmering and unpredictable mandalas.[24] For Charles Baudelaire in 1863, 'the goal of the lover of universal life' was 'to become a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness', an aspiration extending the Romantic metaphor of the poetic imagination as 'kalleidoscopism' (as Percy Bysshe Shelley put it) or 'Phantasmagoria' (by John Keats, after a kind of optical illusion named in 1802).[25] Carroll, too,

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[22] Planché, *Guess Me*, p. 32.
[23] Planché, *Guess Me*, p. 3; p. 179.
[24] Susan R. Horton, 'Were They Having Fun Yet? Victorian Optical Gadgetary, Modernist Selves' , in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. by Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (University of California Press, 1995), pp. 1–23.
[25] Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Johnathan Mayne (Phaidon Press, 1964), pp. 1–40 (p. 9). Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Clarendon Press, 1964), II, p. 69. John Keats, letter to Fanny Brawne (March, 1820), in *Selected Letters*, ed. by Grant F. Scott (Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 431.

composed a canto sequence titled 'Phantasmagoria' in 1869, in which the speaker finds himself logically cornered:

> Commencing every single phrase
> With "therefore" or "because,"
> I blindly reeled, a hundred ways,
> About the syllogistic maze,
> Unconscious where I was.[26]

The logical apparatus typified by conjunctions like 'therefore' or 'because', which thrive on linear sequences of ideation, are radically undercut by kaleidoscopic or phantasmagoric thinking: quantitatively, a 'single phrase' is rhymed with 'a hundred ways' before settling as a 'maze'. If the kaleidoscope appealed to nineteenth-century writers for its ability to 'capture moments of transformation,' as Helen Groth has argued, in Carroll's case it refracts logical axioms into multiple paths, enacting this transformativity on the page.[27]

Amid the emphasis on literature's kaleidoscopic capacity, proponents of Victorian wordplay often mocked what we might instead call 'telescopic' readers: those readers who miss out on the puzzle by fixating only on the poem, or vice versa, able only to see one form at a time. In Tom Hood's contemporaneously published *Excursions into Puzzledom* (1879), these readerly camps form the basis of an imaginary caste system enforced by officers holding question mark-shaped scythes. Puzzledom's inhabitants, who have evolved into the shape of nuts, are a 'very strange set of people': they end all sentences with question marks, and measure the success of their queries by whether or not you decide to 'pop them into crackers and crack them' (a gruesome literalisation of the puzzle-solving idiom of 'cracking' that had been in circulation since 1640, though one that is apparently 'painless' in Puzzledom).[28]

Poets roam this land with lawn-mowers (a punning allusion to Theseus's dismissal of poets in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), and there is an elected Puzzledom Laureate responsible

[26] Carroll, 'Phantasmagoria', vi, 36–40, in *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* (Random House, 1920), p. 848.
[27] Helen Groth, 'Kaleidoscopic Vision and Literary Invention in an "Age of Things": David Brewster, *Don Juan*, and "A Lady's Kaleidoscope", *English Literary History*, 74 (2007), pp. 217–36 (p. 218).
[28] Tom Hood, *Excursions into Puzzledom* (Ballantyne Press, 1879), p. 2.

for issuing versified charades. The kindly narrator warns prospective immigrants that 'literal people' cannot enter: 'they give the Puzzlers a great deal of trouble.'[29] The measure of a 'literal' lies precisely in their telescopic inability to grasp semantic ambiguity. In one Sisyphean case that reworks the school of language from Swift's floating Laputa, a 'literal' is condemned to carry 'an immense trunk of a tree' on his back because he believes 'it is fashionable to belong to a club.'[30] Ironically prefiguring the geometric classism of Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), those who interpret things with insufficient depth are immediately and publicly ostracised.[31]

Though playful, the mockery of 'literal' readers in Puzzledom attests to a more serious suspicion about interpretation: that reading risks becoming uncritical, and hence vulnerable, when it is overly telescopic. Adam Mazel's recent study of Christina Rossetti's early poetry, for instance, has valuably demonstrated the importance of puzzle literacy even to the modern critical apparatus. Rossetti wrote versified word games in *Marshall's Ladies Daily Remembrancer* in 1850, and many subsequent allusions to puzzle lexicon in her better known poems have escaped critical recognition. Jerome McGann's analysis of 'From House to Home' (1858) in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti* (1987), for instance, assents to the conventional wisdom that her 'cryptic words' like 'first' and 'second' create a sense of portentous mystery, but misses their structural function as conventional syllabic markers for mid-nineteenth-century charade puzzles.[32] As Mazel argues, though Rossetti's catalogic verse style is typically considered a product of Miltonic influence, it might be 'better understood as successfully reworking the enigma' forms popular in the period.[33]

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[29] Hood, *Excursions into Puzzledom*, p. 5.
[30] Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, rev edn (John Wanamaker, 1911), p. 221.
[31] Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (Seeley & Co., 1884).
[32]As an illustration, consider: 'My first is a preposition, / My next is a composition, / And my whole is an acquisition.' The solution is FORTUNE, syllabically counted out into FOR and TUNE. Jerome McGann, 'Introduction', in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, ed. by David A. Kent (Cornell University Press, 1987), (pp. 1–22) p. 12.
[33] Mazel, '"You, Guess": The Enigmas of Christina Rossetti', in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 44 (2016), (pp. 511–33) p. 524.

Conversely, paranoia over enigmatic forms of address was an attractive opportunity for parody at the end of the nineteenth century. In Anthony Charles Deane's *Frivolous Verses* (1892), a ballad mocking Shakespeare's 'The Lover's Complaint' imagines the thwarting of courtship by puzzling means:[34]

> Or how can the tenderest passion
> Survive such a fatal defect?
> For Maud is a victim of fashion,
> And is, before all things, correct;
> To a girl who incessant fiddles
> Or sings comic songs, I'm averse;
> But one who talks nothing but riddles
> Is really still worse!

Though intended as a specimen of wit to capitalise on the popularity of fin-de-siècle riddles — the epigraph quotes a contemporary report labelling riddles as 'the latest fashionable amusement' — Deane's parody evinces the notion that riddles disrupt ordinary units of meaning. The feigned horror topples on itself: though the speaker 'doubt[s] if a walking enigma / Will do as a partner for life', his pun on 'I'm averse' shows how the ambiguity of language is in fact an apt 'partner' for the the qualities of life itself. In its etymological sense, after all, *Frivolous* refers to the combination of parts (as in *friable*).[35]

Carroll's own 'reworking' of the enigma in the form of word puzzles took varied guises. To Jason Rosenhouse, Carroll was 'the first' to exploit the Victorian puzzle to its fullest potential as a vehicle for experimental logic: 'drawing a clear line with amusing puzzles on one side and difficult mathematical and philosophical questions on the other' is impossible with Carroll's work, he notes, because the two sides are so integrated[36]. Though Rosenhouse's claim perpetuates a broader critical tendency to debate Carroll over contemporaneous puzzle writers like Tom Hood, Frederick D'Arros Planché, or Alice Gomme — William Dobson's

[34] Anthony Charles Deane, 'The Lover's Complaint', ll. 17–24, in *Frivolous Verses* (Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1892), pp. 32–4.
[35] *frivolous*, adj. (etymology), in *OED Online* (accessed 11 April 2025) [first entry 1898].
[36] Rosenhouse, *Games For Your Mind*, p. 24.

Literary Frivolities (1880), for instance, makes comparable arguments in its introduction — it certainly attests to how far Carroll popularised these generically hybrid puzzle forms.

Syllogistic exercises which a reader must navigate using prescribed diagrams read like little Carrollean nonsense poems: serious problems populated with far-fetched referents, like formal versions of the missing link between ravens and writing desks, or cabbages and kings. By way of a thread for the 'syllogistic maze' (importantly, the word *clue* derived from *clew*, a ball of thread), both *The Game of Logic* (1886) and *Symbolic Logic* (1896) were published with 'a diagram on card, and nine Counters, four red and five grey.'

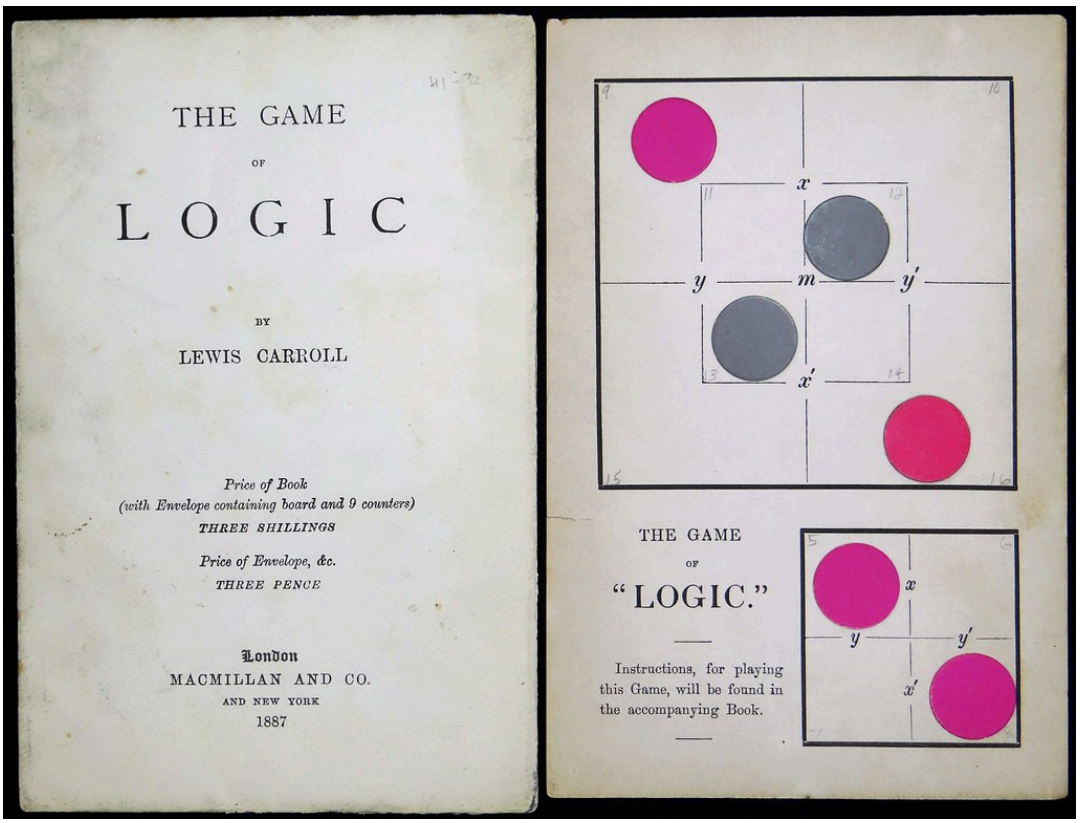

Figure 4: The envelope accompanying Carroll's *The Game of Logic* (1886).

In one puzzle from *Symbolic Logic*, Carroll implicates his own authorial strangeness in the process of solution:

1) No interesting poems are unpopular among people of real taste;
2) No modern poetry is free from affectation;

3) All *your* poems are on the subject of soap-bubbles;
4) No affected poetry is popular among people of real taste;
5) No ancient poem is on the subject of soap-bubbles.

Univ. "poems"; *a* = affected; *b* = ancient ; *c* = interesting ; *d* = on the subject of soap-bubbles ; *e* = popular among people of real taste ; *h* = written by you.[37]

The reader must convert the sequence into algebra and plot it into a square to test its internal compatibilities. The answer, written quasi-cryptographically in Carrollean logic, concludes judgmentally:

1 2 3 4 5 1 4 2 5 3
$ce'_0 \dagger b'a'_0 \dagger h_1d'_0 \dagger ae_0 \dagger bd_0$; $c\,\underline{e}' \dagger \underline{a}\,\underline{e} \dagger \underline{b}'\underline{a}' \dagger \underline{b}\,\underline{d} \dagger h\,\underline{d}' \mathbb{P}\, ch_0 \dagger h_1$, ie. $\mathbb{P}\, h_1c_0c$
i.e. All *your* poems are uninteresting.

As if a traditional rhyme scheme (ABAB, CDCD…) had been extrapolated out into a cipher, Carroll's algebraic system of inferential 'counters' reads like a parody of exegesis. The propositions, stacked to resemble a stanza, lure in a prospective decryptor rather like a poem beckoning over an attentive reader. Other puzzle forms devised by Carroll, such as the doublets later reimagined as 'word golf' in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), end up looking like poetry by virtue of their structure and interest in verbal felicity.[38] Indeed, poetry is overrepresented among Carroll's logical exercises. Like the hookah-smoking Caterpillar in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), who begins speaking poetry to Alice immediately after bombarding her with 'puzzling question[s]', Carroll prizes poetry as a medium for contesting logic.[39] Again and again, conclusions such as 'No frogs are poetical', 'No one looks poetical unless he is pale', and 'None of my lodgers write poetry' rub up against propositions inviting the reader to doubt their own success: 'All | logical studies | are | things that puzzle me' or 'Nothing intelligible ever puzzles me / Logic puzzles me'.[40]

[37] Carroll, *Symbolic Logic*, 4th edn (Macmillan and Co., 1897), p. 118.
[38] 'Some of my records are: hate-love in three, lass-male in four, and live-dead in five (with "land" in the middle)', in Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (Berkeley Medallion, 1968), p. 182.
[39] Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), in *Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*, pp. 17–128 (p. 53).
[40] Carroll, *Symbolic Logic*, p. 155; p. 97; p. 129; p. 135; p. 102.

Often, this culminates in paradoxical premises demonstrating their own essential contingency:

> 90. No riddles interest me if they can be solved;
> All these riddles are insoluble.
>
> Conclusion: [No Concl. Fallacy of Like Eliminands not asserted to exist][41]

The riddle swallows itself up: it goes without solution. In so doing, it affirms its own intuitive proposition: that each riddle included by Carroll is interesting. Inversely, conclusions such as 'Logic is unintelligible' and reductions such as 'All | logical studies | are | things that puzzle me' invite calibration across discrete problem sets, as they don't quite tessellate conceptually. Simultaneously, part of what Carroll considers the fun of puzzles is the failure of taxonomic systems to legislate for the fundamental complexity of the exterior world. In 'Things and Their Attributes', part of the prefatory rubric to Carroll's logic puzzles, Carroll hazards that 'Classification, or the formation of Classes, is a Mental Process, in which we imagine that we have put together, in a group, certain Things.'[42] Though sets like 'Things', 'Attributes' and 'Adjuncts' get a solver so far, the system is fundamentally illusory: it is something we must 'imagine' rather than know factually.

The two categories are essentially inflections of realism (abstract objects exist externally, waiting for sentences to capture them) and nominalism (abstract objects are convenient fictions devised in language). Carroll's puzzles, which are just as interested in the failure of solution as its enactment (more than 70 of his problems yield 'No Conclusion'), illustrate that neither realism or nominalism can adequately account for the contingency of language. Carroll's self-deprecating examples poke fun at the fiddliness of parsing down complex phenomena into mathematical units: 'All | examples that are not arranged in regular order like those I am used to | are | examples not understood by me.'[43] Ultimately, it is

[41] Carroll, *Symbolic Logic*, p. 130.
[42] ibid, p. 1.
[43] Carroll, *Symbolic Logic*, p. 16.

'*differentia*' — what distinguishes one class from another — that weighs most significantly on any system of expression.

Readers are inducted into a puzzle apparatus that promises to renew and reshape their ability to interpret information beyond the book itself. In the introduction to *Symbolic Logic*, Carroll advertises the gift of clarity that will allow readers to detect and decipher the illogic 'in books, in newspaper, in speeches, and even in sermons, which so easily delude those who have never taken the trouble to master this fascinating Art.'[44] Carroll's framework prefigures Ezra Pound's scheme for two kinds of art, first outlined in his 'Note on Dante' in *The Spirit of Romance* (1919):

> There are two kinds of beautiful painting, as one may perhaps illustrate by the works of Burne-Jones and Whistler; one looks at the first kind of painting and is immediately delighted by its beauty; the second kind of painting, when first seen, puzzles one, but on leaving it, and going from the gallery, one finds new beauty in natural things — a Thames fog, to use the hackneyed example. Thus, there are works of art that are beautiful objects, and works of art which are keys or passwords admitting one to a deeper knowledge, to a finer perception of beauty.[45]

Pound would later decry Torquemada's early cryptic crosswords as 'abominations' in 1934, but in 1919 the notion that art could operate like a puzzle remained an attractive metaphor.[46] Just as Carroll promotes logic's ability to rewrite a reader's interpretive mechanisms, and in so doing grant them the power of hermeneutic suspicion, Pound heralds the capacity of puzzles to redeem the world itself as a puzzle. Carroll was drawn to puzzles, as he was to nonsense, because they allowed him to ask questions about how we divide up the world; in turn, the early-twentieth-century intrigue in puzzlement as a necessary condition of puzzles emerged from the nonsense world of Victorian ludolinguistics.

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[44] ibid, p. xiiv.
[45] Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance: An Attempt to Define Somewhat the Charm of the Pre-Renaissance Literature of Latin Europe* (J. M. Dent and Sons, 1919), p. 154.
[46] Pound, *ABC of Reading* (Faber, 1934), p. 95.

ii. 'A Radium of the Word': Architectures of Philology

In tandem with the popularisation of literary puzzle forms in the nineteenth century, a homologous system became increasingly important to educational best practice: sentence diagramming. Though less overtly ludic than Carroll's diagrams, sentence diagramming used spatial representations to map out the complex and ambiguous grammar determining English phraseology. Initially popularised by James Brown's *American Grammar* (1831), ambitiously illustrated manuals such as Frederick Barnard's *Analytic Grammar* (1836), Oliver Peirce's *The Grammar of the English Language* (1839), and Solomon Barrett's *The Principles of Grammar* (1848) attempted the creative treatment of otherwise dry philological debate.[47]

Charles Gauss and B. T. Hodge's *A Comprehensive English Grammar* (1890) represented the zenith of using impractical but fabulous designs to 'translate' poetry into grammatical form. In one striking instance, Gauss and Hodge arboreally reimagine a passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, using what Carroll had called 'a method of trees' to diagram a proposition: the 'Gordian twine' spun by the serpent is systematically unwoven into a system of branches, as if redeeming the 'fruit / Of that forbidden tree' and in so doing, reversing the fall. In the tradition of S. W. Clark's more pragmatically minded *A Practical Grammar* (1847), Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg's *Higher Lessons in English* (1877) ultimately became the educational standard for sentence diagramming.[48] The Reed-Kellogg system uses interconnected lines to convey each word's grammatical function; the subordinate relation of different kinds of line allow a sentence to be reconstructed from its constituent parts. Since the 'footing of grammar [...] is very insecure', Reed and Kellogg try to guide the English grammarian away from tripping.[49]

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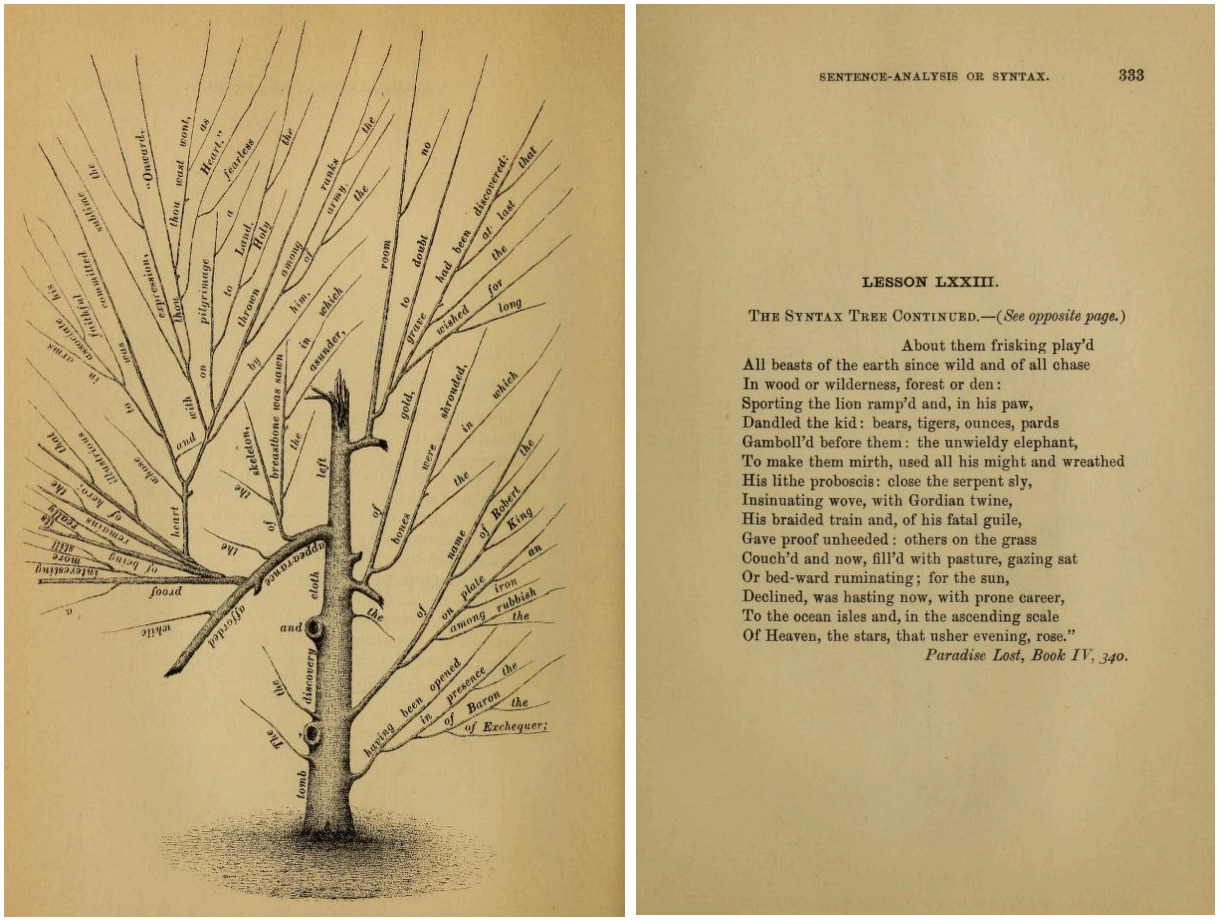
[47] James Brown, *American Grammar* (Clark & Raser, 1831). Frederick Barnard, *Analytic Grammar with Symbolic Illustration* (E. French, 1936). Oliver Peirce, *The Grammar of the English Language* (Robinson and Franklin, 1839). Solomon Barrett, *The Principles of Grammar* (Joel Munsell, 1848).
[48] S. W. Clark, *A Practical Grammar: in which words, phrases and sentences are classified according to their offices, and their various relations to one another: illustrated by a complete system of diagrams* (A. S. Barnes & Co., 1868).
[49] Alonzo Reed, Brainerd Kellogg, *Higher Lessons in English* (Clark & Maynard Publishers, 1880), p. 3.



SENTENCE-ANALYSIS OR SYNTAX. 333

LESSON LXXIII.

THE SYNTAX TREE CONTINUED.—(*See opposite page.*)

About them frisking play'd
All beasts of the earth since wild and of all chase
In wood or wilderness, forest or den:
Sporting the lion ramp'd and, in his paw,
Dandled the kid: bears, tigers, ounces, pards
Gamboll'd before them: the unwieldy elephant,
To make them mirth, used all his might and wreathed
His lithe proboscis: close the serpent sly,
Insinuating wove, with Gordian twine,
His braided train and, of his fatal guile,
Gave proof unheeded: others on the grass
Couch'd and now, fill'd with pasture, gazing sat
Or bed-ward ruminating; for the sun,
Declined, was hasting now, with prone career,
To the ocean isles and, in the ascending scale
Of Heaven, the stars, that usher evening, rose."
Paradise Lost, Book IV, 340.

Figure 5: Milton translated by Gauss and Hodge, in *A Comprehensive English Grammar* (1890).[50]

Instead of passively learning rules by rote, students and writers alike were trained to conceive of words as mobile parts in a quasi-mechanical system. Diagramming forces a given reader to see through to the structural skeleton of a sentence, parsing component units into distinct spatial relationships on the page. Before exploring how the late-nineteenth-century vogue for sentence diagramming weighed on the contemporary poetic imagination, it is important to consider parallel developments in the visualisation, comprehension, and coordination of language production.

Contemporaneously, and alongside the flush of mass-market puzzles that used comparable syntactic mechanisms, advances in production technologies were atomising the alphabet at large. Though John Locke had suggested in 1693 that 'dice and play-things with

[50] Charles Gauss, B. T. Hodge, *A Comprehensive English Grammar* (Pan Publication Co., 1890), pp. 333–4. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Penguin Books, 2000), IV. ll. 339–53.

letters on them' would accelerate childhood literacy, alphabet blocks first soared in popularity as a pedagogical tool in the mid-nineteenth century.[51] Alphabet soup hit the market in 1867, and by the the 1880s it was being marketed for its educational value to parents across the English-speaking world; 'alphabet soup' was mainstream enough by 1883 to occur as a metaphor for acronyms for the first time, and later became a standard refrain for critics of Roosevelt's department-churning New Deal in the 1930s.[52]

In communication, too, technological advances were bolstering the association between the alphabet and machinery. The popularisation of Morse code as a result of nineteenth-century telegraphy encouraged a view of language as a system of transmutable dots and dashes. The typewriter, first patented in the mid-nineteenth century and relatively standard in Anglophone offices by the 1890s, cemented this association: the act of typing, a reiterative and tactile experience when compared to handwriting, required that a typist think of words as amalgamations of keystrokes. Indeed, though the earliest typewriters were alphabetical in sequence, almost immediately typists were confronted with a defamiliarised alphabet. As a result of telegraph operators bemoaning the processing speed of early models, and an academic study of bigram (letter-pair) frequency by Amos Desmore, the QWERTY keyboard was devised in 1873: a blitzed-up hierarchy of letters that demanded careful attention by initiates.[53]

Beyond taking language out of the ether and into the hands of its users, the combined triple effect of sentence diagramming, alphabetic technologies, and the boom in word puzzles was to influence how early-twentieth-century writers conceived of their own textual production. In her 1935 lecture 'Poetry and Grammar', Gertrude Stein explained the fundamental sway held by sentence diagramming over her attitude to literature:

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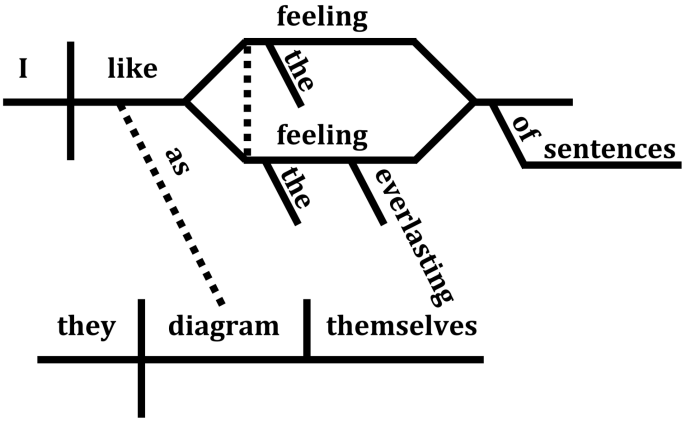
[51] John Locke, *Education* (Gray & Bowen, 1830), p. 187. See also: 'Alphabet Blocks' (The National Museum of Play), <https://www.museumofplay.org/toys/alphabet-blocks/> (accessed December 22, 2024).
[52] Janet Clarkson, *Soup: A Global History* (Reaktion, 2010), pp. 119–20. Tonya Bolden, *FDR's Alphabet Soup: New Deal America, 1932–39* (Knopf, 2010).
[53] Koichi Yasuoka, Motoko Yasuoka, 'On the Prehistory of QWERTY', *Zinbun*, 42 (March 2011), pp. 161–74.

> When I was at school the really completely exciting thing was diagramming sentences and that has been to me ever since the one thing that has been completely exciting and completely completing. I like the feeling the everlasting feeling of sentences as they diagram themselves. In that way one is completely possessing something and incidentally one's self.[54]

Though 'nouns and adjectives' remain largely uninteresting to Stein, 'verbs and adverbs' are fascinating because they can make mistakes, 'both as to what they do and how they agree or disagree with whatever they do.'

One consequence of sentence diagramming, however, is that it converts an unruly mass of speech parts into concrete blocks. Sentence diagramming turns the world into nouns while conscripting readers, as verbs, to spatialise the gaps between them. Stein's fondness for verbal ambiguity attests to the difficulty, then, of insisting on consistent diagramming standards for any dynamic language system. Notably, when given a brief biography for readers of *The Atlanta Constitution* in 1935, she was described as 'a distinguished writer of puzzling poetry.'[55] To Kitty Burns Florey, 'Trying to stuff the complexities of the English language into flat visual structures is a bit like trying to force a cat into the carrier for a trip to the vet'.[56] Stein's own prose style, abhorring commas and lapsing into parataxis, shows how resistant any lexical cat can be to containment. Even while avowing the autodiagrammatic liberty of English prose, Stein's sentence evades capture:

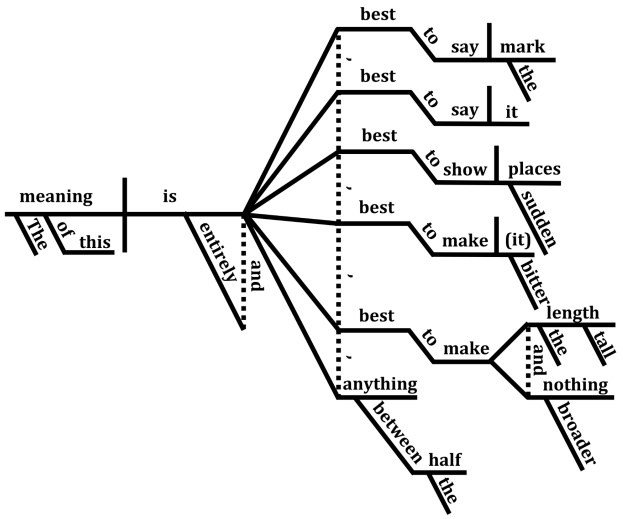


[54] Gertrude Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar', in *Lectures in America* (Virago, 1988), pp. 209–76 (p. 211).
[55] 'The News at a Glance', *Atlanta Constitution*, 16 February 1935, p. 1.
[56] Kitty Burns Florey, *Sister Bernadette's Barking Dogs: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences* (Melville House Publishing, 2006), p. 46.

Stein's appositive restatement of the direct object ('the feeling the everlasting feeling') necessitates a non-conjunctive dashed line, against Reed-Kellog convention.[57] Stein's poetry was often described as puzzling by critics and supporters alike. In one review of 'The Fifteenth of November' (glossed as 'a portrait of T. S. Eliot'), an anonymous critic in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* complained that 'Cross-word puzzles are like eating toffee to this stuff.'[58] Another critic, writing for the *Daily Mirror* on 'Rhymes to Cure the Cold' — that is, literature as medicine — disagrees with the toffee analogy: 'Much more modern [medically], and infinitely more powerful in its effects is Gertrude Stein. Up to date disease like cross-word mania can be banished in one dose.'[59]

Sentence diagramming offers one way to diagnose how Stein's poetry flirts with the limits of a 'completely completing' syntax'. 'A Drawing' from *Tender Buttons* (1914) toys with the discernibility of meaning by gesturing at the impossibility of grammatical completion:

> The meaning of this is entirely and best to say the mark, best to say it best to show sudden places, best to make bitter, best to make the length tall and nothing broader, anything between the half.[60]



[57] Two grammarians specialising in sentence diagramming, Ellen Jovin and Julia Montiak, each confirmed that Stein's appositive direct objects require improvised adaptation of the Reed-Kellog system (emails to the author, 22 December 2024). These diagrams are each my own.
[58] 'Georgian Stories', *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 8 November 1926, p. 2.
[59] 'Here and There', *Daily Mirror*, 6 May 1933, p. 6.
[60] Stein, 'A Drawing', in *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (Claire Marie, 1914), p. 22.

Stein's sentence-poem aches to be consummated with a predicate of some kind, but the copula — and by extension, the 'meaning' it qualifies — remains unresolved. Instead, a sextuple compound complement elliptically suggests what may be 'entirely' best (though the adverb is conjuncted away from the adjectives). Lacking connective tissue, Stein's punctuation is not consistently applied; in one subclause, the direct object is omitted. If Stein's writing characteristically 'unfolds a continuous scene of multiplying transformations,' as McGann puts it, then diagrams plot these transformations materially.[61]

Stein's vocabulary is logical and at times geometric, as if mocking the 'drawing' that might subject the grammar to rational comprehension, or setting herself the challenge of writing unorthodox sentences that cannot be quantified. As Stein would put it in 'George Hugnet', 'grammar is as disappointed not is as grammar is as disappointed': a recursive model for the convolutions made possible by grammatical mischief.[62] In 'Sugar', a poem from the 'Food' section of *Tender Buttons*, Stein seems to court this sense of impossibility in diagrammatical representation:

> The teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful.
> The line which sets sprinkling to be a remedy is beside the best cold.
> A puzzle, a monster puzzle, a heavy choking, a neglected Tuesday.[63]

'Teasing' has a double grammatical function: as a contronym, 'tease' can mean both to create bafflement and to pick it apart. 'The line', a staple unit of sentence diagramming, sets out 'to be a remedy' to any verbal 'puzzle', but is ultimately confounded by appositive nouns: 'a heavy choking, a neglected Tuesday.' Poetry's relationship with grammar is indeed 'trying', both as an adjective for difficulty and a gerund of effort: because the visual and the syntactic operate using different units, the creative opportunity for ellipsis is particularly strong for poetry. Stein's interest in the logical overextension of linguistic scaffolding ultimately creates opportunities to show how language, and especially poetic language (sentence diagramming,

[61] Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 20.
[62] Stein, 'George Hugnet', in *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms*, 6 (1930), p. 133.
[63] Stein, 'Sugar', in *Tender Buttons*, pp. 44–6.

for instance, has no way of representing even basic poetic structures like enjambement), stays unbidden to any singular form.

Stein praised her close friend Mina Loy for 'always be[ing] able to understand' her work; indeed, confronted with editorial pleas to consider using commas, Stein defended her punctuation on the basis that Loy 'was able to understand without the commas.'[64] Loy wrote a poem in praise of Stein in 1924:

> Curie
> of the laboratory
> of vocabulary
> she crushed
> the tonnage
> of consciousness
> congealed to phrases
> to extract
> a radium of the word[65]

Insofar as Stein sets out to defamiliarise language by overrealising grammatical interrelations to the point of confusion, Loy recaptures the style in miniature. The articles in 'a radium of the word' are inverse to the expected order and lay emphasis on the multiple opportunities within the word at large.

Loy's own unpublished archival papers between 1914–1920 evince a comparable fascination with crushing vocabulary to extract surprising interiority. Like 'a Scrabble player switching tiles around on a rack,' as Tara Prescott puts it, Loy's marginal scribbles illustrate the contingent vocabulary discoverable in otherwise innocuous collections of letters.[66] In one instance, Loy treats the word 'Shampoo' as a letter bank for anagrammatical experimentation: 'Sam Samp, Sop, Soap, Shop, Sha, Sham, Ham, Hap, Hoop, Hop, Hops, Hoops, Hams.'[67] Elsewhere, Loy proves herself a 'Curie' in her own right, subjecting the words 'conquest' and 'powerful' to sustained imaginative pressure in order to generate a comprehensive list of

[64] Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (University of California Press, 1997), p. 130.
[65] Mina Loy, 'Gertrude Stein', in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996), p. 94.
[66] Tara Prescott, *Poetic Salvage: Reading Mina Loy* (Bucknell University Press, 2017), p. xxix.
[67] Loy, 'Second Costa Visit: draft fragments', in Mina Loy Papers, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 6, Box 1, Folder 8.

internal words.[68] She signs one poem 'Nia Lyo, alias Anim Yol, alias / Imna Oly', a 'renomination containing the echo of animal'; in another case, she mulls over the political issue of the 'Sex Question' by reconfiguring it as 'Ques Sextion, Qx Squestion, Queseestion, Sestion Quese'.[69] As Priya Abularach has persuasively argued, frivolous recreation jostled against more suggestive attempts at self-expression.[70]

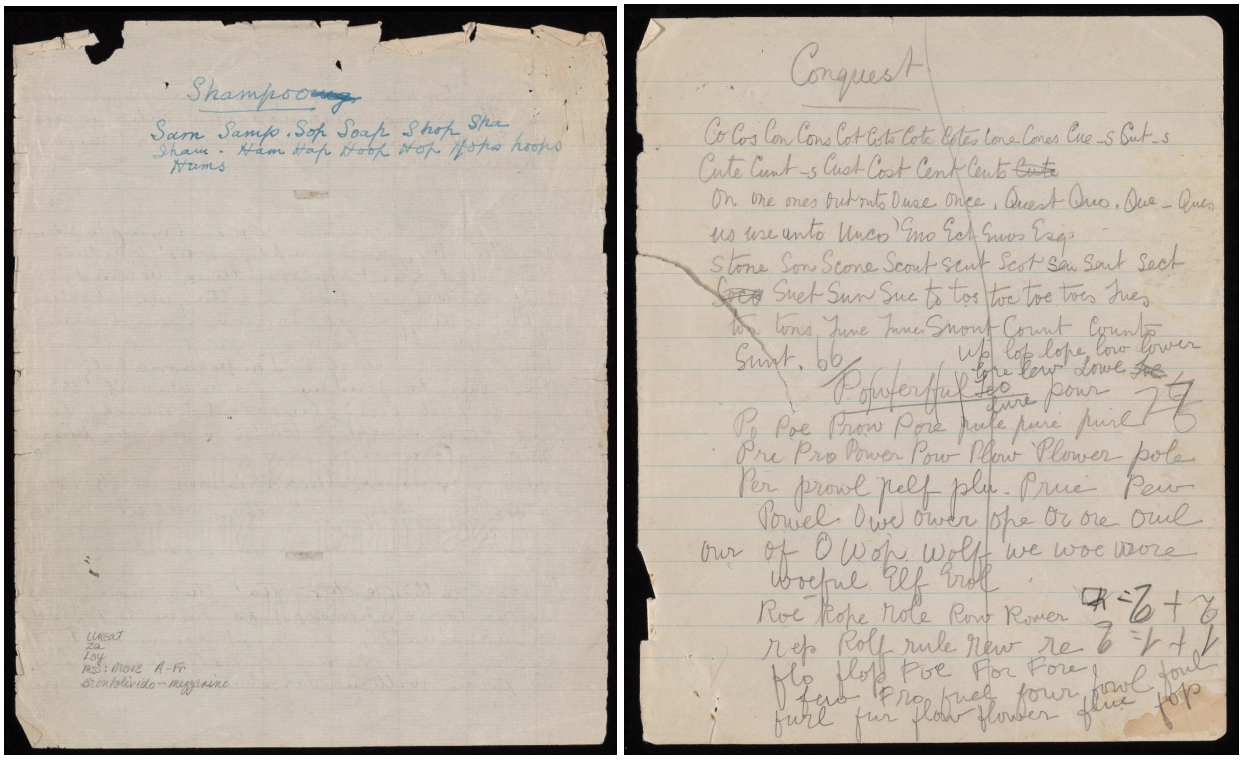


Figure 6: Two draft fragments from Mina Loy's notebooks (c. 1914–1920).[71]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, poets who had grown up ingesting both word puzzles, and newly standardised philological frameworks, naturally considered their output in these combinatorial terms. The metaphor of literature as a board game, in particular, emerged out of the confluence of these ludic and philological traditions. Indeed, by the time

[68] Loy, 'Draft of a Dialogue', in Mina Loy Papers, YCAL MSS 6, Box 1, Folder 5, p. 3v.
[69] Loy, 'Lions' Jaws', in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 46–50 (p. 49). Loy, 'Notes', in 'Notes', in Mina Loy Papers, YCAL MSS 6, Box 1, Folder 21.
[70] Priya Abularach, '"A no-man's land of meaning": The Sphinx's Riddle of Mina Loy' (unpublished thesis, University of Cambridge, 2024).
[71] Left: Loy, 'Second Costa Visit: draft fragments', in Mina Loy Papers, YCAL MSS 6, Box 1, Folder 8. Right: Loy, 'Draft of a Dialogue', in Mina Loy Papers, YCAL MSS 6, Box 1, Folder 5.

Ferdinand de Saussure delivered his *Cours de linguistique générale* (1907–11), using mechanical models to compare 'the functioning of language and a game of chess' was pedagogically widespread, and had been iterated by writers including Henri Bergson and Charles Baudelaire. However, Saussure's interest in 'language [as] a type of algebra' extended beyond theory. Unpublished notebooks made posthumously available reveal the beginnings of an obsession with anagrams in classical poetry.

Though critically unfashionable — for Nabokov (the first Russian cruciverbalist, as Chapter Two will discuss), the pursuit of secondary structures in canonical texts was 'vulgar, shabby [and] fundamentally medieval' — Saussure's anagrams were never developed beyond marginal notes: taken together, they are 'inadequate' as a unified theory.[72] Illustratively, a Latin imperative like *cave* (beware) being found at irregular intervals in *condemnavisse* is only tenuously persuasive; more persuasive is its evidence for Saussure's fascination with language as an interplay of signifiers rather than an inherent manifestation of external reality.[73] For this reason, Saussure ventured *anaphony* as an imperfect form of the *anagram*, prefiguring the terms in which Christopher Ricks has defended the anagram as 'no more and no less arbitrary than a rhyme': each is to be considered as an important verbal felicity central to both writing and reading.[74] Anagrams substantiate Saussure's belief in chess, say, as 'an artificial realisation of what language offers in a natural form': an amalgam of mobile counters apt to generate unpredictable and complex semantic phenomena.

A devotee of Bergson, it was the poet, critic, and philosopher T. E. Hulme who bridged the gap between European philological theories and radical Anglophone poetics at the start of the twentieth century, by sharing them with the coterie of writers foundational to Imagism and, in turn, Vorticism. His self-described '*weltanschauung*' was indeed influential: in Rebecca

[72] Peter Wunderli, 'Saussure's anagrams and the analysis of literary texts', in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, ed. by Carol Sanders (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 174–85 (p. 174). Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (Vintage, 1989), p. 20.
[73] Jean Starobinsky, *Words upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, trans. by Olivia Emmett (Yale University Press, 1969), p. 26.
[74] Christopher Ricks, quoted in Colin Burrow, 'Ti tum ti tum ti tum' [review of Ricks, *Along Heroic Lines*], in *London* Review *of Books*, 43.19, 7 October 2021.

Beasley's account, his lecture on 'Modern Poetry' in 1908 made him the chief 'intellectual impetus for Pound's imagist movement'.[75] To T. S. Eliot in 1926, Hulme was not only 'the most *fertile* mind of my generation, but in 1924 he dubbed Hulme 'the forerunner of a new attitude of mind, which should be the twentieth-century mind, if the twentieth century is to have a mind of its own.'[76] Hulme was thought of as a consciously un-nineteenth-century thinker, whose notions about poetry were decidedly novel.

Before exploring the influence of counter metaphors on early twentieth-century poets, however, it is important to consider the complex philosophical beliefs that underwrote Hulme's approach to poetics. Hulme essentially believed that the prevailing intellectual apparatus of the late nineteenth century, with its emphasis on scientific and rational methodologies, was poorly equipped to account for the dynamic plurality of the real world. In an unfinished manuscript, *Cinders* (1906), written while he traversed the Canadian wilderness in a fit of Emersonian exploration after being expelled from the University of Cambridge, Hulme uses the image of an ash-heap to illustrate the fundamental chaos of reality:

> This plurality consists in the nature of an ash-heap. In this ash-pit of cinders, certain ordered routes have been made, thus constituting whatever unity there may be — a kind of manufactured chess-board laid on a cinder-heap.[77]

Philosophical models may appear to tidy up the ash-heap, but this is both illusory (the ash-heap cannot be neatened) and reductive (it rationalises away the valuable heterogeneity of the 'cinders'). In this way, Hulme likens these systems to a 'manufactured chess-board' laid on top of the ash-heap: a system that artificially gestures at order, but ultimately fails to secure it. Though 'unity is made in the world by drawing squares over it', the lines go awry: 'the line stops [...] all logic and life are made up of tangled ends like that.'[78]

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[75] Rebecca Beasley, *Theorists of Modernist Poetry: T. S. Eliot, T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound* (Routledge, 2007), p. 1.
[76] T. S. Eliot, 'Commentary', *Criterion*, 2 (April 1924), p. 231. Eliot, 'Donne and the Middle Ages' (1926), in *The* Varieties *of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard (Faber, 1993), p. 82.
[77] T. E. Hulme, 'Cinders', in *T. E. Hulme: Selected Writings*, ed. by Patrick McGuiness (Carcanet Press, 2003), p. 20. Hereafter *TEHW*.
[78] Hulme, 'Cinders', in *TEHW*, p. 22; p. 30.

Throughout Hulme's criticism and poetry, the failure of geometric systems like the 'line' or the 'square' recurs as a metaphor for the inadequacy of brittle rationalism. This, Hulme explains, is the fallacy of the 'eagle's eye': when we 'see the world as pure geometry, and can make out its dividing lines', we forget that 'the eye is in the mud, the eye *is* mud.'[79] This is not to say that lines are unimportant — in the Canadian flats, Hulme understandably concluded that 'the world lives in order to develop the lines on its face' — but rather that lines can never wholly capture the world beneath them. Discussing the 'clumsiness of prose' in his 'Notes on Language and Style' (1907), Hulme likens this experiential variety to 'constant movement above and below the line of meaning', appending 'a little sketch of a curve rising above a fixed horizontal line' in his notebook.[80] Later, in a marginal sketch held by Keele University, Hulme diagrams the 'unity of nature' to an undulating line while 'Collections of Ideas' are networked like a sentence diagram.

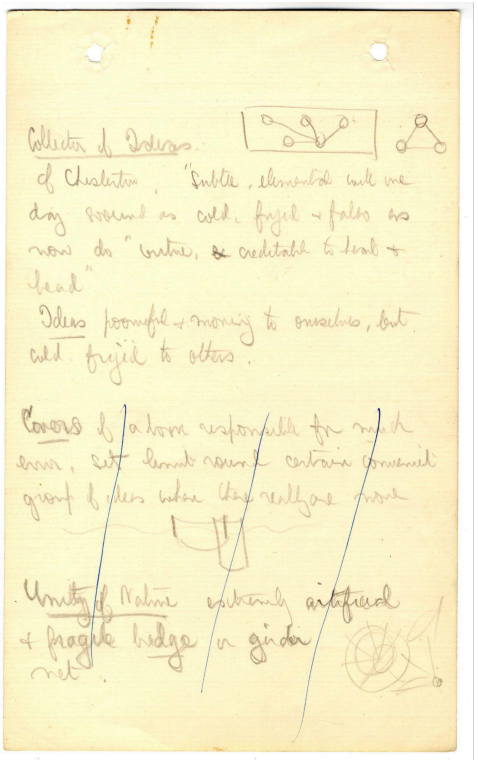

Figure 7: A page from Hulme's notebook.[81]

[79] Hulme, 'Cinders', in *TEHW*, p. 32.
[80] Hulme, 'Notes on Language and Style', in *TEHW*, p. 37.
[81] T. E. Hulme Papers, Keele University (GB 172 HUL19 [b]).

Like Stein's 'line [which] sets sprinkling to be a remedy', Hulme's 'line of meaning' is only remedial insofar as it disguises the 'monster puzzle' of the world.

Troublingly, for Hulme, human minds too often reify these systems as if they were more than mere approximations, and in so doing, treat these provisional grids as a final truth rather than a fabricated framework. Mathematics, for instance, offers one kind of certainty while dispensing with the experiential aspects of living that refuse to be converted into symbols. The condition of modern prose, as Hulme warned in his 'Notes on Language and Style' (1907), is perilously near to being mere algebra: 'The idea of modern prose is to be all counters, i.e. to pass to conclusions without thinking.'[82] Counters, in Hulme's lexicon, are words that are used as chess pieces in automatic and unthinking transactions on the chess-board of language: 'the type of all reasoning is that of arranging counters on the flat, where they can be moved about, without the mind having to think in any involved way.'[83] Strikingly, and in possible reference to the prop envelope accompanying Carroll's *The Game of Logic*, Hulme's counters are red: 'The red moving figure is [...] just as powerful a means as the one called logic which is only an analogy to *counter-pushing* [...] Literature as red-counters moving on a chessboard.'[84]

Taking cues from Stéphane Mallarmé's notion that 'verse sagely remunerates the defect of languages,' Hulme proposes poetry as the true candidate for redemptively reclaiming the exciting variety of the ash-heap without losing sight of structure.[85] Poetry, which uses these counters on 'the gossamer web' rather than the chessboard, can evoke the vibrancy of the external world without disfiguring it into purely logical schemata. Put simply, poets aim at representing experience, rather than representing how minds represent experience. The first

[82] Hulme, 'Notes on Language and Style', in *TEHW*, p. 37.
[83] ibid, p. 38.
[84] ibid, p. 48; p. 53.
[85] Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers', in *Divagations* (Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1897), pp. 235–53 (p. 242). Translation from Sandra Adell, *Double-Consciousness/Double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth-Century Black Literature* (University of Illinois Press, 1994) p. 45.

time Hulme 'ever felt the necessity or inevitableness of verse', he asserts, was upon grasping the inadequacy of mathematics.[86]

Hulme's conviction was that poetry represented an antidote to the 'counter language' wielded in prose that reduced words to abstract signs or symbols: 'in prose as in algebra,' he warned, the external world takes the form of counters 'without being visualised at all in the process'. It is a notable feature of Hulme's own prose, by contrast, that it is so dense with striking visual analogies. A 'relentlessly analogical thinker', in McGuiness's estimation, Hulme populates his theories with models like the ash-heap, chessboard, or, in one evocative case, a hairy caterpillar:[87]

> Perhaps the nearest analogy is the hairy caterpillar. Taking each segment of his body as a word, the hair on that segment is the vision the poet sees behind it. If [the poet] employed the ordinary word, the reader would only see it as a segment, with no hair, used for getting along. The hairy one for beauty, to build up a solid vision of realities.[88]

Hulme's argument is that poetry resurrects inert language from the fate of predictability by charging it with 'vision' (a precursor to the notion of a '*new* image' he prescribed). The metaphor of resurrection is appropriate: he believed such 'images are born in poetry' but 'die a long lingering death' in prose. Conventional prose crawls along in predictable sequence like a bald caterpillar, whereas poetry alerts readers to its shimmering bristles. The metaphor, perhaps nodding at the caterpillar from Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, certainly advocates for 'puzzling' as a way of charging innocuous phrases with imagination.

Hulme is, in essence, proposing a kind of sentence diagram. Unlike the linear trees of Reed and Kellogg, Hulme's caterpillar is portioned into segments for each word. S. W. Clark's *A Practical Grammar* (1860) was one popular forerunner to Reed and Kellogg's system, assembling variously bulbous capsules instead of strands.[89]

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[86] Hulme, quoted in Beasley, *Theorists of Modernist Poetry*, p. 13.
[87] Patrick McGuiness, 'Introduction', in *TEHW* p. 7.
[88] Hulme, 'Notes on Language and Style', in *TEHW*, p. 38.
[89] S. W. Clark, *A Practical Grammar*, p. 47; p. 53.

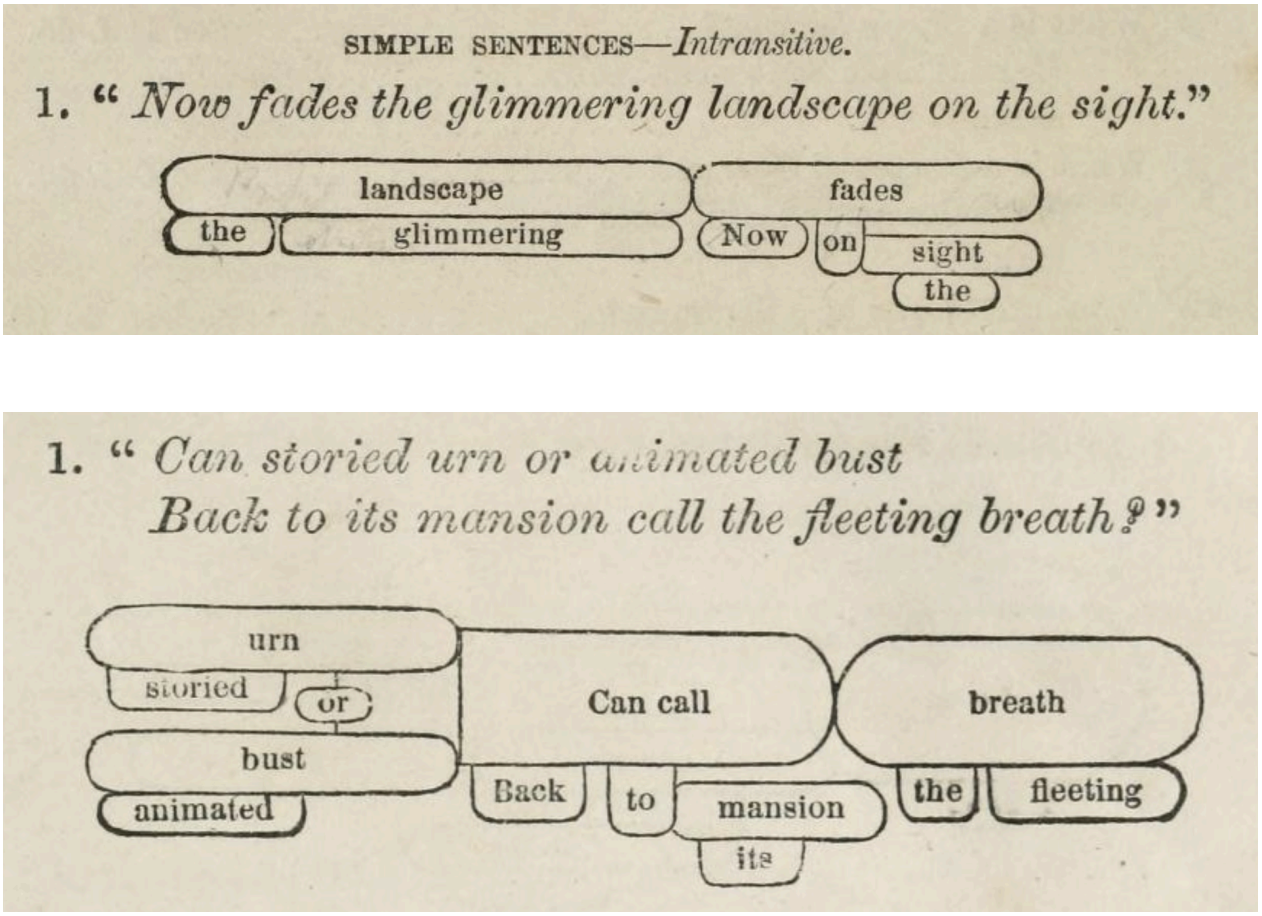

Figure 8: Diagrams of Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' from *A Practical Grammar.*

A potential influence on Hulme's image of the caterpillar, Clark's sentence diagram structure exemplifies the loss of poetic 'vision' caused by rational analysis. Each unit, which indeed resembles the blandly hairless segment of a caterpillar, impairs the 'beauty' of the poetry by treating each component part algebraically. A word becomes 'a mere counter to be manipulated' when 'we cease to think of *x* as having a meaning.'[90] If, for Hulme, 'prose is algebra and poetry is an avoidance of it', as Oliver Tearle has argued, then philological diagramming is a clear instantiation of letting the 'manufactured chessboard' overdetermine the gossamer world of language.[91]

[90] Hulme, 'Notes on Language and Style', in *TEHW*, p. 37.
[91] Oliver Tearle, *T. E. Hulme and Modernism* (Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 26.

For Hulme, inspiration was therefore 'a matter of an accidentally seen analogy or unlooked-for resemblance'. Hulme's adjective, incidentally, would be reprised by William Empson in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951) when he urged for the creation of a dictionary that could register 'the unexpected tricks that a word might play, especially by an unlooked-for sense poking up' (see Chapter Four). The consequence of amalgamating analogies in order to estrange words from their stale, utilitarian function, is indeed the opportunity for 'tricks' to surprise a reader. In Hulme's estimation, poetry works 'to prevent you gliding through' the ash-heap on autopilot. Reading the cinders is necessarily proximate with *riddling*, in its etymological sense as a way of sifting through particulate matter.[92] This original sense of the *riddle* is central to Heidegger's conclusion in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (c. 1935) that his chief concern is with 'the riddle of art, the riddle that art itself is': rather than 'claiming to solve the riddle,' Heidegger thinks the object of art is 'to see the riddle.'[93]

Recalling his encounters with evolutionary determinism, Hulme used the figure of the puzzle to explain his simultaneous satisfaction and dissatisfaction with hermeneutics: he felt excitement 'in finding that one can completely explain the world as one might solve a puzzle.'[94] Bergson was the key to breaching any cognitive impasse, supplying 'exhilaration' by opening up 'a kind of mental explosion' constricting his ability to think. The terms of this 'relieving force' are taken from the puzzle: 'a solution had been given to a problem'.[95] As with Heidegger, Hulme avoids solution as a necessary condition of puzzlement; instead, puzzlement lets the scales fall from one's eyes, granting a new kind of seeing. To Heidegger, literary puzzles catalyse not mere *Errechnen* (calculation) but instead *Erraten* (surmising): 'In surmise we take a leap, without guidelines, without the rungs of any ladder [...] To grasp the riddle is to leap.'[96] Without the safety rails of sentence diagrams, Hulmean chessboards, or Carrollean quadrants,

[92] *riddle*, n., in *OED Online* (accessed 24 December 2024) [revised entry 2010].
[93] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), p. 79.
[94] Hulme, 'Notes on Bergson I', in *The New Age*, 9 (October 19, 1911), p. 587.
[95] Hulme, 'Notes on Bergson II', in *The New Age*, 9 (October 26, 1911), p. 610.
[96] Heidegger, 'On the Vision and the Riddle', in *Nietzsche*, 1, trans. by David Farrell Krell (Harper & Row, 1991), pp. 36–44 (p. 36).

literary puzzlement nurtures transformative hermeneutic leaps and bounds: 'bound' not in the sense of Logic's capture in *Rape of the Lock*, but rather Logic hopping free from its chains.

iii. 'A Code and not a Core': Pound's 'Pruzzles'

Due to the influence of Hulme's aesthetic philosophy on writers under the banner of Imagism, it is unsurprising that poets like Ezra Pound were so often described as 'puzzling'. After a visit by Pound, Richard Aldington, T. Sturge Moore, Victor Plarr, and F. S. Flint to Wilfred Scawen Blunt in 1914, during which Blunt was presented with a box designed by Gaudier-Brzeska containing a set of dedicatory poems, Blunt confessed himself confused: among the poems, he struggled to find 'anything but word puzzles.' Unbeknownst to Blunt, Pound had actually penned each of the poems enclosed.[97]

Though critics have often drawn attention to these questions of difficulty, ellipsis, or obscurity in early-twentieth-century poetics, they rarely make an explicit link between these puzzling forces and the actual puzzles that informed the adjective. Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (1971), for instance, labels the 'enigma' as 'the literary form most elaborated by the nineteenth century' when it comes to Pound's influences, but stops short of considering puzzle structures in Pound's work.[98] This was an affinity keenly felt in the period: Louis Untermeyer, bemoaning the so-called 'Cross-Word Puzzle School of poetry' in 1923, decried Pound's *Cantos* as 'rag-bags of memories crammed with literary flotsam and jetsam', later criticising 'the flotsam and jetsam of desiccated culture stuck together in the puzzle-picture manner'.[99] Though Untermeyer's grumble leads Leonard Diepeveen to conclude that very few 'pro-difficulty moderns [...] accepted the terms of the game argument,' I argue instead that the counter metaphor pervaded the work of even supposed puzzlephobes like Pound.[100]

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[97] Lucy McDiarmid, 'A Box for Wilfred Blunt', *PMLA*, 120.1 (January 2005), pp. 163–80 (p. 164).
[98] Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (University of California Press, 1971), p. 23.
[99] Louis Untermeyer, *American Poetry Since 1900* (Henry Holt & Company, 1923), p. 167; p. 358.
[100] Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism*, p. 271.

Pound, who knew personally the setter Torquemada by his real name, Edward Powys Mathers, before his venture into cruciverbalism, condemned his crosswords as 'abominations' in his *ABC of Reading* (1934), for instance, while simultaneously endorsing a poetics marked by omission and semantic charge.[101] Pound often used puzzles as a metaphor for composition, for instance in the introduction to his anthology *Confucius to Cummings* (1964), fondly described as 'a puzzle or pruzzle' in a neologistic twist on the noun.[102] According to the conventions of cryptic clues, by then standard, the surplus 'r' inserted in 'puzzle' could have stood for 'reading' (as in the three Rs). For Tearle, 'much imagist poetry works in a similar way to a verbal puzzle', in that readers must 'register the associations between the images [...] for the poem to make sense.'[103] Tearle's positive spin on the comparison belies the more negative charge that was felt keenly in the period. Bemoaning intellectual 'enthusiasm about "imagism" and the imagists,' one reviewer of Bob Brown's *My Marjory* (1916) in *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram* complained that 'it is all very puzzling'.[104] To one commentator in *The Liverpool Daily Post*, if Ezra Pound 'continues to spread', then 'cross-word puzzles will have a serious literary rival.'[105]

Though Pound was superficially unconvinced by the comparison, he ambivalently cultivated the notion that poetry ought to be puzzling while simultaneously rejecting actual puzzles for their failure precisely to represent reality. For this reason, it is too sweeping to say that Imagism was founded on the basis of Hulme's opposition to 'counter language' alone. Imagist poetics instead reclaimed the opportunities of word-counters by playing chess the wrong way: by harnessing the dynamic power of dislocation and ellipsis in order to conscribe readers into an interactive process of semantic activation. In the very act of championing a style of poetry that was surgically precise, stripping away all superfluity of expression, the

[101] Pound, letter to Isabel Weston. 7 October 1920, in *Ezra Pound to his Parents: Letters 1895–1929*, ed. by Mary de Rachewiltz, A. David Moody, and Joanna Moody (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 472.
[102] Pound, 'Confucius to Cummings', in *Confucius to Cummings: An Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Pound and Marcella Spann (New Directions, 1964), pp. ix–x (p. x).
[103] Tearle, *T. E. Hulme and Modernism*, p. 26.
[104] 'Poetry, What is Poetry', *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 3 August 1916), p. 6.
[105] Brother Savage, 'Pillorying the Famous in Fiction', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 16 November 1929, p. 6.

Imagists necessarily created a new kind of imprecision: one to be 'unlocked', as Hannah Sullivan has it, by the reader.[106]

Sullivan ties this grander aesthetic vision to technological advances in typography, particularly when it comes to the stylistic tics so prevalent in Imagist poetry. 'Radical excision' allowed authors to compress their writing by stripping away connective tissue in manual redrafts, opting for 'syntactic ellipsis rather than elaboration.'[107] Pound, indeed, prescribed the pruning of 'superfluous' adjectives in *Poetry*, and in F. S. Flint's paraphrase of Imagism's aesthetic manifesto, one key tenet is 'to use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.'[108] More than mere concision, Imagism was founded on the basis of grammatical and rhetorical removal. A poem like 'In a Station of the Metro' (1913), for instance, operates by parataxis: denied actuation as a simile, instead two images ('these faces in the crowd' and 'Petals on a wet, black bough') are drawn into ambiguous interrelation. As in a riddle, the tenor and vehicle become fluid.[109] There is no copula: no *to be* to 'make sense of separate images', as Sullivan has it. Daniel Albright describes this as a 'deleted picture', a term which aptly captures some of the aesthetic contradictions of the Imagist project.[110] Imagism avows an interest in communicating singular visions precisely, but it does so through the aggregation of multiple kinds of imagery whose coordination is uncertain.

The words are not 'counters' in Hulme's sense of functional, mechanised units, but become a different kind of counter — ludic, motile, generative — in Imagism's imaginative puzzle-poems. When describing his inspiration for 'In a Station of the Metro', Pound used these terms of the verbal equation: 'I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation [...] not in speech, but in little splotches of colour.' Pound had been reading Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), first reviewed in English by Michael Sadler

[106] Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 106.
[107] ibid, p. 102.
[108] Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', *Poetry*, 1.6 (March 2013), p. 200. F. S. Flint, 'The History of Imagism', *The Egoist* (May 1915), p. 71.
[109] Pound, 'In a Station of the Metro', *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (April 1913), p. 12.
[110] Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 215.

in *Rhythm* in 1912. Offering an apparently 'viable alternative to the earlier impressionist analogies' ventured by Hulme, as Michael Faherty suggests, Pound was struck by Kandinsky's notion that 'words are and will remain mere hints and superficial indications' of an object.[111] Strikingly, following the surge in popularity of crosswords from 1914 onwards, Kandinsky's paintings began to feature miniaturised black-and-white grid schemes: perhaps an instantiation of his notion that definitions might be 'set free' by spatial abstraction.[112]

The essential belief of both sentence diagramming and fin-de-siècle word-puzzles was that lexical pieces were to be treated as nouns regardless of their meaning. The logical extension of Hulme's counter metaphor, after all, is not that all language enters a chess-like *rigor mortis*, but rather that words are available for ludic and surprising dislocations. Pound's prevailing fascination with the 'thingliness' of each symbol, as Albright has it, naturally converts his medium into the thing it describes. In the original printed layout of a poem like 'In a Station of the Metro', for instance, Pound foregrounded the quiddity of the words, clumping them into discrete, petal-like bundles. Though certainly corresponding with contemporaneous instantiations of concrete poetry — for instance, Vasily Kamensky's *Tango with Cows: Ferro-Concrete Poems* (1914) or Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1918) — Pound's interest in the 'thingliness' of words was also a natural flowering of a diagrammatic philological apparatus.

Later, Pound would again clarify that he wrote 'not an equation of mathematics, not something about a, b, and c, having something to do with form, but about sea, cliffs, nights.'[113] The key difference, to Pound, was that the Image (or Vortex) 'has a variable significance, like the signs *a*, *b*, and *x* in algebra.' Rather than refuting algebraic counter language entirely, as Hulme had advised, Pound recognised the versatility of algebra as a framework for redeeming

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[111] Michael Faherty, 'The Third Dimension: Ezra Pound and Wassily Kandinsky', *Paideuma: Modern and* Contemporary *Poetry and Poetics*, 3 (Winter 1992), pp. 63–77 (p. 63). Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, New York edn (Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), p. 72.
[112] For example, Kandinsky, *Auf Weiss II*, 1923, oil on canvas, 105cm x 98cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.
[113] Pound, 'Vorticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 96 (September 1914), pp. 461–471.

fallen vocabulary: a way for one word to be multiple. The metaphor for this relationship is again cryptographic: an image, lacking a fixed meaning, cannot be 'decoded as readily' as conventional language. The Image or Vortex, as conveyed in poetry, generates a code that resists decoding, rather than the avoidance of codes entirely.

Pound's 'doctrine of the new noun', indeed, held that in modern poetry, the noun should take priority over adjectives, adverbs, and other modifiers that would sully the directness of expression. Qualifiers cloud a reader's vision with extraneous description, whereas a noun, however sparsely described, can evoke a manifold association through what he called his 'method of Luminous Detail.'[114] For John Steven Childs, the Imagist poem strives ultimately to concatenate nouns 'in order to create a unitary sign having an overall signified, the Image.'[115] As such, the Imagist poem figures as a unitary noun in itself. Beyond Childs' suggestive premise, I argue that Imagist poems harnessed the opportunity of treating even more basic semantic units as nouns: the clause, the word, and the letter.

Though Pound's interest in Chinese ideograms would not fully mature until later in his career, his puzzling noun-poems certainly represent a proto-union of his notions of *phanopoeia* and *logopoeia*; that is, picture-poetry and word-poetry. In his *ABC of Reading* (1934), in which he denigrates Torquemada's crossword 'abominations', Pound seized the ideogram as a valuable model for his own poetic practice. Rather than modern Western languages, which had become bogged down in grammatical and syntactic fluff — the so-called 'wagging tails' of inflection — Pound believed the concentrations of meaning licensed by ideogrammatic representation to be an ideal framework for poetry.[116] Though certainly a simplification of ideogrammatic languages, ideograms clearly charmed Pound as an redemptive possibility for an apparently fallen English language. Pound had, after all, studied

[114] Pound, 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris [II]... A Rather Dull Introduction', *New Age*, X.6, 7 December 1911, pp. 130–1 (p. 130).
[115] John Steven Childs, *Modernist Form: Pound's Style in the Early Cantos* (Susquehanna University Press, 1986), p. 336.
[116] Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 50.

philology at a graduate level at the University of Pennsylvania, and would certainly have been familiar with discourse surrounding sentence diagramming. Pound uses these terms, for instance, to denigrate John Milton's poetic ability: he is 'chock a block with Latin', and therefore 'studied his English not as a living language, but as something subject to theories.' Like Hulme, Pound considers syntactic density a dereliction of representation, because it estranges its object, maiming it into something intelligible schematically rather than instinctively.

Akin to collage, in which textual and pictographic elements combine to synthesise new wholes, Pound aimed to recreate for his readers the moment of clarity central to ideograms without any cumbersome explanatory scaffolding. Paradoxically, and as a culmination of this practice, Pound's poetry often appears obscure, indirect, and in need of explanation. What marks his poems as successful, according to their internal ambitions, also makes them confounding readerly objects. For Albright, this is the 'quantum' central to the Imagist project: in pursuit of directness, and by 'paring down a verbal description', the poem inevitably becomes 'an *image* both of its original and of something else.'[117] Cognate with Viktor Shklovsky's argument in 'Art as Technique' (1917) that literature must make the 'stone stony' without lapsing into 'algebra', poets were simultaneously coming round to the ludic opportunities of using words algebraically to make the stone other-than-stone, and in so doing, to reclaim the 'metamorphosibility' of the external world.[118] Tellingly, in a less quoted part of Shklovsky's essay, riddles are given as an exemplar for the kinds of 'enstrangement' desirable in anti-algebraic literature.[119]

Pound's *Cantos* (1915-) represent the zenith of this practice, collaging disparate and polylingual elements to challenge a given reader to supply their own copula: to diagram, as it were, an unruly cluster of sentences, as if performing some kind of hermeneutic dot-to-dot. In

[117] Albright, *Quantum Poetics*, p. 139.
[118] Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Nebraska University Press, 1995), pp. 3–25 (p. 11).
[119] Shklovsky, 'Art, as Device', trans. by Alexandra Berlina, in *Poetics Today*, 36.3 (September 2015), pp. 151–73.

Canto 31, Pound levies a parenthetical 'cypher' ('XTZBK49HT') shortly after describing being 'much puzzled', a wink to the kinds of cryptographic writing that was becoming increasingly popular for private correspondence — strikingly, the puzzling parenthesis is the 'only part of this canto "written" by Pound', or at least in his own authorial voice.[120] Though Achilles Fang proposes that 'Here Pound has pounded his typewriter keys at random,' freely substituting a set of asterisks from a letter about Thomas Jefferson, there is no mention of a 'cypher' in the original.[121] Suggestively, indeed, Pound's *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) uses the same term to gesture at deliberate concealments:

> The hurried reader may say I write this in cypher and that my statement merely skips from one point to another without connection or sequence.
>
> The statement is nevertheless complete. All the elements are there, and the nastiest addict of crossword puzzles shd. be able to solve this or see this.[122]

Pound raises a common criticism of his own work only to avoid refuting it. The work is 'complete' as a condition of its disconnection, rather than in spite of it. Like his manifesto for poetry, 'direct treatment of the thing' flowers from cutting away conjunctive vocabulary, paring down a set of words until the omissions become charged, like working with negative space. A statement is complete, or at least completely akin to the true nature of experience, when it has semantic gaps in it: as Pound argues, 'Ideas are NOT understood, even when men write down what they themselves consider simple and unambiguous statements.'[123] Even while getting in a jab at cruciverbalists, Pound strays into the kind of abbreviatory idiom ('shd.') so standard in the popular puzzles he reviled.

Earlier than his *Cantos* or late critical work, Pound's early poetry evinces a more basic intrigue in the opportunities of treating counter language redemptively. In 'On his own face in

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[120] George Kearns, *The Cantos* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 11.
[121] Achilles Fang, ''Material for the Study of Pound's *Cantos*, by Fang. Typescript, annotated, 1958', in Achilles Fang Papers, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 99, Series 2, p. 615. See also *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. by Paul Leicester Ford, 4 vols, (H. W. Derby, 1894), IV, p. 423.
[122] Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New Directions, 1938), p. 48.
[123] ibid, p. 49.

a glass' (1905) from *A Lume Spento* (1908), Pound seems to lean into the stylistic traits associated with contemporary word puzzles:[124]

> **On his own face in a glass**
>
> O strange face there in the glass!
>
> O ribald company, O saintly host!
> O sorrow-swept my fool,
>
> What answer?
> O ye myriad
> That strive and play and pass,
> Jest, challenge, counterlie,
>
> I ? I ? I ?
> And ye?

The combination of confronting questions with a looking glass might remind a reader of Carroll's Caterpillar once again. Helen M. Dennis is right to surmise that the poem concerns the 'complex process of personality as poetics', but what has been absent from critical discussion of this poem is the puzzle idiom Pound enlists to voice this complexity.[125] Certainly, the speaker's mirrored personae attest to the 'mask-changing and re-making' associated with poetic influence, as Catherine Shubert has argued, but the 'scattering of his notion of personal identity' is enacted on the level of language, too.[126]

Pound's terms are those of hermeneutic riddling: there is an 'answer' correspondent with his soul-searching questions, and each of the polysyndetic list of verbs performed by Pound's 'ribald company' are ludic. 'Counterlie', in particular, stands out as a neologism, on the one hand suggesting adjacency, and on the other working adversarially against the speaker through deception; formed from 'counter', it is both a preposition, and, when a noun, the scourge of literature according to Hulme. This adjacency, or falsehood, is crystallised in the

[124] Pound, *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. by John King (Faber, 1976), p. 34.
[125] Helen M. Dennis, 'Ezra Pound and the Mask of Memory', *Quaderni di Palazzo Serra*, 15 (2008), pp. 33–55 (p. 33).
[126] Catherine Shubert, 'Modern Metamorphoses: Issues of (Im)personality and Tradition in the Poetry of Pound, Eliot, and H.D.' (unpublished thesis, University of Michigan, 2009), p. 34.

following line, notable for its wide spacing (a spacing typographically compressed when quoted by both Dennis and Shubert). Each 'I' and question mark are placed apart, in contrast with the conventional spacing of the rest of the poem, as if recapturing the distance of an enjambement horizontally.

Pound's lacunae entice the reader to field an 'answer' of their own: what are we to make of these interrogative pronouns? The technique of omission opens up a 'myriad' of potential responses to his question. Homophonically, it is suggestive that *A Lume Spento* also featured a poem called 'The Cry of the Eyes', which Pound retitled just 'The Eyes' when he later included it in his collected works. In a letter to his mother in 1928, Pound's characteristic misspelling of words saw 'eyetalyan' repeatedly used in place of 'Italian', demonstrating their availability for quick change in his usage.[127] As if in the style of a rebus, one poem's title captions a line from another: Pound's repeated query is, in some sense, a 'Cry of the 'I's'. In *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot would play quasi-ideogrammatically with the same idea: 'O O O O that Shakespehearian Rag'. Eliot's 'O's typographically stand for the 'pearls that were his eyes' of the previous lines, colliding music-hall cadence with the dying words of *Hamlet* (in the First Folio: 'The rest is silence. O, o, o, o.')[128] Pound's poem begins acrostically with three 'O's, naturally drawing a reader's attention to the spatial qualities scaffolding the semantic qualities of the poem.

Arriving at the 'I's, then, the reader is primed to think of them not only existentially, but also verbally. Beyond reflecting the uncertainty of selfhood, Pound's question marks serve, I suggest, to wage a guessing game against the reader. In a poem that asks the reader 'What answer?', speaks of 'striv[ing]' to 'play', and ends by asking the reader what they think ('And ye?'), the puzzle structure seems to be earmarked for consideration. Though variants of

[127] Pound, letter to Isabel Weston, 1 March 1 1928, in *Ezra Pound to his Parents: Letters 1895–1929*, ed. by Mary de *Rachewiltz*, A. David Moody, and Joanna Moody (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 651.
[128] Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 128, in *TSEP*, *I*, p. 58. For the textual history of these 'O's, which are often removed from modern *editions*, see Alan C. Dessen, 'Much Virtue in O-Oh: A Case Study', *Early Theatre*, 20.2 (2017), pp. 121–40 (p. 121).

missing-letters games (known by different names) have existed for centuries — Alice Gomme's collection of *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1894) calls it 'Birds, Beasts, and Fishes' — hangman's morbid diagrammatical system was widespread by the turn of the twentieth century.[129] The *Philadelphia Enquirer* in 1902, for instance, illustrates the 'gallows diagram' in a guide for children's parties.[130] Though Pound's hangman remains off-stage, the reader is nonetheless confronted with a puzzle to solve.

Appropriately, for a poem concerned with looking, the three possible solutions — *iritic*, *iridic*, and *iritis* — are each ocular, denoting the quality and impairment of eyes respectively.[131] Like the 'glass' the speaker confronts, the eye seems to reflect and refract in equal measure. With seeming prophecy, Pound would suffer cataracts in his later life which clouded his famously blue eyes; before his own troubles, in 1917 Joyce wrote to Pound to relay the 'depressing' news about his halting progress on *Ulysses* thanks to an imminent iridectomy ('Devil take my absurd eyes!').[132] When you eye the poem closely, eyes begin to look back: beyond the phanopoetic 'O's and melopoetic 'I's, Pound 'induces [logopoeia] by stimulating associations with other words.'[133] The final syllable of Pound's neologised 'counterlie' nests an 'eye' in disguise; suggestively, though 'counterly' is an established word, his adjustment modifies the pronunciation to achieve a specific end-sound. Pound's apostrophes to 'ye myriad' and 'ye', too, read like a clipped 'eye' despite not sounding like it: a frustrated 'eye rhyme' of a sort. In an uncollected poem addressed to Hulme, indeed, Pound described himself as 'a bard, / Wi' cryptic eyes', combining his vision with a kind of puzzle-scouting worldview, as if confirming his argument that puzzling art allows one to find 'new beauty in natural things', rewriting the world as a puzzle.[134]

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[129] Alice Gomme, *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 2 vols (New York: Dover Publications, 1964*),* I, p. 33.
[130] 'A White Cap Party', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 February 1902, p. 39.
[131] *iritic*, adj. (coined 1855), *iridic*, adj. (coined 1845), *iritis*, n. (coined 1818), *OED Online* (accessed 27 December *2024*). A further chemical term, *imidic*, was coined in 1895 but remained obscure for several decades.
[132] James Joyce *to* Ezra Pound (13 April 1917), in Ezra Pound Papers, 1868–1976, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 43.
[133] Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 37.
[134] Pound, 'To Hulme (T. E.) and Fitzgerald (A Certain)', in *Collected Early Poems*, p. 232.

Poems which make direct or indirect use of puzzle mechanics abound throughout Pound's oeuvre: 'Gnomic Verses', as he put it in the title of a poem of 1915, recur from his early poetry through to his *Cantos*, the so-called 'puzzle-picture' poem so typical of his style according to Untermeyer. 'Near Perigord', for instance, makes extended use of the riddle as a plot device, while in his essay on the Chinese poet Rihaku, Pound admired how the reader can 'play Conan Doyle' by reading poetry through 'a mathematical process of reduction,' allying his own interest in pared-back poetry with the the technique required for puzzle-solving.[135] In a poem supposedly paraphrasing a conversation with Hulme, convalescing from a bullet wound in 1915 after returning from the trenches, Pound deploys the 'line' metaphor so prevalent in Hulme's theory to describe the internalisation of war:

> Behind the lines, cannon, hidden lying back miles.
> Before the line, chaos:
>
> My mind is a corridor. The minds about me are corridors.
> Nothing suggests itself. There is nothing to do but keep on.[136]

Hulme was killed by shellfire in 1917 in West Flanders: 'apparently absorbed in some thought of his own he had failed to hear it coming.'[137] Christos Hadjiyiannis argues that Pound punctuates 'chaos' with a colon to create a 'typographic visual labyrinth', chaining narrow lines to simulate 'crawling through narrow trenches.'[138] The semantic field, however, relates palpably to the 'line' motif in Hulme's essays and notebooks:

> All of these sudden insights [...] all of these start a line, which seems about to unite the world logically. But the line stops. There is no unity. All logic and life are made up of tangled ends like that.[139]

The disunity of the 'line', as both a standard metaphor for the application of logic, and a unit of poetry, occurs to Hulme as an opportunity to capture cinders. Geometrically, though 'a line of

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[135] Pound, *Early Writings* (Penguin, 1995), p. 298.
[136] Pound, 'Poem: Abbreviated from the Conversation of Mr. T. E. H.', ll. 12–15, in *Collected Early Poems*, p. 286.
[137] Robert Ferguson, *The Short Sharp Life of T. E. Hulme* (Allen Lane, 2002), p. 270.
[138] Christos Hadjiyiannis, 'Logic of the Heart: Affective Ethical Valuing in T. E. Hulme and Max Scheler', in *Modernism and Affect*, ed. by Julie Taylor(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 56–74 (p. 62).
[139] Hulme, 'Cinders', in *TEHW*, p. 30.

words has only one dimension, poetry supplies 'other elements [...] which form as it were an emotional equivalent for the lost dimension.' Poetry redeems one-dimensionality as puzzling depth, stranding the mind in a labyrinth of corridors — Carroll's 'syllogistic maze', perhaps — but in so doing, letting the mind more faithfully roam about the reality of experience, clueless as we may be.

A further early poem, 'An Object' from *Ripostes* (1912) — to which was appended *The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme* — avows the innate puzzlingness of the external world and poetry's natural candidacy to describe it:

> **An Object**
>
> This thing, that hath a code and not a core,
> Hath set acquaintance where might be affections,
> And nothing now
> Disturbeth his reflections.

H. K. Riikonen calls 'An Object' an 'ironic poem' designed as an exercise in the Greek epigram tradition, while for William Flesch, it exemplifies the kinds of 'enigmas' that John Hollander associated with Pound's poetry at large.[140] The poem certainly iterates one of Pound's characteristic manoeuvres, using a demonstrative language — in this case 'This thing', but elsewhere, for example, 'the glass' or 'these faces' — to revoke its own referentiality. As Max Nänny has argued, this 'contextualising effect' has the curious consequence of decontextualising the poem, implying a logical sequence between statements to which the reader is not privy.[141] In this sense, whether we view the poem as 'an object' *per se*, or think of the object as a generalised case study, the idea of 'a code and not a core' speaks for poetry more broadly. Pound is interested in the so-called 'disturb[ance of] reflections' and the ways in which acquaintance might actually belie 'affections' coordinated by readerly response. A

[140] H. K. Riikonen, 'Ezra Pound and the Greek Anthology', in *Ezra Pound, Language and Persona*, ed. by Massimo Bacigalupo, William Pratt (University of Genova, 2008), pp. 181–94 (p. 190). John Hollander, quoted in William *Flesch*, 'Playing Patience: John Hollander's Reflections on Espionage', *Southwest Review*, 86.2 (2001), pp. 228–45 (p. 238).
[141] Max *Nänny*, 'Context, Continuity and Contact in Ezra Pound's *Personae*', *ELH*, 47.2 (Summer 1980), pp. 386–98 (p. 392).

fragmentary world means there is no 'core', but rather than perceiving counter language as a harmful lapse into algebra, thinking of poetry as 'code' opens up the opportunity for readers to glimpse the cinders more faithfully.

In a 1913 article for *The New Age*, Pound condemned the kinds of 'wordy disguises' used to subordinate language to its function. To substantiate his argument, Pound offers a scientific metaphor recalling Ernst Chladni's 1787 demonstration that the resonant frequency of a violin bow would create patterns in dust:

> If you pour a heap of iron filings on to a glass plate they form a heap; no amount of care and thought would make you able to arrange them bit by bit in a beautiful manner. Clap a strong enough magnet to the underside of the plate and at once the filings leap into order. They form a rose pattern on the lines of the electric force; move the magnet and they move in unison.[142]

By extension, there are two kinds of 'confusion': a 'heap of iron filings, partially magnetised [or] a dead heap.' This division is one potential model for describing Pound's interest in reconciling Hulme's notion of a counter language, in this case through a verbal order that he would later call 'a vortex'.[143] A 'code', for Pound, is not the dull encryption of a 'wordy disguise', but rather something more like a vortex: a puzzling, swirling amalgamation of signifiers that invites hermeneutic participation.

Like Planché's kaleidoscope, Carroll's envelope of counters, or Hulme's ash-heap, the filings reflect the natural disorder of the external world, but rather than language rigidly imposing a structure over the top of it — Planché's telescope, Carroll's diagram, or Hulme's chessboard — a magnet might draw it into an image: a shifting, mobile, provisional image, but an image nonetheless. Pound's remark that 'I cannot make it cohere' in *The Cantos*, seen in this way, is not an admission of failure so much as a badge of authenticity.[144] Rather than having the fixity of a sentence diagram, poetry can make its petals bend in the breeze. The magnet is not only the intelligent design of a poet's intellect, but crucially the activating attention of a

[142] Pound, 'Through Alien Eyes [I]', *The New Age*, XII. 11, 16 January 1913, p. 252.
[143] See Richard G. Landini, 'Vorticism and *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound', *Western Humanities Review*, 14 (January *1960*), pp. 172–81 (p. 176).
[144] Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, CXVI. 26 (Faber, 1975), p. 795.

reader: upon being read, the rose changes shape. Like the speaker in 'On his own face in a glass,' the iron filings are set atop a mirrored surface. Poetry does not eradicate the puzzling, fragmentary nature of the heap, but on the contrary provides a structure for it to continue to be puzzling in a new dimension, and puzzle each reader individually.

iv. 'Haystacks of Self-Bamboozlement': The British Crossword Craze

> Dear Sir — In reply to your letter I regret that I can not undertake to assist in the solution of crossword puzzles. Yours faithfully — Curator.
>
> A stereotyped letter at London Zoo (February 23, 1925)

Contemporaneously with Pound's poetic experiments, another kind of magnet was threatening to pull readers away from poetry altogether. London Zoo was one of many casualties of the so-called 'Crossword Craze' that swept the United Kingdom in the mid-1920s, having been imported from the United States. In January 1925, the zoo's resources were already being stretched thin: the acquisition of a thirteenth ostrich had led to public pressure to 'train one of them for police purposes,' a feat that had supposedly been accomplished 'some years ago on an ostrich farm in Florida.'[145] A fortnight later, a 'fugitive monkey' named George bruised a naturalist's knee before his recapture in Regent's Park, having 'fallen to the wiles of a woman' who sensibly detained him.[146]

To add insult to genicular injury, the zoo was reportedly under siege by 'requests for aid in solving "cross-word" puzzles.' As a new, still amorphously defined phenomenon, the hyphenation and quotation marks would persist for some years. Readers bombarded London Zoo's postroom to ask: 'What is a word in three letters meaning a female swan? What is a female kangaroo, or a fragile creature in six letters ending in TO?'[147] London Zoo, as a reporter for *The Times* suggested, 'has enough to do with the care of its own animals, and cannot act as

[145] 'Ostrich Policeman', in *Nottingham Evening Post*, 2 January 1925, p. 4
[146] 'Ensnared by Woman: Escaped London Monkey Recaptured', *Western Mail*, 24 January 1925, p. 10
[147] PEN, DOE, and BENITO respectively.

consultant to the world at large.'[148] Such was the volume of incoming correspondence that the chief curator reportedly commissioned a 'stereotyped letter' in order to fend off inquiries pertaining to, for instance, 'the scientific name of jumping mice (*zapodidae*).'[149] The wearied zookeepers of London imagined themselves at the thin edge of a puzzle wedge; fated, as Ernie Bushmiller had joked in a contemporaneous American comic strip, to serve buckets of alphabet soup to animals prized and poached for their phonemes alone.[150]

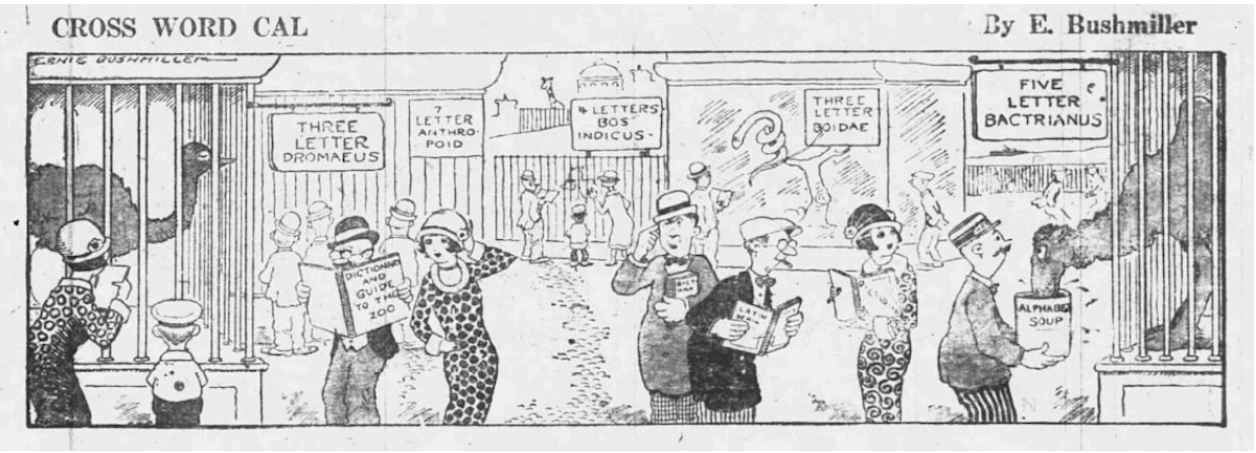

Figure 9: 'Cross Word Cal', in *Sunday New York World* (1925)

Ernie Bushmiller had worked as a cartoonist and crossword puzzle line drawer for *The New York World* from 1919, the publication in which Arthur Wynne had first designed a 'Word-Cross Puzzle' in 1913. Though Wynne's puzzle is often held to be the first crossword, Adrienne Raphel has compellingly demonstrated that cognate forms had featured in the popular children's magazine *St. Nicholas* and *People's Home Journal* in the preceding decades, and as discussed in my Introduction, classical predecessors such as the Sator Square had been long established.[151] The format caught on quickly, with *The Pittsburgh Press* launching their own crossword in 1916, and *The Boston Globe* following suit in 1917. Spying a captive audience whose needs had not yet been met, Richard Simon and Lincoln Schuster published

[148]'Curious Queries to the Zoo', *The Times*, 17 January 1925, p. 7
[149] 'Do Your Jumping Mice Have Title?' [*Associated Press*], quoted in *Times Herald*, 23 February 1925, p. 1.
[150] Ernie Bushmiller, 'Cross Word Cal', in *Sunday New York World* (1925).
[151] Adrienne Raphel, 'The Crossword Mentality', p. 25.

The Cross Word Puzzle Book in 1924 under the imprint Plaza Publishing, a decoy name used so as not to compromise the lofty literary ambitions of their new publishing house.[152] A sharpened pencil was included with every purchase. Predictably, the collection was a runaway success, selling more than 350,000 copies in its first year, and generating enough mailed-in orders to Simon & Schuster to jam their entrance. Legendarily, according to D. St P. Barnard, 'Two New York magistrates even went so far as to ration addicts who had neglected to support their families, to a maximum of two puzzles a day.'[153]

As with many anecdotal reports of the gargantuan proportions of the crossword craze, it is hard to delineate between reality and apocrypha. This is perhaps partly due to the polymorphous manifestations of the crossword across different media. Almost instantaneously, the vogue for the puzzle translated into an array of improbable commercial applications. Helen Hovanec's survey *The Puzzler's Paradise: From the Garden of Eden to the Computer Age* (1978), for instance, provides a suite of examples evocatively attesting to the broad appeal of the puzzle. Crossword fans could purchase enough clothes embroidered with puzzle designs to fill a wardrobe; for accessories, they might be tempted by The Mardor Company's range of 'Cross Word Puzzle Jewelry' including golden bracelets, rings, and enamelled collars pins each adorned with 'the clever application of cross word puzzle designs.'[154] On the move, they might consult their wrist-mounted portable crossword dictionary; in private, they might reach for 'The Thinking Man's Crossword Toilet Tissue', marketed for 'Brains and Bottoms.'

Adrienne Raphel's *Thinking Inside the Box* (2020), and the unpublished PhD thesis on which it was based, *The Crossword Mentality in Modern Literature and Culture* (2018), provide an ambitious and detailed synthesis of many of these colourful details that combine in the

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[152] Alan Connor, *Two Girls, One on Each Knee (7): The Puzzling, Playful World of the Crossword* (Penguin Books, *2013*), p. 143.
[153] D. St P. *Barnard*, *Anatomy of the Crossword* (1963), quoted in Tony Augarde, *The Oxford Guide to Word Games* (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 60.
[154] Helen Hovanec, *The Puzzler's Paradise: From the Garden of Eden to the Computer Age* (Paddington Press, 1978), p. *34*.

narrative arc of the crossword puzzle as it took root in the United States.[155] Raphael's account of the proliferation of the puzzle metaphor as a critical shorthand for difficulty is particularly instructive when it comes to understanding the typical crossword's deployment in literary reviews. Both Hovanec and Raphel, however, hold the United States in focus as the epicentre of the crossword, and the site of its most interesting aftershocks. Given the provenance of the crossword, this is a reasonable methodology, but it is nonetheless a partial one. Beyond reflecting a broader critical blindspot about exactly how *cryptic* crosswords work, and why they might have emerged in defiance of the orthodox American tradition, this centralism serves to clarify a narrative of the puzzle on a neat, teleological journey from Arthur Wynne to *The New York Times* today, rather than to reflect the myriad radical ways the crossword was appropriated and reinvented in its international afterlife.

The puzzle-jammed doorways of Simon & Schuster in New York were mirrored in the mythologies of postal meltdown on the other side of the Atlantic. The British edition of *The Cross Word Puzzle Book* was published in 1924. The preface warned in capital letters 'THIS IS NOT A TOY!', issuing a warning-as-advertisement that upon starting the collection, 'you'll be able to go back to your work in about a week.' In the following months, *The Citizen* would validate this theatrical claim by reporting that 'all over the country letters are being delayed' as a result of 'extra heavy mail caused by crossword competitions.'[156] In 1925, *The Derby Daily Telegraph* would report that the Osaka Central Post Office of Japan handled 4,172,829 'replies in crossword puzzle competitions between June 25 – August 31', accounting for 'nearly half of the total amount of mail': a number equivalent to every citizen of Tokyo Prefecture in 1925 entering once. In one day alone, 223,237 entries were received.[157]

Though *The Cross Word Puzzle Book* put a spotlight on the crossword in the United Kingdom — as *Punch* put it in 1925, it was the 'dominant social feature' of the year —

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[155] Adrienne *Raphel*, *Thinking Inside the Box* (London: Penguin, 2020); *The Crossword Mentality in Modern Literature and Culture* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Harvard University, 2018).
[156] 'Cross-Word Craze', *Citizen*, 17 January 1925, p. 4.
[157]'Cross-Word Craze in Japan', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 1925, p. 3.

Pearson's Magazine had been publishing 'Word Squares' modelled on the 'tremendous vogue in America just now' since 1922.[158] The crossword settled into its first mainstream regular slot in the United Kingdom in January 1925, when the *Sunday Times* confessed it had 'fallen a victim to the universal craze of Cross-Word puzzles' — the same month in which London Zoo had commissioned its stereotyped letter in order to ward off the postal overload of enquiries relating to puzzling zoological nomenclature.[159] When Raphel quotes from this syndicated report, which though originally in *The Times* was reprinted in *The Nottingham Herald*, she assigns the deluge to 'the zookeepers of Nottingham', though there is in fact no zoo in Nottingham at all.

Caught in the crossfire of the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for crosswords, the preformatted apology bristles with righteous indignation at the unreasonable demands being made on the curatorial budget. By the following year, however, the crossword was breathing new life into London Zoo's pedagogical mission by equipping the reading public with a taxonomy they had previously lacked. A columnist in the *Birmingham Gazette* noted in 1926, in regard to the birth of an eland calf at London Zoo, that 'owing to knowledge gained from many crossword puzzles, I am able positively to state the interesting fact that its mother is one of the Antelopes of Africa.'[160]

This early specimen of the notion of a specialised language with the crossword, a kind of grandiloquent counter-language later dubbed *crosswordese*, was often deployed with regard to animals such as the antelope that happened to have lots of short subspecies. In 1968, Stephen Sondheim quipped that American crosswords, lacking the gamified ambiguity of his preferred British cryptic, relied merely on the rote memorisation of obscure 'Bantu hartebeest' and their ilk.[161] Almost four decades earlier, T. S. Eliot beat him to the joke, blessing

[158] Augarde, *Word Games*, p. 55.
[159] Raphel locates this anecdote (from a report on London Zoo for *The Times* later syndicated to *The Nottingham Herald)* at Nottingham Zoo, which does not exist.
[160] 'A Family Matter', *Birmingham Gazette*, March 2, 1926, p. 4.
[161] Stephen Sondheim, 'How to do a Real Crossword Puzzle', *New York Magazine*, 8 April 1969), p. 11.

the new Narthex of an American parish by wondering if churchgoers also presumed 'a Narthex was one of those African antelopes which are so useful to makers of crossword puzzles.'[162] Grids were crowded with the ASP, EFT, ELAND, GNU, IBEX, NYALA, and OKAPI: animals that have obtained a peculiar hyperreality, appearing in crosswords more often than in conversation. A 1934 letter from P.G. Wodehouse even credits a crossword setter with 'putting the good old emu back into circulation', embalmed in the rag-tag bestiary of the newsprint puzzle where the unique character of an animal is, ultimately, subordinate to its unique alphabetical characters.[163] Reclaiming this popular caricature of the crossword, Torquemada would later issue a puzzle in *The Observer* in 1928 entitled 'Antelopement', the solutions to which formed the shading for an antelope-shaped crossword grid. The clues in this grid exploit the double status of words as abstract signifiers and as concrete amalgams of letters, seizing the same animal imagery in a clue like '21. Kind of ape monkeyed' to yield YTASSRU (an anagram, or 'monkeyed' treatment, of *satyrus*, a 'Kind of ape' taken from a Linnanean bestiary).

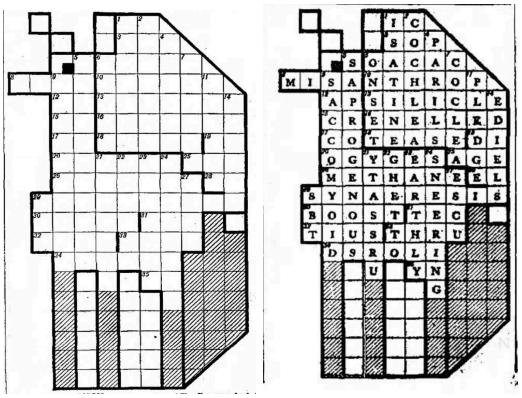

Figure 10: Torquemada, 'Crossword: 105 — Antelopement' (*The Observer*, 1928).[164]

London Zoo's love-hate relationship with the crossword is illustrative of the ambivalent status it held in the British imagination: on the one hand, crosswords were an anti-intellectual American import that threatened to level the prestige model of British literacy by inflicting a

[162] Eliot, 'The Blessing of the New Font, Narthex, and Organ' (October, 1931), in *Complete Prose*, 4, p. 850.
[163] P. G. Wodehouse, quoted in Connor, *Two Girls, One on Each Knee*, p. 6.
[164] Torquemada, 'Crossword: 105. — Antelopement', *Observer*, 25 March 1928, p. 25; 'Crossword: 106. — Aviary', *Observer*, 1 April 1928, p. 25.

counter language on the masses, and on the other hand, they were devices for energising a bored reading public, teaching through play rather than through didacticism. While merchandise styled around crosswords flourished in the United States (where one could purchase clothes, cigars, and postcards modelled around the black and white grid pattern), it was received more suspiciously in the United Kingdom. Reporting on the 'cross-word puzzle stocking', *The Coventry Evening Telegraph* warned that though 'the novelty has caught on among American women, French women call it hideous.'[165]

The commercialisation of the crossword aesthetic seemed a natural consequence of its apparently transactional attitude to language, one based on trading counters rather than adding to knowledge or experience. Even worse, because the crossword had the trappings of being literary — it was, at a basic level, about words — it provided an alibi for masquerading as an academic. *The Guardian* illustrated a stereotyped 'crossword puzzle-hunter' in 1925 as one anxious 'to hide the fact that he is working "on the square" by trying to give the impression that he is pursuing knowledge for its own sake or for academic reasons.'[166] The plain crossword nurtured this kind of reading, in that it provided opportunities for language acquisition and deployment that required no imagination whatsoever.

Walter de la Mare's lecture on 'Magic in Poetry' in 1925 argued that though 'the ordinary wayfaring man, for the purpose of talking, had a vocabulary of but a few hundred words, with these he had to express all his thoughts and feelings about the universe.'[167] In contrast, those that use the dictionary 'merely for crossword puzzles' was oversaturated with vocabulary, but utterly deprived of 'mysterious Imaginative experience' that is the quality of good literature. To *The New York Times* in 1924, crosswords were little more than 'a sinful waste in the utterly futile finding of words the letters of which will fit into a prearranged pattern, more or less complex.'[168] In 1920s London, *The Times* likewise sneered that

[165] 'Cross-Word Puzzle Stockings', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 22 January 1925, p. 7.
[166] J. A. Charlton Dean, ''Cross-Words in the Free Libraries', *Guardian*, 26 February 1925, pp. 9–10.
[167] 'Magic in Poetry: Mr Walter de la Mare at Plymouth', *Western Morning News*, 1 May 1925, p. 3.
[168] 'Topic of the Times: A Familiar Form of Madness', *New York Times*, 17 November 1924, p. 6.

'everywhere, at any hour of the day, people can be seen quite shamelessly poring over the checkerboard diagrams, cudgelling their brains for a word meaning idler, or whatnot,' with contemporary estimates pricing 'the infection of unprofitable trifling' to the American economy at five million hours per day split across ten million regular solvers.[169]

The vogue for crossword parodies illustrate the view that puzzles desiccated language into its plainest parts, robbing vocabulary of any imaginative proliferation it might hold. 'The Ballad of Cross-Word Land', published in *The Guardian*, called on the language of pathology to present a nursery rhyme seemingly 'afflicted with the disease' of puzzles:

> Asa kept an ass
> And a leg and a moa,
> Eli had an eland
> And a great big boa.
> Under the Upas
> One dark night,
> The boa and the moa
> Had a stand-up fight.
>
> Eli and Asa,
> Wakened from naps,
> Emerged to discover
> The cause of the yaps…
> And, sad to relate,
> The Boa ate both of 'em
> Up on the eyot.[170]

The mock verse is crowded with words selected only for their utility to the maker of a crossword puzzle, leading to a prosody saturated with monosyllabic terms with a high proportion of vowels. Eli and Asa attain the same algebraic status as the boa that consumes them on the eyot, selected strategically rather than evocatively. A footnote to the word 'eyot' explains that the typical spelling is 'ait', though 'the form "eyot" is the stand-by of the cross-word merchant,' casting the constructor as a mercenary trader of words rather than one who esteems their pedigree.

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[169] 'Cross-Word Puzzles: An Enslaved America', *The Times*, 9 December 1924, p. 17.
[170] B. N. S., 'The Ballad of Cross-Word Land', *Guardian*, 23 February 1925, p. 7.

Contemporaneous parodies targeted clues, rather than solutions, as the site of the most absurd transformation of language. Stephen Leacock's *Winnowed Wisdom* (1926), extracts of which were serialised in publications such as the *Weekly Examiner*, included a chapter on 'The Cross-Word Puzzle Craze' under the subheading 'Studies in the Newer Culture'. Following a false aetiology of the crossword puzzle as an object that migrated from Tibet to 'American colleges' via Japan, Leacock asserts that 'the mania has now assumed international dimensions.' To illustrate his claim, Leacock ventures that 'if the cross-word puzzle solvers were stood up in line (either horizontally or vertically, they wouldn't care which), they would reach half-way to Havana.'[171] Leacock inhabits a defence of the crossword in order to make it ridiculous, adopting the position that 'it is brightening up our language' *ad absurdum.* Leacock samples a supposed conversation between two puzzlers:

> "Good morning, Short-for-Peter."
> "Hullo, Diminutive-of-William. How do you experience-a-sensation in four letters this morning?"
> "Worse than a word in four letters rhyming with *bell* and *tell*."
> "Oh, I am sorry to hear it. What is the substance, body or cubic content of space in six letters with you?"[172]

Leacock satirically exalts this form of writing as holding 'evidently large possibilities' for the future of English literature, imagining that it might spruce up an otherwise inert body of work. Leacock applies the same reductive formula to a stanza from Longfellow's 'The Village Blacksmith' (1840):

> Under a spreading chestnut-tree
> The village smithy stands;
> The smith, a mighty man is he,
> With large and sinewy hands,
> And the muscles of his brawny arms
> Are strong as iron bands.
>
> — from Longfellow, *The Village Blacksmith* (1840)[173]

[171] Stephen Leacock, *Winnowed Wisdom* (Butler & Tanner, 1926), p. 82–3.
[172] ibid, p. 84.
[173] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Village Blacksmith* (E. P. Dutton & Company, 1885), ll. 1–6, p. 16.

> Under the spreading chestnut tree,
> The village smithy remains erect, upright or in a vertical position
> common to man and the apes but not seen in other animals,
> The smith, a mighty man, is a personal pronoun
> With large and sinuous extremities of his limbs in four letters,
> And the muscles of his brawny arms
> Are as strong as a company of musicians.
>
> Admirable! Isn't it? It only needs a little industry and we can have the whole of our classical literature translated in this way.
>
> — from Leacock, *Winnowed Wisdom* (1926)[174]

The run-on formatting of Leacock's original 1926 edition has been retained, as part of the absurdity of his redefinition of 'stands' lies in its drastic elongation: one word becomes twenty. It is as if the crossword performs a broken version of Erasmus's *copia*, rewriting preexisting language with the wrong kind of abundance. Leacock's exercise in proliferation, though designed to show how newspaper puzzles could bastardise literature through Hulmean counter vocabulary, clearly suggests a degree of fun to be had.

Like most parodies, the scorn is softened with a tacit acknowledgement of fondness. Indeed, in the spirit of the puzzle, Leacock appears to embed a silent conundrum in the stanza itself: the missing word 'iron' in the final line, the only deviation from Longfellow in an otherwise scrupulously substituted tribute. The missing iron is (ironically) supplied by the commentary, for the verse 'only needs a little industry' (for which iron is metonymic) to be resolved.

Against the prevailing wind of an often disapproving literary elite, certain voices spoke out for the crossword's virtues. Aldous Huxley explained in 1931 that 'one of the pleasures we derive from poetry is precisely the crossword puzzler's delight in working out a problem' that might be 'metaphysical' as well as scientific.[175] Initially poking fun at the crossword, the critic Christopher Hassall later found it a valuable stimulus; consulting Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes'

[174] Leacock, *Winnowed Wisdom*, p. 85.
[175] Aldous Huxley, 'And Wanton Optics Roll the Melting Eye', *Bookman* (March 1931), pp. 35–8 (p. 36).

to solve a clue, Hassall found himself 'flabbergasted' anew having been enlivened by a 'crossword-ridden mind'.[176]

In 1925, *The Derby Daily Telegraph* heralded the crossword as a paradigm shift in common literacy: 'The present generation of Britons should become the most literate since Julius Caesar brought us Roman culture and scientific taxation [...] So much earnest dalliance with words, and such close study of dictionaries and thesauruses must have its educational result.'[177] *The Manchester Evening News* would agree a year later, with Frank Crane, writing to defend literature as a mode of play that is too often subjected to utilitarian work, and praising the crossword's ability to enchant what would otherwise be 'literature read under compulsion or a certain number of prescribed hours of reading the dictionary.'[178] The issue of the dictionary was indeed live: as reported in *The Newcastle Evening Chronicle* in 1926, 'the attempt to solve [crosswords] is a liberal education in the hidden resources of the English language, and results in strange and adventurous journeys through the dictionaries, sales of which have vastly increased owing to the popularity of these exercises in the pursuit of the *mot juste*.'[179] When the President of the Board of Education in 1925, Lord Eustace Percy, expressed ambivalence about the educational value of crosswords, his willingness to entertain its pedagogic value was newsworthy enough to be reported in *The Times*.[180]

Correspondent with an apparent rise in the popularity of dictionaries, however, were apocryphal stories about dictionary vandalism due to crosswords. *The Whitstable Times* reported in 1925 that in Los Angeles, 'English dictionaries may only be borrowed for five minutes at a time.'[181] As reported in *The Manchester Guardian* in the same year, the Canadian National Railways had ordered that 'dictionaries be placed on all library equipped cars' to placate 'passengers who desire to amuse themselves by working cross-word puzzles on

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[176] Christopher Hassall, *Ambrosia and Small Beer* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), p. 123; p. 259.
[177] 'Crosswords Craze', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 17 January 1925, p. 6.
[178] Frank Crane, 'Work and Play', *Manchester Evening News*, 24 June 1926, p. 7.
[179] 'Charm of Cross Words', *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 26 October 1926, p. 4.
[180] *The Times*, 6 February 1925, p. 10.
[181] 'Punch Essence', *Whitstable Times*, 31 January 1925, p. 4.

trains.'[182] These rumoured consequences of philological greed were actioned by British libraries preemptively, and justified by cases of theft that could be associated with crossword consumption. Such was the controversy of these decisions that *The Manchester Guardian* published a series of forums in February 1925 in which librarians contributed their own opinions on the matter.[183] Hull Library considered removing their *Oxford English Dictionaries* in order to ward off 'undue wear and tear,' while the Liverpool Library Committee withdrew 'all high-priced dictionaries from the Picton library in consequence of the damage being done to them by crossword puzzle enthusiasts.'[184] In one case reported by the *Evening Dispatch* in 1926, a dictionary worth £12 12s had been 'damaged by the erasure of a rare word in order, presumably, that no one else should be able to trace it' by an allegedly territorial solver.[185]

Even after the early adrenaline of the crossword craze had died down, the 1927 Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society's inventory attests to the enduring legacy of popular puzzles. In addition to the dramatic loss of 12% of their entire library stock, the secretary Alfred Holmes pointed out that 'almost every dictionary in the rapid reference department had gone, some of them only about two days after they were put there.' They had, in his professional opinion, 'been deliberately stolen.'[186] Catastrophist accounts of crossword-minded misbehaviour were counterweighted, however, by librarians cheered by an increase in library users. Answering the siren's call of the 'missing word', one Lancastrian librarian hoped that encountering 'other information in addition to that required for their immediate wants' ensures that 'they will become regular users of the library,' acting as a kind of 'publicity agent' for literary matters[187] In contrast to claims that the crossword was cannibalising the literary appetite of the nation, booksellers likewise reported 'disposing of

[182] 'Abroad', *Guardian*, 18 March 1925, p. 18.
[183] G. M. Bland, 'Cross-Words in the Free Libraries', *Guardian*, 26 February 1925, p. 10.
[184] G. M. Bland 'Cross-Words in the Free Libraries', *Guardian*, 26 February 1925, p. 10.
[185]'Library Cross-Words Ban', *Birmingham Evening Despatch*, 27 November 1926, p. 6.
[186]'Dictionaries Stolen', *North Mail and Newcastle Chronicle*, 2 February 1927, p. 7.
[187] G. M. Bland 'Cross-Words in the Free Libraries', *Guardian*, 26 February 1925, p. 10.

thousands more dictionaries, glossaries, dictionaries of synonyms, and all other aids to crosswords.'[188]

The moral qualms in response to the crossword extended to the issue of society at large, where the addictive qualities of the puzzle threatened either to fragment or cohere the masses. In 1925, the president of the British Optical Association W. R. Bakers warned that 'the new crossword craze would cause headaches arising from eye strain.'[189] By extension, certain ophthalmic surgeons 'alleged that undue indulgence in puzzle-solving is liable to lead to various forms of trouble, mental and physical.'[190] The metaphors used to denigrate the crossword were indeed pathological: it was an 'epidemic', an 'imported disease' ravaging the population, a 'fever', a 'drug' to numb solvers into a kind of automatic stupor.[191] The crossword's threat to Great Britain was compared to that of the measles.[192] Scout groups were said to have succumbed to 'cross-worditis.'[193] Reports of death that involved the crossword, however tangentially, foregrounded the puzzle to imply some kind of malign influence on the victim. A suicide report in the *Sunday Mercury* in 1926 ventured a crude extension of the crossword metaphor to dramatise the death of a London licensee: 'He was doing a cross-word puzzle when the impulse to self-destruction gripped his mind and he shot himself [...] The mystery of the moment that unbalanced his mind must remain for ever unsolved.' Though 'the formula of the unexpected mental storm' remains unknowable, the fact of its being a formula implicates the crossword as a suspect.[194]

Where the crossword was not deadly, it was at the very least highly addictive. *The Citizen* complained in 1925 that 'in every restaurant at lunch and tea-time, men and women may be seen with the black and white squares before them; even on trams and buses the

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[188]'Manchester and Cross-Word Saint', *Grimsby Evening Telegraph*, 17 March 1925, p. 4.
[189] W. R. Bakers, quoted by S. T. Wood in *Long Eaton Advertiser* (February 6, 1997), p. 2.
[190]'The Cross-Words Craze', *Western Daily Press*, 30 January 1925, p. 4.
[191] 'London's Newest Craze', *North Mail and Newcastle Chronicle*, 12 January 1925, p. 2. J. C. Squire, 'Puzzles', *Observer*, 30 November 1924, p. 4.
[192] 'The Cross-Words Craze', *Western Daily Press*, 30 January 1925, p. 4.
[193] 'Scouts Catch Cross-Worditis', *Herald and Express*, 11 March 1925, p. 3.
[194] 'In Passing', *Sunday Mercury and Sunday News*, 11 April 1926, p. 6.

puzzles occupy leisure moments.'[195] The kitchen was often the domestic microcosm of this broader pattern, with letters to editors often complaining of marital strife as a result of disagreements over the crossword. In a letter to *The Times* in 1930, Dorothea Bagnall complained that the 'harmony' of Sundays had been ruined by the regular arrival of Torquemada's puzzle for *The Observer*. She suggested a clue for *The Times* crossword: 'The last conformity of noble minds' (Solution: Crosswords).[196] The puzzle was often thought to be displacing valuable labour away from more valuable activities in the national interest, whether 'boys' clubs and social work' or 'world peace.'[197] In the latter case, the metaphor of the crossword was particularly adaptable. The world's new hobby quickly became a journalistic commonplace for the puzzling state of international relations, with *The Weekly Dispatch* describing Downing Street's 'interallied debts' as a particularly challenging crossword in 1925.[198] The *Birmingham Post*, discussing the work of the League of Nations, rued the public's comparative lack of interest in 'this matter of world peace' compared to the crossword puzzle, and was vindicated only two days later.[199] To great embarrassment, a leak confirmed that the secretaries of state for the UK, France, and Germany, had spent an entire summit session solving crosswords in a private room instead of discussing postwar diplomacy.[200]

Countervalently, the crossword was extolled by some for its service to the national community, rather than its threat to it. In 1925, 'crossword nights' were beginning to be used to rouse 'team spirit' in the Scouts, and even the stereotypically silent deadlock of British public transport was alleviated by conversations about clues.[201] As *The Western Daily Mail* put it in 1925, 'it has become a congenial social force, inasmuch as it appears to be becoming permissible for temporising baffled seekers after exact meanings to approach perfect

[195] 'Cross-Word Craze', *Citizen*, 17 January 1925, p. 4.
[196] Dorothea Bagnall, 'Letter to *The Times*', *The Times*, 7 June 1930, p. 8.
[197] 'The Latest Craze', *Western Daily Press*, January 12 1925, p. 5.
[198] 'Secret History of the Week', *Sunday Dispatch*, 15 January 1925, p. 2.
[199] 'Vital Work of the League of Nations', *Birmingham Post*, 8 September 1925, p. 14.
[200] 'Our London Letter', *Gloucester Journal*, 17 October 1925, p. 13.
[201] 'Scouts Catch Cross-Worditis', *Herald and Express*, 11 March 1925, p. 3.

strangers in quest of information: British exclusiveness is being broken down by the penetrative influence of the crossword puzzle.'[202] Reclaiming the domestically inharmonious portrait of a marriage ruined by puzzles, *The Evening Dispatch*'s piece on the 'Boom of Crosswords' in 1930 illustrated how 'the crossword is the breakfast table safety-valve', encouraging interpersonal communication as well as ensuring that no one person can monopolise the paper.[203]

Ultimately, the pernicious but paradoxical cultural status of the crossword would permeate literary discourse as a lightning rod for competing anxieties about the nature of poetry. In Roy Campbell's 1949 essay on Richard Aldington, the foundational Imagist poet is described as a 'clear-headed poet' who does not levy enough 'hesitancy or obscurity [...] to nourish a single one' of a swarm of 'parasitic interpreters.'[204] By contrast, for every poet like Aldington,

> there are at least three hundred crossword-conscious professors demanding [...] to be *puzzled* by poetry which is more difficult to read than to write; poetry in which they can joyfully hunt the thimble of meaning through haystacks of self-bamboozlement; poetry which is vague and formless but offers (like Leonardo's mildewed wall) a million suggestions of half-meanings and glimmerings of sense.

Intended to deplore Aldington, Campbell inadvertently provides a winning sales pitch for the dynamism that readers already associated with the vanguard of contemporary poetry: because of its bamboozlement, because of its propensity for joyful hunting, and because of its millions of luminescent suggestions, it radiates a kind of imaginative hermeneutic energy. Campbell's parenthesis refers to an exercise prescribed by Leonardo da Vinci for budding artists:

> It may seem but trivial and almost ludicrous, [but it] is nevertheless extremely useful in arousing the mind to various inventions. When you look at a wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture of stones if you have to devise some scene, you may discover a resemblance to [...] an endless variety of objects, which you could reduce to complete and well drawn forms. And

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[202] 'The Cross-Words Craze', *Western Daily Press*, 30 January 1925, p. 4.
[203] 'Boom of Crosswords', *Birmingham Evening Despatch*, 7 March 1930, p. 8.
[204] Roy Campbell, 'The Happy Pagan', *Poetry Review* (April–May 1949), reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. by Daniel G. Marowski and Roger Matuz (Gale Research, 1973), pp. 15–6 (p. 15).

> these appear on such walls confusedly, like the sound of bells in whose jangle you may find any name or word you choose to imagine.[205]

In Campbell's misuse of the reference, poetry itself becomes a stained wall in which words draw 'endless variety' from their 'confused' apparition. The mildewed wall is a compelling inversion of Pound's iron filings, Planché's kaleidoscope, or Hulme's cinders. In each, serendipitous but chaotic arrangements afford poetry a redemptive opportunity, by the subversive embrace of counter language, to take the puzzling quality of the natural world as its prevailing structural and epistemological condition.

[205] Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, trans. by Jean Paul Richter (Dover, 1970), p. 508.

2. Square Dealing: The Poetics of the Cryptic Crossword

Introduction

> 36. I meant
> I went.

Parallel with SHAKESPEARIAN [sic] in 'Ballet Russe', a crossword in rhyming couplets featured in Torquemada's *Cross-Words in Rhyme for Those of Riper Years* (1925), is the solution II.[1] With a sparse surface meaning evoking fugitive signification, II sits at the foot of the grid's lacunar dancer (a visual pun, perhaps, on the iambic feet of the clue), herself absent in negative space and posed as if to reach out to a missing companion. The clue, a proto-specimen of the so-called '&lit' (in which cryptic wordplay and definition are syntactically simultaneous), relies on the first-person perfect conjugation of the Latin verb *ire*, to go. Personified as if speaking to the solver in the manner of a riddle, the solution certainly 'meant / I went'. The solution is simultaneously given acrostically in the clue's anaphoric pronouns, recreating the vertical structure of the grid in miniature. A model of cryptic economy, the meaning is calculatedly promiscuous, 'meant' only insofar as its meaning 'went' unexpectedly; in Torquemada's explanatory notes, this clue stands out for having no citation. The rhyme, yoking both the start and end words of each duosyllabic line, repairs the very detachment described by the couplet.

[1] [36d], Torquemada, 'II. Ballet Russe', in *Cross-Words in Rhyme for Those of Riper Years* (Routledge, 1925), p. 4. Hereafter *TCR*.

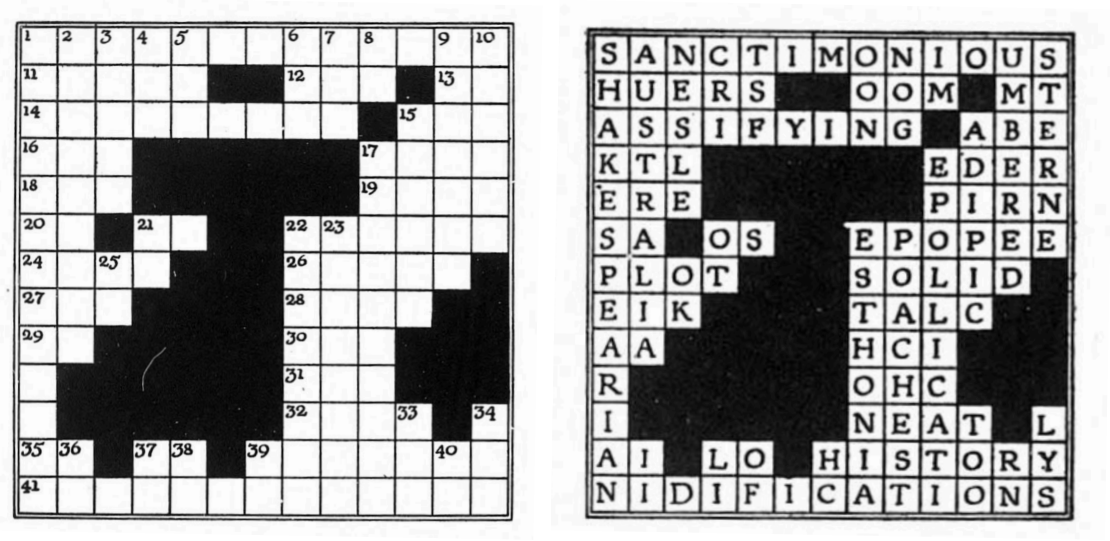

Figure 11: The grid for Torquemada's 'Ballet Russe' (1925)

This chapter will consider the poetic dimensions of early cryptic crosswords, assessing them as allusive, experimental, and self-consciously literary textual forms that have been largely underscrutinised in criticism. Though the history of the cryptic crossword has been engagingly and comprehensively narrated in works such as Alan Connor's *Two Girls, One on Each Knee (7)*, John Halpern's *The Centenary of the Crossword*, and T. Campbell's *On Crosswords* — each published in 2013 to mark the centenary of Arthur Wynne's originary puzzle — critics of twentieth-century literature have tended to exclude the crossword from discursive consideration. Instead, literary-critical accounts of the crossword are, by and large, normatively modelled on American paradigms about plain crosswords (even when using it as a lens to interrogate writers who vocally preferred cryptics). Though this approach prevails (as explored in my Introduction) in critical accounts by Lohrli, Ben-Merre, Zumhagen-Yekplé and others, I will briefly explore how Adrienne Raphel's essay 'The Crossword Mentality' exemplifies this inadvertent blindspot.

Raphel discusses the cryptic crossword sparingly, and historicises it largely by quoting from Connor, Halpern, and Campbell; consequently, several of her claims about early iterations of the cryptic crossword are misleading. Raphel, for instance, asserts that Torquemada

'typically wrote his clue in verse forms'.[2] Though this chapter will consider Torquemada's verse puzzles, as well as his indirect usages for lines of poetry, verse puzzles were certainly a minority across his hundreds of works for *The Observer*. Raphel does not quote from *Cross-Words in Rhyme* to support this claim, nor indeed any of Torquemada's puzzles. Tellingly, the two indirect examples provided to illustrate Torquemada's puzzle style — 'mini-narratives [...] clues in the form of knock-knock jokes' — were not written in verse, quickly undermining her proposed Torquemadan archetype.[3]

The brevity of Raphel's discussion of Torquemada would be inconspicuous if cryptic mechanics were exiled from her analysis, but it proves to be methodologically suspect when she offers a lengthy close reading of Empson's 'Bacchus' (1940) with 'the crossword mentality' in mind. The analysis, using George Steiner's 'On Difficulty' as a scheme for puzzling strategies, is informed by an American model of the crossword, rather than the British cryptic one favoured by Empson (he solved *The Times* cryptic every day before lunch, as Chapter 4 will discuss).[4] This is in some respects representative of the limitations of viewing the crossword merely as a 'heuristic of difficulty' as Raphel does, or as simulations of the 'aesthetic experience of one's own agency' as Kubala puts it, rather than a dynamic and shifting textual form in its own right.[5]

Torquemada's puzzles, according to an *Esquire* article published in 1935, were thought to feature too many 'horribles' to appeal to Americans; his reputation was such that 'he becomes a simile' for fearsome puzzlement.[6] In his introduction to *Cross-Words in Rhyme*, Torquemada is indeed at pains to differentiate his own work from the so-called 'ordinary puzzle [...] a sheer waste of time', instead offering 'a separate entertainment, a fresh slant of

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[2] Raphel, 'The Crossword Mentality', p. 61. Kubala, 'The Aesthetics of Crossword Puzzles', p. 384.
[3] These two examples appear to be taken paraphrased from a web article written by Emily Cleaver about Torquemada in 2010. See Cleaver, 'Torquemada and the Torturous Literary Puzzle', *Litro*, 26 June 2010, <<https://www.litromagazine.com/literature/torquemada-and-the-torturous-literary-puzzle/> (accessed 25/10/23)>.
[4] Jacobus Empson, email to the author (23 October 2023).
[5] Raphel, 'The Crossword Mentality', p. 108. Kubala, 'Aesthetics of Crossword Puzzles', p. 11.
[6] F. Gregory Hartswick, 'Mr. Torquemada of England', *Esquire*, 1 August 1935, pp. 46–7 (p. 46).

wit or beauty, from each Light in their cross-words.'[7] The first recorded use of 'light' to define the solution to a crossword puzzle, by the following year it was being used in *The Guardian* to complain about Torquemada himself: 'Constructors seem to protect themselves by basely devising lights which are so far-fetched that they throw darkness rather than light on the general problem.'[8]

This chapter, then, aims to 'throw some light' on these early crosswords, seldom mentioned let alone discussed by literary critics, despite being, I contend, one of the most popularly distributed 'modernist' textual forms in the period. In particular, I will consider the poetic dimension of these puzzles which repeatedly turned to verse as a site of both reverence and reimagination. Section 1 will consider how Torquemada wilfully courted generic hybridity in *Cross-Words in Rhyme for Those of Riper Years* (1925), a collection that flirted with both the possibilities and proprieties of entangling poetry with puzzlement. Section 2 investigates Torquemada's outsized reputation as a literary tastemaker, before surveying the critical blindspot that has seen the 'puzzle interest' of myriad canonical twentieth-century writers subordinated to biographical intrigue, rather than something more culturally ubiquitous. Section 3 considers how Torquemada used literary strategies homologous with his literary peers to recalibrate the canon both abstractly and architecturally. Finally, Section 4 will consider the evolution of crossword clues from Torquemada through to Afrit and Ximenes, arguing that cryptic syntax figured as a kind of inverted framework for so-called 'high modernism': making allusions the prosodic units, while making prosody the site of networked polyphony.

[7] Torquemada, *TCR*, p. 1.
[8] 'Miscellany', *Guardian*, 16 February 1925, p. 5.

i. ‘The Darkness of Some Lights’: Rhyming Clues

Though ostensibly ‘a minor poet’, Tony Harrison ranks Edward Powys Mathers (1892–1939) along with Ezra Pound, John Dryden, and Gavin Douglas in his chief literary influences.[9] Known to his friends as ‘Willy the Cypher King’, Mathers later adopted the pseudonym Torquemada when he began writing crosswords for *The Saturday Westminster* in 1925, the name of the famously brutal first Grand Inquisitor. Mathers, a poet best known for translating J. C. Mardrus’s French edition of *One Thousand Nights and One Night* (1923), retained this pseudonym throughout his career as a puzzle setter, most notably for *The Observer* from 1926 until his death in 1939 (I will use the name Torquemada for clarity, but he published poetry as Mathers). Though the coterie of puzzle setters who contributed to the development of the cryptic crossword was broad, Torquemada pioneered and popularised many of the mischievous syntactic strategies at work in cryptic clues.

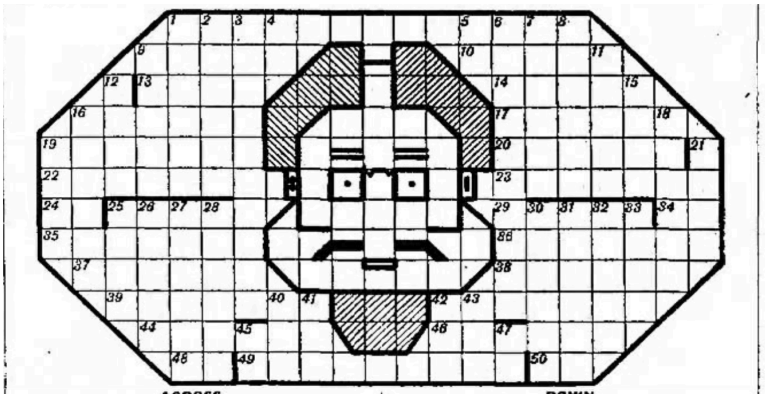

Figure 12: Torquemada’s 100th *Observer* puzzle: a self-portrait (1928).[10]

Torquemada was described by his acquaintance Pound as a writer of ‘abominations’, by Sackville-West as ‘a scholar of diversity’, by Joyce as a ‘gentleman’, and by Harrison as an ‘erotic aesthete, cocktail-shaking Chinese American, honorary Arab nomad, *bhang*-chewing,

[9] Tony Harrison, *The Inky Digit of Defiance: Selected Prose 1966–2016* (Faber, 2017), p. 417.
[10] Torquemada, ‘Crossword: 100. — Torquemada’, *Observer*, 19 February 1928, p. 25.

Turkish bisexual, tormenting puzzle-setter'.[11] Consensus has only settled around the latter descriptor; when Ximenes (Derrick Somerset Macnutt, named after Torquemada's Inquisitorial successor) attempted to formalised cryptic syntax in *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword* (1966), he named Torquemada as the progenitor of the form. Ximenes' early puzzles for *The Observer* were, after all, subtitled 'Torquemada Style'.[12] In the period before so-called Ximenean standardisation, cryptic clues were radically experimental, with a set of rules that were still gleefully inchoate. Even Torquemada's 'plain[er]' offerings avowed their own conceptual difficulty. Illustratively, his 314th puzzle began with a plain clue for HERMENEUTIC avowing the difficulty of interpretive difficulty of solving — '[1a. It is the function of most crossword clues to be]' — before later including a homophonic cryptic clue — '[17d. Rich library that hardly sounds so]' — for the LOEB library.[13] Torquemada was curious about the possibilities enabled by combining poetic strategies with definitional misdirection, acutely and persistently engaged with the hidden hermeneutics of a Janus-like literary library.

A poem addressed to the editor of *The Times* in 1930 bemoaned the bruising feats of readerly skill required to solve Torquemada's puzzles after a comparatively pedestrian stroll through the newly launched *Times* crossword:

> Chuckled with joy at something deftly potted,
> Admired the skill our weary wits entrapping.
> Sworn at the "anagrams," the "hidden" spotted,
> And chortled when (just once), *you* were caught napping!
>
> Six days we labour; days of groan and grace.
> As one goes easier and another harder;
> The seventh day (of rest!) we're left to face
> The torts and torments of a Torquemada.[14]

[11] Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 95. Vita Sackville-West, 'Fabulous Wind', *Observer*, 19 November 1944, p. 3. Joyce, letter to Ezra Pound (28 September 1920), in Ezra Pound Papers, YCAL MSS 43. Harrison, *The Inky Digit*, p. 427.
[12] Ximenes, 'Crossword (Torquemada Style): 950', *Observer*, 25 June 1944, p. 2.
[13] [1a/17d], Torquemada, 'Puzzle 314', in *Torquemada: 112 Best Crossword Puzzles*, ed. by J. M. Campbell (Pushkin Press, 1942), p. 81. Hereafter *T112*.
[14] 'A Christmas Card', *Times*, 19 December 1930, p. 13.

The poem refashions the creation myth to match the weekly publishing calendar, with *The Times* puzzle providing 'groan and grace' enough before the demands of Torquemada on Sunday. Torquemada figures as a vengeful God, confounding his people with wilfully devilish tests. The final line of the poem enacts the wordplay described in the preceding stanza, 'defly pott[ing]' MEN (Torquemada's subjects) inside TORTS to activate his TORMENTS. The handy rhyme of 'harder' with 'Torquemada' was a motif he had himself seized in his very first *Observer* puzzle: '[31a. Very, very hard]' yields HHH, allying pencil classification with the strain of solution.[15]

The *Times* 'Christmas Card' evinces an instinctive affinity between Torquemada's puzzles and verse itself. Six years earlier, when catastrophising the crossword craze as 'the wild hyacinth of American industry' threatening to put Britain in a chokehold, the newspaper explained the rules using a poetic exemplar:

P O E T
R A T E
A T A
M L

The miniaturised grid, offered in service of an argument villainising the crossword as a threat, foregrounds the poet in its criticism.[16] POET is drawn into proximity with RATE, as if satirising the kind of literary mind that might 'sell out' by indulging in puzzle-writing. As a professional poet and puzzle-writer, Torquemada courted the comparison in direct and provocative terms in *Cross-Words in Rhyme*:

21. A poet given money by the king;
    That's singular, but I'm the other thing.

[15] [31a], Torquemada, 'Crossword: 1 — Feelers', *Observer*, 14 March 1926, p. 26.
[16] 'Cross-Word Puzzles: An Enslaved America', *The Times*, 9 December 1924, p. 17.

Torquemada's clue puts a spotlight on the market incentives often unspoken in the creative economy, labelling himself as 'other' to this phenomenon.[17] The solution, PL, is the same abbreviation for Poet Laureate that Eliot had used to metonymise 'Puzzle' in his childhood *Fireside Magazine* (as Chapter 3 discusses). The PL is state-funded (visually nested inside a castle-shaped grid), and grammatically speaking PL (or 'plural') is 'other' to 'singular'. The clue sequences plural definitions into a rhyming couplet in order to connote plurality itself.

Torquemada's early verse-crosswords courted the charge of generic hybridity in direct terms. In an *Observer* article featured only a few pages before one of Torquemada's posthumously published puzzles in 1940 (which aptly included the solutions NONSENSE and IDIOTIC), Basil de Sélincourt complained about William Empson's comparison between poetry and crosswords in *The Gathering Storm*: 'The glints of significance which penetrate Mr Empson's black-out hardly tempt one to disturb his draperies. Could not our poets, instead of tantalising us with darkened chambers, send out their searchlights?'[18] Appealing for poetry to entertain a more black-and-white economy of meaning, Sélincourt misconstrues Empson's comparison with that most black-and-white of forms, the crossword. Chapter 4 will closely consider Empson's puzzle metaphor, but Sélincourt's own imagery engages a motif that is prevalent in Torquemada's puzzles. Solutions are known as 'lights' in cruciverbal idiom because of their appearance in grids: the preface to *Cross-Words in Rhyme*, indeed, is the first recorded use of the word.[19] Torquemada was alert to the implications of this lexicon when pondering his own literary machinations in the first down clue:

1. The darkness of some lights suggests that he,
   The setter, aimed illiberally at me.

[17] [21a], Torquemada, 'III. Rooks', in *TCR*, p. 6.
[18] Torquemada, 'Crossword No. 756', *Observer*, 6 October 1940. Basil de Sélincourt, 'Poetic Black-Out', *Observer*, 6 October 1940, p. 3.
[19] light, n. (sense II. 7. d): 'The answer to a clue in a crossword puzzle'. *OED Online* (accessed 14 February 2025) [revised entry 2021].

Far from sidestepping the notion that the crossword is darkly obscure, the clue confronts it by giving IMPENETRABILITY as its solution.[20] Solving the clue actuates its very penetrability, and the interpenetration is made structural in the horizontal clues to which 'impenetrability' serves as an internal acrostic. Not knowing the answer is redeemed by retrofitting it in a second dimension. Against the binary proposed by the likes of Sélincourt, Torquemada blends darkness with cryptic light. Ironically, when T. S. Eliot came across 'Light' (defined as [An old clue (5)]) in 1962, he failed to solve it, chastising himself with a marginal cross for his oversight.[21] The puzzle is itself a pun on thorny difficulty, with 'The Thistle' shape created in the lattice solutions, disparate words drawn into surprising compatibility.

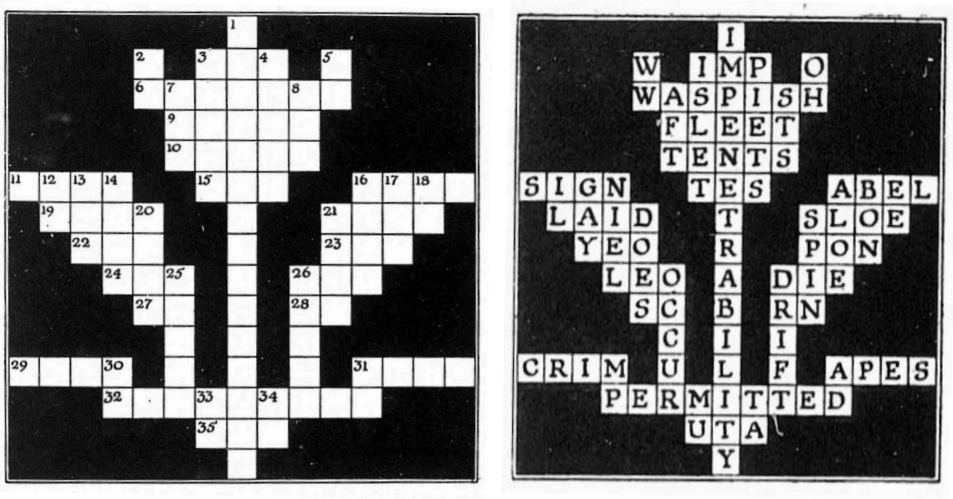

Figure 13: Torquemada's 'The Thistle' (1925)

Like the image, each clue achieves identity by harmonising the non-identities it leverages. If each clue operates by performing *ceci n'est pas la solution*, the grid affirms that *ceci n'est pas un thistle*, and the solution means that *ceci n'est pas impenetrable* — heeding René Magritte's

[20] [1d], Torquemada, 'IX. The Thistle', in *TCR*, p. 18.
[21] Eliot's copy of *The Times Crossword Puzzles, No. 6* (1962), p. 94, in 'T. S. Eliot Ephemera: Crossword Puzzle Books', 3 Kensington Court Gardens, London, C/6/1/14.

warning that 'everything we see hides another thing' — then Torquemada exploits *la trahison des mots* to recoup this ambiguous non-equivalence as an opportunity for play.[22]

Poetry, already predisposed to setting units of meaning and units of prosody at odds with each other, was a natural candidate for staging these demonstrations of cryptic dexterity. Chapter 1 suggested that, in part, the puzzling modes of poets such as Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound stemmed from their philological interest in the inadequacy of diagrammatical accounts of language use. Torquemada's frustration with plain crosswords was a comparable catalyst for literary experimentation. His manifesto for puzzles (published as the preface to *The Torquemada Puzzle Book* in 1934) labelled his texts as an effort to revitalise a literary genre thought 'too easy to hold for long the attention of anyone concerned with an interest in words.'[23]

Torquemada's rhetoric recalls Shklovsky's 'Art as Technique', in which art is heralded as a way 'to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception [as] an aesthetic end in itself.'[24] Though the crossword did not appear in Russian until Vladimir Nabokov imported it in 1924, it is striking that Shklovsky illustrates his argument using alphabetic abbreviation:

> Alexander Pogodin offers the example of a boy considering the sentence 'The Swiss mountains are beautiful' in the form of a series of letters: T, S, m, a, b. This characteristic of thought not only suggests the method of algebra, but even prompts the choice of symbols (letters, especially initial letters). By this 'algebraic' method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognise them by their main characteristics [...] The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression [...] And so life is reckoned as nothing.

Like Viktor Shklovsky's framework for *ostranenie*, Torquemada aims at defamiliarisation as a means of resurrecting stagnant language. To surpass the strictures of 'prose perception' — tellingly, Torquemada later offered a clue concocting POSER from PROSE — Torquemada

[22] René Magritte, quoted in H. Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, trans. by R. Millen (Harry N. Abrams, 1977), p. 172.
[23] Torquemada, *The Torquemada Puzzle Book* (Victor Gollancz, 1934), p. 11. Hereafter *TPB*.
[24] Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 11.

enlists modular wordplay to make unfamiliarity its guiding epistemological and structural condition, thereby inverting Shklovsky's anti-algebraic framework.[25] Valuing poetry's simultaneous capacity for precision and generative imprecision, Torquemada took pleasure in liberating words from rote familiarity and dedicating them to the task of cryptic play. The setter, in a contract loosely waged with or against the solver, should 'try to make him think that he is dealing with his own particular sort of clue, when he is actually doing nothing of the kind, and you can, for a little, postpone the inevitable end.'[26] It is precisely *by* using algebrisation in unexpected ways that life can be reckoned as something. To extend Hulme's metaphor, Torquemada's clues aim to reenchant each verbal counter and multiply them unpredictably.

Devices like the cryptic clue make a virtue of encoded incongruity, disclosing the stowaway mirrors cached in language itself. It is a remarkable quirk of 'The Swiss mountains are beautiful' that it operates as a semi-viable cryptic clue:

The Swiss	**mountains**	**are**	**beautiful**
a Swiss-German definite article	*transliterated mountain range in Northeast China*	*(link word)*	*synonym for beautiful*
DAS	HING	=	DASHING

There is of course no suggestion that Pogodin, Shklovsky, or any intermediate translator set out to write a cryptic clue. Rather, the cryptic clue is a generative mechanism for catching some of the fugitive energies of language use, each premised on unlikelihood. The attention nurtured by wordplay, like Pound's idea of puzzle-vision after viewing a puzzling painting, leavens the world and word alike with new potential. Anagrammatically, 'The Swiss mountains are beautiful' lends us a quasi-Shklovskian poem:

[25] [39d], Torquemada, 'Puzzle 524', in *T112*, p. 189.
[26] Torquemada, *TPB*, p. 15.

> Habituation wastes life; rune-sums
> tabulate unworthiness. If I assume
> I sustain future wholeness, am a bit
> unanswerable, I auto-sum shiftiest
> mutations. Thus, if I, as us, renewable,
> write us manifestations, behaul us,
> I must be an author. I sew faultiness,
> Automatise a tribune wishfulness.[27]

The reconfigurability of words does not signify any macroepistemological 'answer' in particular, other than the fact that all language, subjected to creative attention, teems with signification. Wordplay staves off instrumentalised meaning, diverting the 'inevitable end' both in a temporal and teleological sense.

Torquemada himself used this pun to title a 1934 *Observer* grid 'Secret Ends', in which clues featured incomplete couplets: 'the missing rhyme, straight or reversed, is the word required.'[28] In one unnumbered clue, the missing imagery permits multiple imaginative solutions:

> Behold the lowly …
> Approaching at a …

Reminded of the 'lowing herd' and 'plowman homeward plod[ding] his weary way' in Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1750), the reader might venture HERD and WORD as solutions, supposing the homophone with 'heard' as a metapuzzling twist on the theme. The actual solution, WORM and SQUIRM instead evokes the 'sillie worm' trope from, say, George Herbert's 'Sighs and Grones' (1633). Gamifying the reader's ear for rhymes, the grid is constructed around an absent poem supplied by the instinct of the solver. As such, two poetic events are made to happen simultaneously. The use of rhymes, and metonymically, poetry, to achieve this effect, affirms the notion that poetry's rich allusive history combined with its syntactic laxity made it an ideal form for puzzling experimentation.

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[27] Anagrams my own.
[28] Torquemada, 'Crossword: 425 — Secret Ends', *Observer*, 20 May 1934, p. 19.

Again and again, Torquemada's rhyming clues use the metaphor of multiplicity to describe their own interpretive camouflage. In 'The Bat', the first two down clues chain together the interplay of singles and doubles:

1. If my single cloak be reft
   With no cloak at all I'm left.
2. Doubles can cause me, and they say of me
   That I can double anything you see.

The solutions, MONOCHLAMYDEOUS (a botanical term etymologically associated with cloaking) and INEBRIATION, are innocuous words conscripted into constructive misbehaviour.[29] Suggestively, Torquemada was described by Robert Gibbings as 'the most benevolent man' he had ever met, though this 'beaming benevolence' was chiefly down to 'the level of his inebriation.'[30] An earlier clue allusively calls up *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to laminate the preposition AT with new literary significance:

26. What he was me, that black thing in the middle,
    A hatter once confessed to be a riddle.[31]

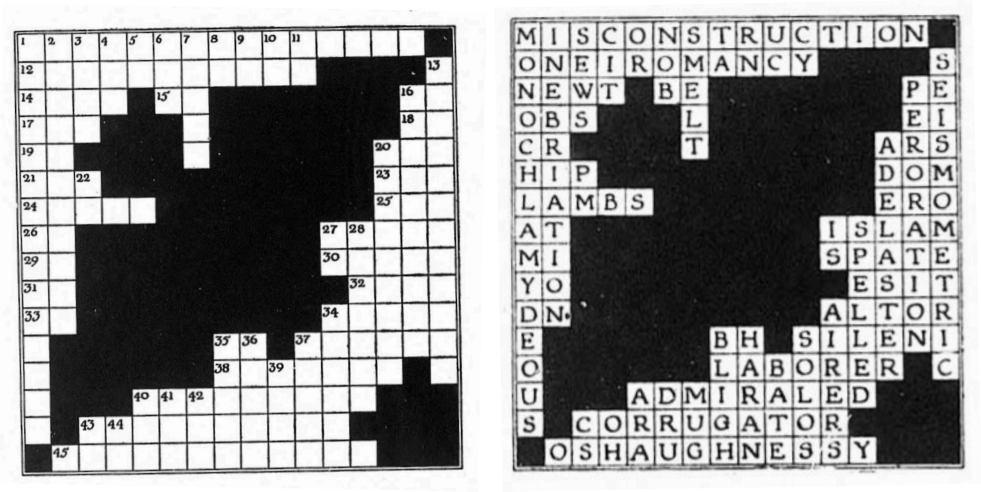

Figure 14: Torquemada's 'The Bat' (1925)

[29] [1d/2d], Torquemada, 'VI. The Bat', in *TCR*, p. 12.
[30] Gibbings, quoted in Harrison, *The Inky Digit*, p. 422.
[31] [26a], Torquemada, 'VI. The Bat', in *TCR*, p. 12.

While Alice tumbles down the rabbit hole, Carroll uses the figure of the bat to communicate her dreamlike stupor to the reader: 'Do cats eat bats? [...] Do bats eat cats?' The Hatter later versifies the bat in a prepositionally incompatible rhyme: 'Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! / How I wonder what you're at!'[32] Solving the clue requires the reader to track down a reference to a nonsense puzzle, meaning that Torquemada's couplet is only solved by Carroll's couplet remaining semantically elusive. Like the bat, articulated only as a black cavity in the grid, the word is called up *ex nihilo*. A clue in 'Rooks' uses a comparable manoeuvre, uniting two clues in order to vindicate their ability to identify their object:

41. One light for both, because we are the same:
42. Take us together, we are What's-his-name.

Both solutions are SO, forming 'so-and'so' in aggregate.[33] The very uncertainty of the clue, the euphemism of 'what's-his-name', is integrated and thus redeemed by the solution.

Steiner's categories of difficulty represent a useful taxonomy for Torquemada's verse clues, in that they act simultaneously to estrange their object. Steiner defined poetry by its ability to condense multiples into singular forms: for words to bear, as Empson put it, 'compacted doctrines'.[34] For Steiner, 'poetry is knit of words compacted with every conceivable mode of operative force [...] so construed to mesh and crossmesh with the greatest possible cluster of other words in the reticulations of the total body of language.'[35] The crossword takes this crossmesh to its logical endpoint, reifying the cluster by prising open the alphabetic commons as a site for associative logic. Though later in his career Torquemada would apply this mechanism to the literary canon as a whole, his early crosswords often saw 'tactical' and 'contingent' difficulties combined in singular clues:

28. By means of argot I will make you think;

[32] Carroll, *Complete Works*, p. 20; p. 79.
[33] [41a/42a], Torquemada, 'III. Rooks', in *TCR*, p. 7.
[34] Empson, 'Compacted Doctrines', in *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by John Haffenden (Hogarth Press, 1988), pp. 184–9.
[35] George Steiner, 'On Difficulty', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36.3 (Spring 1978), pp. 263–76 (p. 264).

I also turn a lemon into drink.

The couplet neatly stratifies the solution, ADE, into its contingent and tactical parts.[36] Contingently, it is helpful to know that George Ade published *Fables in Slang* ('argot') in 1899. Tactically, you can deduce that adding '-ade' to 'lemon' brews 'lemonade'. Each approach, dehierarchised, is placed into hermeneutic parity by the rhyme connecting them. The entire clue is premised on the idiom of transformative opportunity — 'when life gives you lemons, make lemonade' (first recorded in 1909) — and thereby glosses the clue with an affirmation of its own rehabilitative power.[37]

The condensed narratives relayed in Torquemada's rhyming couplets often draw from the domain of magical performance, imperatively inviting the reader to join in on a trick, as if calling up an assistant from the audience:

8. Through, Latin, add to me and I'll turn rough;
   Turn me and sit, and that will be enough.

32. If you behead a cat, and then enfold
    The lesser part in me, I will grow cold.

In both cases, the solution is a two-letter word imaginatively inflated to be defined in a full rhyming couplet of iambic pentameter.[38] Adding PER ('through, Latin') to AS yields ASPER ('rough'), while reversing AS along with SIT yields SATIS ('enough'). Grafting a C (the head of a cat) into the solution, IE, would grow ICE ('cold'). Though referentially explanatory compared to the convolutions of later Torquemada clues, or indeed post-Ximenean wordplay, these early instantiations attest to the surprising disclosures enabled by using alphabet units as counters in the form of poetry. In 'The Swan', one clue realises this restorative capacity evocatively:

29. As hours in days, so many merulae
    Found living tombs in me, but did not die.

[36] [28a], Torquemada, 'XI. The Black Mill', in *TCR*, p. 23.
[37] For the earliest attestation of the phrase, see Elbert Hubbard, 'Topics in Brief', *Literary Digest*, 38.4 (January 1909), p. 128.
[38] [32a/8d], Torquemada, 'XI. The Black Mill', in *TCR*, p. 23.

Knowing that 'merulae' refers to blackbirds is contingently difficult, but the sing-song cadence of the couplet brings to life its solution, PIE, from 'Four-and-twenty blackbirds' (subordinately indicated by the number of 'hours in days').[39] The birds are alive, entombed in the pie; paradoxically, the pie is alive, entombed within the image of a swan. The crossword apparatus, like Steiner's archetypal poet, is constitutionally 'a neologist, a recombinant wordsmith [...] a passionate resuscitator of buried or spectral words.'[40] Bird inside pie, pie inside bird: both are 'encrypted' (etymologically referring to burial) by the setter, and then resurrected by the activating attention of the solver.

ii. 'Rule of Thumbscrew': Tortured Readers

If the typical image of the crossword solver was an 'idler', then the typical image of the cryptic solver was a tortured reader: less a passive spectator of Leonardo's 'mildewed wall' than a prisoner strapped to it. A column in *The Guardian* in 1930 poked fun at the seeming masochism of the Torquemada aficionado: 'On first making acquaintance with the brain-twisters of the arch-puzzler Torquemada, the victim is apt to form a picture of him gloating over the mental writhings of those who attempt to unravel the clues which his devilish ingenuity has contrived, and contrived, so they think, with such careless ease.'[41] If American-style crosswords were 'too easy to hold for long the attention of anyone concerned with and interested in words,' as Torquemada had complained, then he ultimately accomplished his ambition to provide a harder form of a puzzle: a 'thumbscrew' text, as he fondly referred to them.[42]

[39] [29a], Torquemada, 'V. The Swan', in *TCR*, p. 11.
[40] Steiner, 'On Difficulty', p. 264.
[41] 'The Anatomy of Crosswords', *Guardian*, 23 December 1930, p. 7.
[42] Torquemada, *T112*, p. 11. Torquemada, 'The Crossword Thumbscrew: Torquemada and the Second Lustrum', *Observer*, 23 December 1934, p. 8.

Part of the challenge of a Torquemada puzzle was the often obscure vocabulary required on the part of the solver. In a review of Rose Macaulay's *Keeping Up Appearances* (1928) for *The Observer*, J. H. Tarver complained of being baffled by the words *eoan*, *lehor*, *cottle*, *xenomaniac*, *catachrestic*, *eutaxy*, *etesian*, and *essorian*: 'It is as if Miss Macaulay, having found them serving an apprentice with Torquemada, determined that they should not be allowed to relapse into obscurity.'[43] The title of the review was 'Torquemada and the English Style', signalling the cultural status that Torquemada held as a supposed arbiter of the literary zeitgeist. Discussing new additions to *The Oxford English Dictionary* in 1928, *The Guardian* labelled 'the vast number' of its then 414,825 entries as 'rarities now only valuable to connoisseurs of the cross-word puzzle and are the nuts and bolts of the new Torquemada's rack.'[44] *The Guardian* would maintain a fiercely ambivalent relationship with Torquemada, on the one hand avowing the 'pleasure of solving, particularly as soon as one gets to know what dictionary he uses himself' in 1930, and on the other hand publishing letters calling for his 'abolition' in 1931.[45] In 1930, his knack for 'incongruity' was akin to 'the seasoning of life' itself; in 1932, he 'probably has more brains than ever Mozart had.'[46]

The Guardian's polarised editorial stance on Torquemada was emblematic of his status as a lightning rod for competing notions about the place of literature. Torquemada touched a cultural nerve by producing textual forms which were at once exclusive (by being allusive) and accessible (by democratising allusions through overlaying a secondary syntax intelligible to the non-initiated reader). While some clues leveraged eclectic and obscure reference points to conceal their solution, others subverted this expectation by staging simple solutions in elaborately referential clue surfaces. Thus a clue like 'Found both in Miss Rebecca West and the Book of Judges' yields ES through simple concealment; the LOEB library is conjured

[43] J. H. Tarver, 'Torquemada and the English Style', *Observer*, 13 May 1928, p. 20.
[44] 'Words Without Stint', *Guardian*, 18 February 1928, p. 12.
[45] 'The Superfluity of Black Squares', *Guardian*, 31 December 1930, p. 3. 'A Plea for Simplicity', *Guardian*, 2 January 1931, p. 2.
[46] Gilbert Norwood, 'Our Existence by Contrasts', *Western Mail*, 5 January 5 1934, p. 11. 'London Symphony Orchestra', *Guardian*, 2 November 1932, p. 5.

through homophone in 'Rich library that hardly sounds so'.[47] The previous and following sections of this chapter discuss the syntactic mechanics of Torquemada's clues in order to examine how he exploited syntactic ellipsis while invoking contemporary poetry. This section will consider his readers, aiming to intervene in the critical misconception that plain puzzles alone are what came to mind when twentieth-century writers thought about crosswords.

An odd kind of metaphorical transference began to entangle Torquemada's clues with his solvers, who were often subject to transferred epithets of puzzlement: 'nuts' eager for the 'nuts and bolts' of Torquemada's cryptic machinery. The supposedly 'pestilential' Torquemada was imagined to travel with 'his herd of dictionaries and handbooks and anagrams and bits here and bits there, and clues reversed and lopped off and turned sideways and stood on their heads — and in fact, generally messed about', a polysyndetic list of charges that accrues like a list of clues.[48] Soon after Torquemada's debut for *The Observer*, he had acquired a cult status with a devout legion of solvers. Only two years into his tenure, in 1928, a brief period of illness saw tributary odes published in *The Observer* wishing him well. This was a behaviour ultimately reciprocated in one of his more prominent solvers, the composer Edward Elgar, who was the first solver of a crossword in 1933 during a span of convalescence, having solved and scrapbooked every single Torquemada puzzle since 1926.[49]

One poem, framed as a question — 'Torquemada?' — published by Henry E. Wilkes in *The Observer* in 1932 used the puzzle setter as a metonym for existential unintelligibility:

> The clues are dark. I strive in vain to guess
> The Crossword Puzzle of the Universe
> "Electron" seems to fit, and 'Consciousness,"
> "Energy," "Evolution." "Order?" Yes.
> "Design?" uncertain. Bah! The knots grow worse.
> Here's "Space-Time"; and "Reality," perhaps
> This might be "Law," that "Chance"; "Oh! cursed spite."
> Downs and Acrosses clash, astride the gaps.
> The Grand Inquisitor plays tricks, sets traps.

[47] [41d], Torquemada, 'Crossword: 53 — Winnie the Pooh', *Observer*, 27 March 1929, p. 25. [17d], Torquemada, 'Crossword No. 314', in *Torquemada: 112 Best Crosswords* (Pushkin Press, 1942), p. 81.
[48] 'A Plea for Simplicity', p. 2.
[49] Correct entrants list for 'Crossword: 404 — Christmas Party', *Observer*, 24 December 1933, p. 12. See note from Mrs C. Elgar Blake in 'Hail and Farewell to Torquemada', *Observer*, 23 December 1939, p. 8.

"Fate?" and "Freewill?" Absurd! one can't be right.
"Ether?" I wonder. 'Tis a doubtful clue
At best. But "Relativity" falls pat,
A happy inspiration. "Quantum" too;
With "Query" paired for the initial Q?
A question-mark — must I conclude with that?
O Torquemada, have you played the game;
Or is there after all no game to play?
These redeless runes, these unchecked letters shame
The setter. Doubt assails your name and fame.
Is there a Torquemada? Who shall say?[50]

As if parodying Jonathan Swift's *Battle of the Books*, personified aspects of the grid battle with each other and, adversarially, against the troubled solver. The poem ultimately validates the notion that Torquemada appealed to solvers by offering a simulation of puzzlement, rather than puzzles that could easily be solved. Like subjects in a postlapsarian world, Torquemada's solvers have to reckon with an intelligent design that eclipses their own intelligence.

By 1934, Torquemada was able to claim an international following that few notoriously 'difficult' writers of the period could: 'It is a solemn thought that the crossword puzzle [...] is now part of the national life, and that actual millions have, in the last few years, become thumbscrew-conscious.'[51] Solvers submitted entries from Calcutta and Greece; the Oxford Professor of Arabic David Samuel Margoliouth wrote in 1929 to reinforce Torquemada's classical pedigree, claiming with recourse to Homeric anagrams that 'Greek music is the "Torquemada" of classical studies.'[52] Torquemada was inflected as an adjective ('the Torquemadan sense') for the first time in 1933 to denote the hidden connotation of a word.[53] In an editorial essay for *The Observer* in 1934, the daunting variety of the publishing landscape saw Torquemada become a verb: 'This year the problem out-Torquemadas Torquemada.'[54] Torquemada acquired an affective charge by virtue of his versatility as a metonym for all manners of cultural difficulty.

[50] Henry E. Wilkes, 'Torquemada?', *Observer*, 24 January 1932, p. 14.
[51] Torquemada, 'The Crossword Thumbscrew: Torquemada and the Second Lustrum', *Observer*, 23 December 1934, p. 8.
[52] D. S. Margoliouth, 'Torquemada and Homer', *Observer*, 20 October 1929, p. 10.
[53] Brian Harley, 'Chess', *Observer*, 26 February 1933, p. 23.
[54] 'What to Pack: A Choice of the Year's Books', *Observer*, 12 August 1934, p. 6

What some perceived as stubbornly inaccessible difficulty, however, others characterised as a literary form structurally organised around surprising revelation. An article in *The Guardian* in 1930, indeed, heralded Torquemada not for replacing the typical crossword, but for enlivening adjacent literary forms: 'One of the chief charms of both 'Torquemada' and your midweek puzzle is the combination of two spaces to make one word, and the delight is increased when one of the sections is made to unite with two other separate sections.'[55] In 1934, Gilbert Norwood composed an article on 'Life's Incongruities — Of Word and Action: Our Existence by Contrasts' for the *Western Mail*, in which he recounts the eccentric habits of a friend who enjoyed 'lunching on duck and Burgundy in the shadow of the Parthenon, and poring over a Torquemada cross-word amid the ruins of Corinth.' The article argues for the cultivation of incongruity as an essential characteristic necessary for overcoming the 'limitations [and] boundary lines' that straitjacket creativity.[56] Torquemada figures as an emblem of the 'natural chiaroscuro' achievable through rewriting these boundary lines, resurrecting literary energy from an overdetermined textual form which, though literally black and white, achieves tonal shades of grey. The article ends by quoting from *King Lear* to praise 'Our noblest poet [Shakespeare, who] has increased what seemed incapable of increase by a sudden incongruity,' while simultaneously harking back to elevate Torquemada to the same status.

Far from being taboo in British literary circles, as Pound had implied with his disdain for Torquemada's mass-market 'abominations' in *ABC of Reading* (1934), Torquemada in fact figures in the lives of early twentieth-century writers as a consistent point of reference and reverence alike.[57] Before he began setting as Torquemada, Mathers was an acquaintance of both Ezra Pound and James Joyce. Though Pound would later deplore his crosswords, in 1920 he wrote to his mother to let her know that Torquemada was having issues with his thyroid;

[55] 'The Superfluity of Black Squares', p. 3.
[56] Norwood, 'Our Existence by Contrasts', p. 11.
[57] Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 95.

after Pound's sectioning to a mental hospital in the 1940s, Torquemada's widow Rosamond corresponded with Pound to thank him for his 'generosity and value as his critic.'[58] Torquemada, in turn, thought Pound a poet of 'great-heartedness'.[59] Joyce and Torquemada would in 1926 share the misfortune of both confronting literary piracies by Samuel Roth in *Two Worlds Monthly*, but first met in Paris for 'a very agreeable dinner' in Paris in 1920, the news of which Joyce wrote to share with Pound.[60]

Capitalising on the cult success of his crossword puzzles, Torquemada appended *Cain's Jawbone: A Novel Problem* to the collected *Torquemada Puzzle Book* in 1934. A murder mystery written in elliptical prose, whose 100 randomly ordered pages were designed to be retrofitted in the correct sequence, confounded the myriad readers who attempted it in quest of a cash prize. It was difficult enough that, one month following its publication, *The Observer* published an update that 'The first month from the publication of THE TORQUEMADA PUZZLE BOOK has passed without anyone correctly solving the problem of the novel, CAIN'S JAWBONE.'[61] Among a field of 'some hundreds of competitors', and thousands of casual readers beyond, the prevailing mood was that Torquemada had constructed something that was 'Lots of fun, very fair, very hard.'[62] On March 31, 1935, *The Observer* announced the two winners: a Mr. W. S. Kennedy, awarded £25 for being 'opened the first', and a Mr. S. Sydney-Turner, who 'accepted a special consolation cheque given by Mr. Victor Gollancz.'

Saxon Sydney-Turner, despite a public profile so inconspicuous as to go unremarked upon when reported by *The Observer*, was in fact a founding member of the Bloomsbury Group. Sydney-Turner's interest in puzzles was far from a temporary fixation. In an obituary written for *The Times* in 1962 upon Sydney-Turner's death, Leonard Woolf recalls that he was

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[58] Rosamond Crowdy, letter to Pound (1946), in *Ezra and Dorothy Pound: Letters in Captivity, 1945–46*, ed. by Omar Pound and Robert Spoo (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 340–41 (p. 340).
[59] Torquemada, 'Greene and Pinkie', *Observer*, 24 July 1928, p. 6.
[60] Joyce, To Ezra Pound' (28 September 1920), in Ezra Pound Papers, 1868–1976, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 43.
[61] 'Torquemada's Puzzle Book', *Observer*, 23 December 1934, p. 5.
[62] 'Torquemada's Problem Novel', *Observer*, 31 March 1935, p. 9.

'a champion solver of crossword puzzles.'[63] The impression he made on many in the Bloomsbury Group was articulated using the metaphor of puzzlement. In a letter written by Lytton Strachey to his mother, upon meeting Sydney-Turner in his first Michaelmas term at Trinity College, Cambridge, he notes him as 'very distinguished and with immense knowledge of English literature.'[64] He had the appearance in 1905, as Lytton would recall in an aptly transferred epithet, of a 'puzzled night-animal blinking in the unaccustomed daylight.'[65] Virginia Woolf, who would fondly rib Sydney-Turner for his uncanny ability to preserve useless trivia in his memory, once received a chess book in the post from him. Bemused at his deviation from the to-and-fro of Bloomsbury's typically artistic exchanges, Woolf replied with 'nothing to say — except that I owe you 5/5 for the chess book.' She then confessed that writing to him was 'rather like writing to an elf bathed in moonlight on the top of some hill.'[66]

Even as an undergraduate, Sydney-Turner had been lionised among his peers for his alienating feats of intellect. In an often repeated piece of Bloomsbury lore, Sydney-Turner had been awarded a Classics scholarship at university in recognition of his performance in a translation exam. Beyond the required translation of an arcane Greek text, Sydney-Turner is said to have identified, and then solved, a riddle hidden at the centre of the passage. It is as if the mythology surrounding Sydney-Turner, who remained reclusive and reserved even at social gatherings, converted him into one of the puzzles he was notorious for solving. As Michael Holroyd has summated, in his biography of Lytton Strachey, Sydney-Turner appeared to be 'an automaton of a man, endlessly crossword puzzling and opera-accumulating as he moved indecisively through the shadows.'[67]

Lytton Strachey, however, had the crossword in common with Sydney-Turner. Strachey regularly solved *The Times* crossword puzzle in collaboration with an array of associates,

[63] Leonard Woolf, 'Mr. Saxon Sydney-Turner: The Bloomsbury Group', *The Times*, 13 November 1962, p. 14.
[64] Lytton Strachey, quoted in Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 136.
[65] ibid, p. 145.
[66] Virginia Woolf, letter to Sydney-Turner (27 November 1916), in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicholson, 2 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), II, p. 126.
[67] Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey*, p. 144.

whether with the painter Roger Fry in a Brighton hotel room in 1930, or with Dadie Rylands while touring Italy a few months later.[68] *The Times* crossword had only begun in February 1930, one of the last British publications to hold out against what it had once mocked in 1925 as a 'national menace' threatening to zombify the intellectual capital of London at large. The first *Times* puzzle had been composed by Adrian Bell, a writer whose verse collection *Poems* (1935), in Jeremy Noel-Tod's account, evinces 'playing with words more than the poem needs.'[69] The *Times* puzzle certainly took more of Strachey's time than needed; 'my theory now,' Strachey declared enigmatically, 'is that life is not so much a pattern as a crossword puzzle.'[70] Strachey's gnomic proclamation proved, in some sense, prophetic; as his family gathered around his deathbed at The Bear Hotel in Hungerford in 1932, his siblings passed the time 'playing chess' and 'finishing crossword puzzles by the fire' as they awaited the prognosis of the doctors.[71]

For the Stracheys, the crossword puzzle was an intergenerational fixation. Their father, Richard Strachey, devised mathematical problems throughout Lytton's childhood, though the children's greater sympathy towards their mother Jane's 'literary' interests eventually replaced these conundrums in the form of 'the family's preferred recreational activity': the crossword.[72] Amidst a deterioration in Jane Strachey's eyesight from 1920 to her death in 1928, Pippa Strachey was required to sit with her for hours at a time in order that she could continue to solve her beloved crossword puzzles, having tried and failed to learn Braille in the same period.[73] In Ray Strachey's account of these years, he ponders if the crossword began to eclipse her children in importance as she aged:

> It was strange how very little interest she took in her children. I don't think this was the result of age at all, though I daresay that increased it. What she enjoyed was using her brains — &

[68] Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey*, p. 628.
[69] Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'Slow Bars of Light and Shadow', 16 March 2025, <https://someflowerssoon.substack.com/p/pinks-29-slow-bars-of-light-and-shadow> (accessed 18 March 2025).
[70] Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey*, p. 644.
[71] ibid, p. 671.
[72] Barbara Caine, *Bombay to Bloomsbury: Biography of the Strachey Family* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 9.
[73] Caine, *Strachey Family*, p. 13.

> then last year and more, when she couldn't do much else, she spent all the time she could doing crossword puzzle games.[74]

One of the Strachey children, Oliver, later became a pioneer in the development of computer languages following his employment by the British Military Intelligence in the First and Second World Wars. In 1934, Oliver Strachey was instrumental in breaking the Japanese naval attaché machine cipher, ultimately spearheading efforts to decipher German messages involved with double agents. These decryptions were known, indeed, as ISOS, standing for Illicit Services (Oliver Strachey). Despite having no familiarity with Japanese, Oliver later transferred to Ottawa to work as chief cryptographer for the Canadian equivalent of Bletchley Park, where he untangled complex ciphers formed out of a mixture of kanji, hiragana, and romaji.

Oliver Strachey's son (nephew of Lytton Strachey), Christopher, followed in the family tradition as a computer scientist. A contemporary of Alan Turing at King's College, Cambridge, Christopher Strachey is credited with designing a game of draughts playable on the Manchester Mark I, the successor to Alan Turing's Automatic Computing Machine: the first video game, by some parameters. Strachey also designed a love letter generator in 1952, which generated text using a formula based on the nineteenth-century parlour game Consequences, itself undergoing a revival in the form of the pictographic game 'exquisite corpse' in the twentieth century.

Among Christopher Strachey's papers (Bodleian MS Eng. misc. b. 253/A.72) lies a blank crossword puzzle he composed on graph paper, among a series of puzzles collected around his entries to *The New Scientist*.

[74] Caine, *Strachey Family*, p. 460.

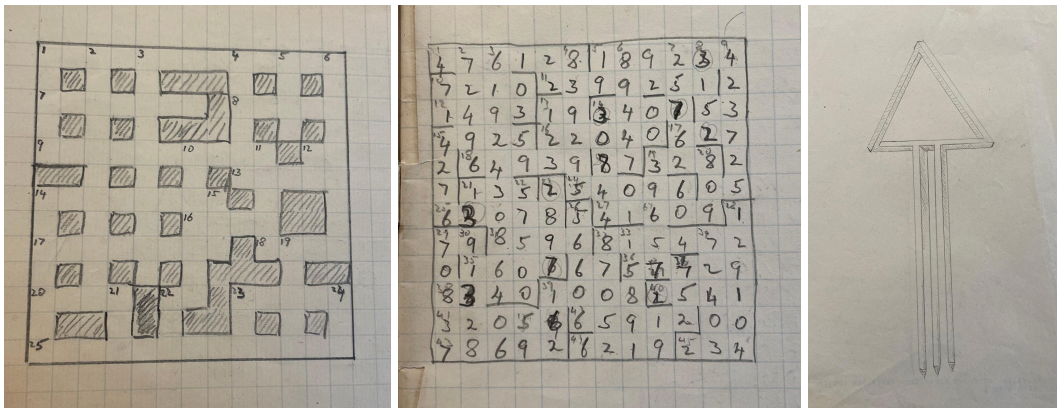


Figure 15: (Left) alphabetical crossword, (middle) numerical crossword, (right) illustration, from the Papers of Christopher Strachey.[75]

One of the puzzles appears to have been designed for letters, while the other, solution filled in, was mathematical. Other pieces of scrap paper in the collection are doodled over with Penrose triangles in an array of colours and formats, with one Escherian shape bleeding into three pencils created in negative space.

The Stracheys were not the only puzzling literary lineage in the era. Ralph and Frances Partridge, who named their son after Lytton Strachey, lived at Ham Spray house following the death of Lytton in 1932 and Dora Carrington's subsequent suicide. Nicholas Henderson's memoir of staying at Ham Spray in this period attest to the centrality of puzzles to their daily lives. Frances favoured specialist jigsaw puzzles, specifically designed to be difficult, being 'in pieces that were so cut as to give no clue to where they were to be fitted.' Unlike Lytton Strachey's penchant for *The Times* crossword, the Partridges were instead aficionados of Torquemada:

> The jigsaws were of the same teasingly difficult kind as the crosswords which were another concomitant of Hamspray [sic] life. The *Times* crossword was always polished off quickly. The puzzles they liked best were those set by Torquemada in the *Observer*. Flatteringly, we would occasionally be asked to help with some clue, perhaps a quotation; but of course it was absurd to think we could do better than Frances, who has remained a crossword-maestro all her life.[76]

[75] Christopher Strachey, 'Folder of "puzzles", verbal, visual and mathematical, created by Strachey at various times,' in the Papers and correspondence of Christopher Strachey, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. misc. b 253/A.72.
[76] Nicholas Henderson, *Old Friends and Modern Instances* (Profile, 2000), p. 20.

Frances remained a devoted crossword solver until her death in 2004, and in her final years favoured *The Independent* cryptic crossword, electing to submit an obituary for Noel Carrington there in 1989.[77] Ralph and Frances Partridge had, however, been solving puzzles together as early as 1926. A letter from Gerald Brenan to Dora Carrington in September, 1926, relays a holiday with Ralph and Frances in the South of France: 'They bathe, eat a large dinner, lie flat on the beach, solve a crossword puzzle, read *The Times*, bathe again, eat another large dinner and go to bed.'[78]

One notable associate of the Bloomsbury Group, the economist John Maynard Keynes, was similarly enticed by the expressive possibilities embedded in crossword puzzles. In a 1942 portrait of Isaac Newton published posthumously in 1946, Keynes would extol Newton for his fundamental belief in the universe as a macrocosmic word puzzle:

> Why do I call him a magician? Because he looked on the whole universe and all that is in it *as a riddle*, as a secret which could be read [...] He regarded the universe as a cryptogram set by the Almighty — just as he himself wrapt the discovery of the calculus in a cryptogram when he communicated with Leibniz. By pure thought, by concentration of mind, the riddle, he believed, would be revealed to the initiate.[79]

Keynes is referring to Newton's choice to correspond with Leibniz in 1677 in the form of an anagram — '6accdae13eff7i3l9n4o4qrr4s8t12ux' — which solves for 'the fundamental statement of calculus': '*Data aequatione quotcunque fluentes quantitates involvente, fluxiones invenire; et vice versa*.' In his *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St John* (1733), Newton had endorsed a 'designedly abstruse' compositional quality while valorising the form of the puzzle, of which the anagram is only one expression, as 'a convincing argument that the world is governed by Providence.'[80] By adopting a posture of puzzlement, of receptiveness to the revelation of enciphered creation, one is alerted to the divine quality of

[77] 'Frances Partridge: Centenarian Survivor of the Bloomsbury Group', *Independent*, 7 February 2004.
[78] Anne Chisholm, *Frances Partridge: The Biography*, 2nd edn (Phoenix: 2010), p. 110.
[79] John Maynard Keynes, 'Newton the Man', in *A Bloomsbury Group Reader*, ed. by S. P. Rosenbaum (Blackwell, 1993), pp. 58–63 (p. 60).
[80] Isaac Newton, *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St John* (J. Darby & T. Browne, 1733), pp. 251–2.

the world at large. Newton's image of the universe as a cryptogram, in Keynes' rendering of it, finds curious subversion in Eliot's metaphor of a metropolitan cryptogram drafted for *The Waste Land*, as Chapter 3 discusses.

Keynes' correspondence with Lydia Lopokova, now held at the Archive Centre of King's College, Cambridge, attests to the versatility of cryptograms as a medium for flirtation. In a letter to Lopokova dated 20 April 1930, Keynes records puzzlement at deciphering Lopokova's handwriting, noting that he had misread her symptoms of 'laryngitis' as symptoms of 'labyrinth.'[81] The joke chimed with the earlier days of their entanglement, which coincided with the apex of the crossword craze at the beginning of 1925. After suffering from a 'stomach cough' akin to influenza, Keynes passed part of his recuperation by solving crossword puzzles. In a brief missive dated 27 January 1925, Keynes deliberately misfilled a solution corresponding to the clue '[1a. King of Lydia]', opting for MAYNARD over and above the required CROESUS (an apt substitution, in their shared fiscal concerns).

[81] Keynes, 'Correspondence with Lydia Lopokova Keynes', in The Papers of John Maynard Keynes, University of Cambridge, King's College Archive Centre, GBR/0272/JMK/PP/45/190/2.

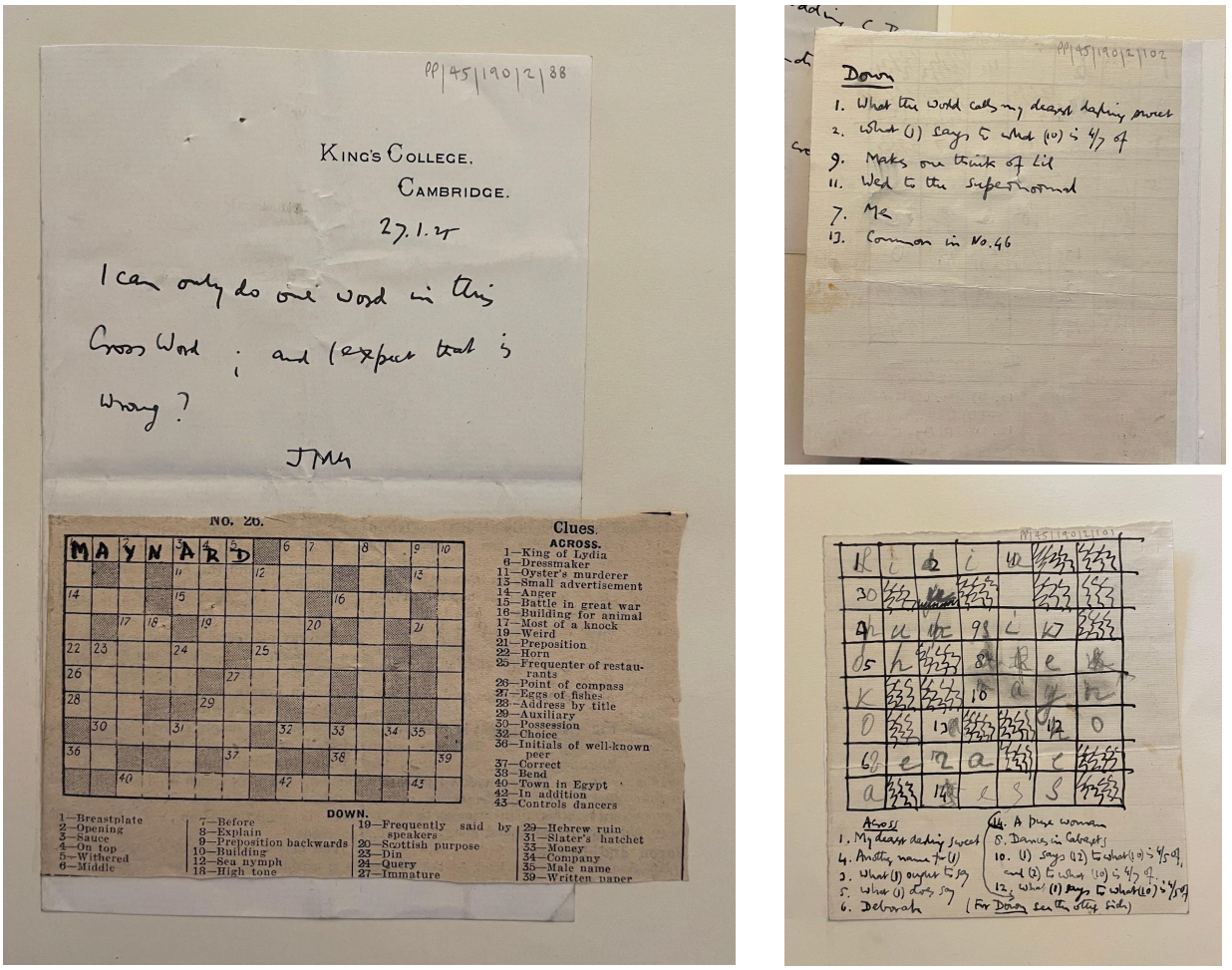


Figure 16: Letters from John Maynard Keynes to Lydia Lopokova (Left, 27 January 1925; Right, 15 February 1925)

The following month, Keynes composed a personalised crossword to celebrate Valentine's Day. The clues are a tissue of private allusions, some of which were so coded as to give even Lopokova pause for thought. Responding to the crossword the following day, Lydia professed:

> I have been troubled with your sweet Valentine, I did not achieve my exercises because of it, and I am late everywhere on account of it, ⅘ and 4/7 are still in my dislocated mind without solution — or was it composed with an idea that I could not divulge it.
> [...]
> Your crossword tempered
> Lydochka[82]

Polly Hill's edition of the correspondence between Keynes and Lopokova, *Lydia and Maynard* (1989), inaccurately transcribes the puzzle. The intended design is held in the original letter at King's College, and features an array of solutions not recorded by Hill. Part of the extended

[82] Lopokova, letter to Keynes (16 February 1925), in *Lydia and Maynard*, ed. by Polly Hill and Richard Keynes (André Deutsch, 1989), p. 290.

10a, for instance, requires the inclusion of 2d ('DA') in order for '[LYDIA says NO to what MAYN is 4/5 of, and DA to what MAYN is 4/7 of]'; in the collected edition, 2d is removed entirely. 14a (TESS) and 11d (ADILA) are likewise missing. Keynes appears charmed by the felicities of intersecting LYDIA with LOPOKOVA, with PUPSIK — the diminutive form of *nync* (doll), one of many pet names in correspondence including 'Balsam' and 'Tongue' — providing the keystone for KEYNES vertically.

The solution for Keynes' 6a, VERA, was a contemporaneous object of cruciverbal *billets-doux* penned by Vladimir Nabokov. While Véra Nabokov was recuperating in the Schwarzwald, Vladimir corresponded with her on a daily basis, regularly integrating puzzles into his letters. One of these puzzles, in a letter dated July 6, 1926, took the form of a zoomorphic butterfly:

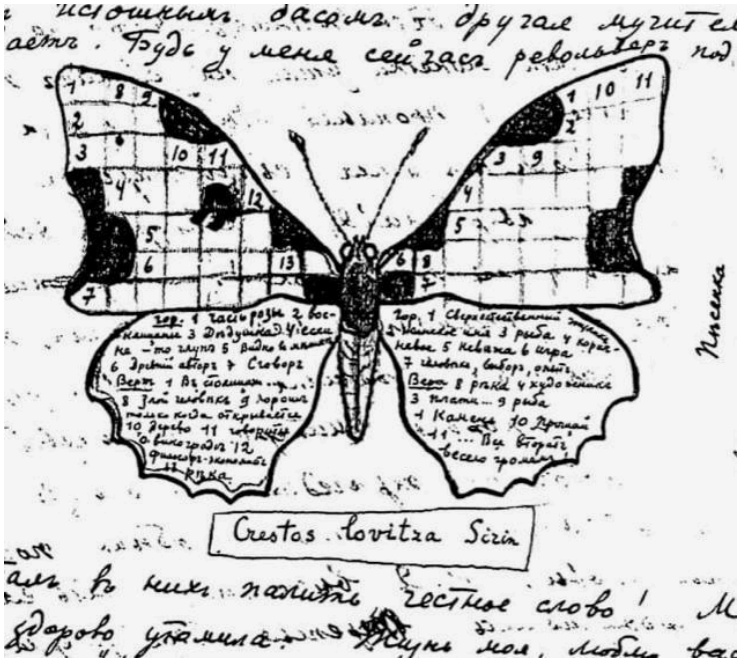


Figure 17: Vladimir Nabokov, '*Crestos lovitxa Sirin*' (1926)[83]

Nabokov's relationship with the crossword was principally one of contestation. Reflecting on his literary career in an interview for *The Paris Review* in 1967, Nabokov compared his index-card-based compositional process with that of compiling a crossword: 'The pattern of

[83] Nabokov, letter to Véra (6 July 1926), in *Letters to Véra* (Penguin, 2016), p. 581.

the thing precedes the thing. I fill in the gaps of the crossword at any spot I happen to choose.'[84] Though his comment is often taken as evidence of a combinatorial mind in the abstract, he chose the simile advisedly: he had composed crosswords, the first in the Russian language, for the daily émigré paper the Berlin *Rul*, in the 1920s. *Rul* had a sizeable circulation before the collapse in the value of the German mark in 1924, and was distributed in more than 30 countries worldwide. Nabokov named his crosswords *krestolovitsa*, a term that failed to catch on due to *krest* (cross) being anathema to Russian Bolshevism, hence the persistence of the transliterated *krossvord* instead.

Nabokov's earliest crosswords demonstrate an instinct for playful self-reference, showcasing inchoately a talent for shocking juxtaposition and structural imagination. They are, however, often dull, repetitive, and replete with factual and typographical errors. Though they have sometimes been incorrectly described as 'cryptic crosswords' by critics when discussing early evidence of Nabokov's ludic habits, they do not consist in cryptic wordplay: they are instead plain crosswords, creative insofar as they define words misleadingly, rather than through reassembly. Thomas Karshan, for instance, misapplies the term 'cryptic' to Nabokov's puzzles for *Rul* to draw a parallel with the 'cryptic disguise' Nabokov would claim for himself in *Speak, Memory* (1951), despite the fact that in the same work of autobiography Nabokov would describe these puzzles merely as crosswords.[85] L. R. Hiatt has used the extended metaphor of the cryptic crossword to describe the double labour of 'oedipal disillusionment' in the narrative structure of *Lolita*, arguing that Nabokov excels in dropping false breadcrumbs for readers to clamour over.[86] Joseph Clayton Mills, who has translated into English each of Nabokov's puzzles for *Rul* with the aid of Kate Kozhukohva, is more compelling when he characterises these early, playful efforts as distinct from the 'meticulous and intricate

[84] Vladimir Nabokov, 'The Art of Fiction No. 40', *The Paris Review*, 41 (Summer–Fall, 1967).
[85] Thomas Karshan, 'Nabokov and Play' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2006), p. 203; p. 246.
[86] L. R. Hiatt, '*Lolita*: A Freudian Cryptic Crossword', *American Imago*, 24.4 (Winter 1967), pp. 360–70.

lattice work of allusion' typical of Nabokov's later work, or indeed the chess problems he devised contemporaneously, later collected in *Poems and Problems* (1969).[87]

Nabokov's *Rul* puzzles, however, rarely misdirect compellingly. Flashes of wit — in a puzzle dated 10 May 1925, Nabokov clues the authors Benediktov (infamously pro-Romanticism) and Baratynsky (infamously anti-Romanticism) consecutively — coexist with mistakes at different scales.[88] The previous week, the puzzle and solution had been mismatched; the following year, Nabokov would misidentify Kareno (the lead in Knut Hamsen's trilogy of *At the Gates of the Kingdom*, *Evening Glow*, and *The Game of Life*) as an Ibsen character.[89] Clues leading to George Bernard Shaw and the Victorian actor Charles Kean abound to the point of verbatim repetition across distinct puzzles.

By contrast, the clues that populate Nabokov's letters to Véra are underwritten with a sense of mischief often lacking from the *Rul* puzzles. Definitions are elusive: 'Behind bars, but not a tiger' leads to CASHIER, and 'wouldn't have come back without this' leads to TRAVELLED. Russian literary idioms are reconstituted ('In poetry — it smokes' yields WOUND), and words are multiplicitously defined: 'rich' appears as 'A man, a choice, and an experience.' Nabokov also included riddles based on combining syllabics to generate new words within a given category. Three days after Nabokov's butterfly crossword, he set Véra a literary riddle:

> *Magic Words*
> *Love song, sateen, cafeteria, frame, burdock, swindler, bar lock, slime, silence, loner, rook.*
>
> This is what you have to do: out of these eleven words (i.e. their syllables) make nine new ones: 5 Russian poets, 2 verse forms, a flower, a bird.
>
> Shenshin — Fet
> Apukhtin
> Romanov
> Nikitin
> Lomonosov

[87] Joseph Clayton Mills (ed.), *Nabokrossvords: Selected Puzzles from the Russian Émigré Newspaper* Rul, trans. Mills and Kate Kozhukohva (Sibilance Press, 2012), p. iii.
[88] [38a/40a], Nabokov, 'Puzzle 20', May 10 1925, in *Nabokrossvords*, p. 86.
[89] ibid, p. ii.

Ode
Satire
Rose
Tumbler Pigeon[90]

As Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd's translation of the letters has shown, the predicted answers (drawn from syllabic anagrams in Russian) themselves disclose surprising dimensions. Nabokov appears to have embedded a private joke, with Apukhtin and Romanov replaceable with Ophuktin and Nikrasov.

Like many of his contemporaries, Max Beerbohm began solving crosswords in the 1920s, but surpassed mere participation by composing them in the same decade. The earliest extant record of a crossword composed by Beerbohm is dated to 12 July, 1925.[91] A selection of his crosswords were featured at a retrospective exhibition for Beerbohm held at the University of Texas at Austin in 1978, having been composed for his brother-in-law Samuel Lipman-Kahn, editor of *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis, Tennessee. One of these crosswords, however, is ostensibly addressed to the British poet and novelist Maurice Baring.[92] The selection of clues from 'Crossword for Maurice' (undated) included in the exhibition was limited to the first 28 Across clues. The solved grid, however, indicates the full lattice of solutions and allusions intended by Beerbohm. Among the literary referents drafted into the puzzle by Beerbohm are *Sketches by Boz*, Bacon, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Galatea, and his own novel *Zuleika Dobson* (1911). The lengthy vertical solution at 6d is MISINTERPRETS, nodding at the lexical mischief intended in his clues.

[90] Nabokov, letter to Véra (July 9, 1926), in *Letters to Véra*, p. 533.
[91] John O. Kirkpatrick, *Max on View: An Exhibition by John O. Kirkpatrick* (University of Texas at Austin Humanities Research Center, 1978), p. 49.
[92] Max Beerbohm, 'Crossword for Maurice' (undated), in *Max on View*, p. 32.

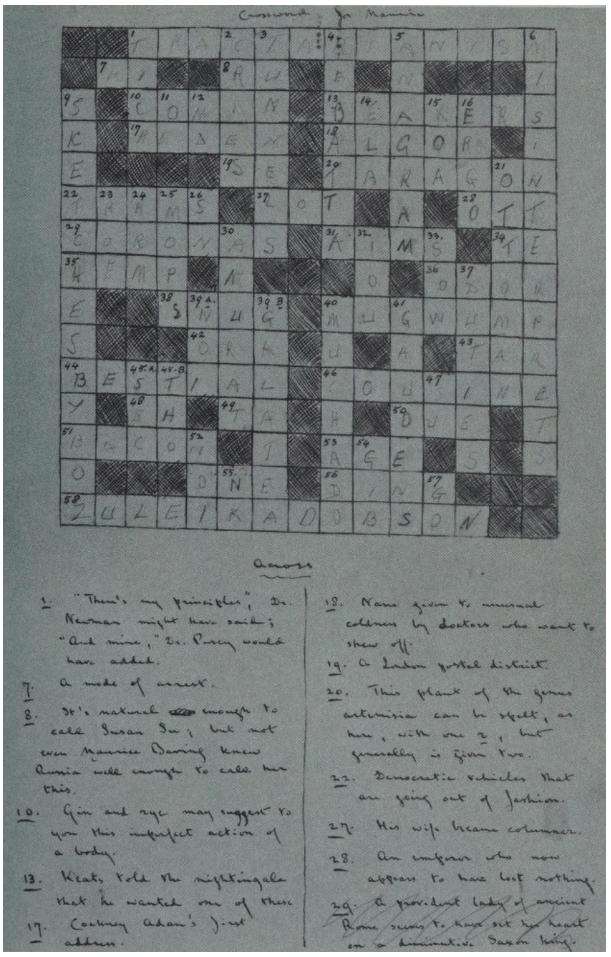


Figure 18: Beerbohm's 'Crossword for Maurice' (undated)

Beerbohm's allusions are not limited to his solutions. The clue at 13a asks '[Keats told the nightingale that he wanted one of these]', leading to BEAKERS, the plural form of the 'beaker [...] / Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene' Keats hopes for in 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Beerbohm tropes his own allusion, reframing the site of inspiration in a new form. '[17a. Cockney's Adam's first address]' yields HEDEN, an aspirated version of Eden in a Cockney accident that cannily replicates the behavioural overaspiration displayed in the garden itself. Words are chopped and changed: Otto von Bismarck is name-checked in miniature in '[28a. An emperor who now appears to have lost nothing]' (OTT), and Drs. Newman and Percy guest-star to clue TRACTARIANISM at 1a.

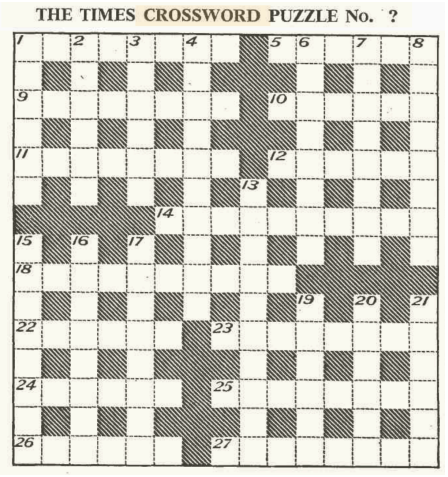
Beerbohm's crossword of choice was *The Times*, solving it regularly from its first publication in 1930 until his death in 1956. S. N. Behrman's account of his friendship with

Beerbohm is studded with instances of interrupted crossword solving under the eaves of a vine trellis. In 1946, Behrman disturbs 'Max, straw-hatted, [...] sitting at a table doing a London *Times* crossword puzzle.'[93] In 1954, Behrman would visit Rapallo and witness an identical scene: 'Max was sitting under the umbrella by the little table, with his straw hat on' alongside the *Times* crossword puzzle. On occasion, Beerbohm's crossword-solving took the form of collaboration. Before the death of his sister, Dora, in 1940, the siblings would spend time together on the terrace, dubbed 'the vining-room' by Max, attacking a crossword as a unified force.[94] In the final years of his life, Beerbohm followed a fixed routine, facilitated by his new wife Elisabeth Jungmann, that consisted in spending most of every morning 'reading and doing *The Times* crossword.'[95] One photograph taken from these years shows Max Beerbohm seated in a wicker armchair in the vining-room engaged in intellectual battle with a recalcitrant crossword puzzle.[96]

Beerbohm's engagement with the crossword was not merely as a hobbyist; rather, the crossword represented a specific mode of textual production that, like other genres, was ripe for his satirical treatment. On March 9, 1940, a parody of *The Times* crossword he composed was published under the banner of 'A New Kind of Crossword'.[97] With Beerbohm's permission, his letter of submission was quoted at length as rationale for his motivation. Beerbohm avows himself curious to see what would happen if *The Times* published a crossword 'with clues signifying nothing — nothing whatsoever,' in a satirically quotidian reformulation of nihilism from *Macbeth*. Beerbohm gleefully speculates on the havoc that would be wrought by such a scenario 'on all the educated parts of Great Britain,' with consequences ranging from matrimonial anguish to a surge in demand for 'a Wordsworth concordance' at local libraries, having unseated the patrons of the clubs nationwide. In his imaginary apocalypse, Beerbohm

[93] S. N. Behrman, *Portrait of Max: An Intimate Memoir of Sir Max Beerbohm* (Random House, 1960), p. 102.
[94] David Cecil, *Max, a Biography* (Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 404.
[95] ibid, p. 488.
[96] Behrman, *Max on View*, p. 48.
[97] Beerbohm, 'A New Kind of Crossword: Night Thoughts', *The Times*, 9 March 1940, p. 4.

infuses these hypothetically stumped solvers with the attributes of the puzzle itself: 'men with blank, set, fixed, pale, just-not-despairing faces.' Beerbohm transfers the epithet from the puzzle to the solver, spotlighting the tendency of crossword aficionados (himself included) to internalise and evangelise on behalf of their preferred puzzles.



THE TIMES CROSSWORD PUZZLE No. ?

ACROSS

1 A Victorian statesman lurking in a side lair (8).
5 Milky way unseen by star-gazers (6).
9 An insect with a girl on each side (8).
10 Pugilists' wear (6).
11 Four toes are broken (8).
12 The cockney's goddess appears to have been a slimmer (6).
14 There's a little company in the meadow next month (10).
18 " But what if memory Itself our — —s had betrayed ?" (Matthew Arnold) (two words) (5, 5).
22 A nudist's aunt? (6).
23 " That day he —— the Nervii " (Shakespeare) (8).
24 Acknowledgement of debt in a vessel (6).
25 Neither animal nor mineral, and only three-fourths vegetable (8).
26 Not what the wicket-keeper tries for in Essex (6).
27 TheP.R.A.is utterly confounded (8).

DOWN

1 Drum (Newbolt) (6).
2 The top of the morning, perhaps (6).
3 A Manx beverage (6).
4 Ho ! Let's go in (anag.) (10).
6 Wordsworth's fan mail ? (8).
7 And yet sugar *can* be refined (8).
8 They are up and doing, no doubt, in " the sweet o' the year " (8).
13 Little Tommy thought it meant a red-faced blacksmith (10).
15 Voltaire's *prêtre enragé* (8).
16 Such buns are eaten on a good day (two words) (3, 5).
17 Caliban's sea-change (8).
19 Pollarded haven(6).
20 I'm in the old Roman bath (6).
21 " Our —— clues that do but darken counsel " (Tennyson) (6).

Figure 19: Max Beerbohm, 'The Times Crossword Puzzle No. ?', *The Times*, 9 March 1940

For a final twist of the knife, Beerbohm appends in a postscript that, in order to provide false hope to these solvers, six clues would in fact be genuine. Beerbohm's rubric for his *Times* crossword does not specify which, and since no solution is possible, no solution was published in the following issue, as would have been the convention for typical *Times* puzzles.

It remains unclear whether the claim that six clues function is itself a further red herring. Beerbohm cannily apes the uncanny-sounding language of cryptic clues to make references that are never consummated in reality. 1d, for instance, evokes Henry Newbolt's 'Drake's Drum' poem, though in such an elliptical way that no solution is deductible. 15d likewise calls up Voltaire's character Jean Meslier, though with a numeration that confounds resolution. 18a and 21d each reprint a fictionalised quotation from Matthew Arnold and Tennyson, while 6d ('[Wordsworth's fan mail]') and 17d ('[Caliban's sea-change]') each do such a good job of sounding like clues that they defy logical parsing. Even clues that own up to their strategy are perfectly written so as to not-quite work. '[4d. Ho! Let's go in (anag.) (10)]'

has the requisite number of characters for a 10-letter anagram, but does not generate any words. It is, however, an anagram of *neologist* when the H is subtracted, perhaps a nod at the frustratingly unreasonable terms of the puzzle. The remaining, functional clues (minus one that has proven too elusive for my efforts) are:

1a. A Victorian statesman lurking in a side lair (8)	DISRAELI
9a. An insect with a girl on each side (8)	LADYBIRD
12a. The cockney's goddess appears to have been a slimmer (6)	SPARER
23a. "That day he ———— the Nervii" (Shakespeare)	OVERCAME
16d. Such buns are eaten on a good day (two words) (3,5)	HOT CROSS

The clues range from the straightforwardly anagrammatical (sidelair* = DISRAELI) to the circuitously homophonic (unaspirated, as a Cockney might, Hespera becomes SPARER). None of these solutions intersect one another, and so the redemptive intersectional backdoor of the struggling solver is denied. More cruelly, the crossing letters we are granted appear to validate elements of wordplay in other clues that never quite operate. The second O of HOT CROSS places the ▫▫🅾▢▢▢ of 24a, 'Acknowledgement of debt in a vessel (6)', seemingly inviting IOU for 'debt' within TIN, CAN, VAT, CAR, VAN, or any other three-letter vessel, but other than SIOUAN (a Sioux native), no words can be generated, let alone one that means 'Acknowledgement'. The italicisation in 7d, 'And yet sugar *can* be refined' has the same tang as Carroll's conclusive 'For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see', avowing a wink-wink-nudge-nudge inclusivity that ultimately confounds the excluded reader. Solvers are led astray by the wilful placement of clues desiccated of their signification, and punished for their recognition of literary precedent.

iii. 'The Weary Bee': Puzzling Anthologies

In Torquemada's puzzles, literary precedent was as often the object of play as words themselves. Wesley Beal defines the 'network aesthetics' of modernism as a pattern of 'distributed forms' which conscript the audience into an interactive process of reassembly.[98] Though Beal's focus is on how 'American moderns were imagining new models of community,' the crossword undoubtedly functioned as an explicit textual manifestation of contemporaneous experiments with collage. Walter Benjamin's notion that such forms force a viewer to 'assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components' could just as easily describe crosswords as artistic montage.[99] Contemporary critics of densely allusive poems certainly used these terms to denigrate, for example, Eliot's *The Waste Land* as the 'conglomerate nightmare of [...] trying to digest Frazer's *Golden Bough*' into a new metabolic form.[100]

In an anonymised review of Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* published in 1930, a critic teased out the comparison at length. Beginning by defining modernist poetry by its tendency to 'suppress "links in the chain" of explanatory and connecting matter' — quoting from Eliot's notes to *Anabasis*, but simultaneously evoking the prosodic omissions advocated by Pound and Flint in their prescriptions for Imagism — the critic explains that this inevitably creates 'cryptograms' for the reader:

> A modernist poem in this sense is, therefore, a species of crossword puzzle. And it does not take much intelligence to see how anybody by merely suppressing the 'links in the chain' say, of a third-rate novel could produce at least a first-class imitation of a great 'modernist' poem.[101]

The idea is that 'modernist' poetry is simply ordinary prose invested with prestige by virtue of lacking conjunctions. Whether or not poems like *The Waste Land* deliberately laid claim to this precise metaphor in images like 'A heap of broken images', the charge is pejorative here: undo

[98] Wesley Beal, *Networks of Modernism: Reorganising American Narrative* (University of Iowa Press, 2015) p. 17.
[99] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by H. Eiland and Kate McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 1999), p. 461.
[100] M. S., '"Forbidden Book" Caused Wild Doings A Century Ago', *Honolulu-Star Advertiser*, 12 April 1944, p. 44.
[101] R. W. K., 'A Modernist Cat', *Liverpool Post and Mercury*, 4 July 1930, p. 6.

the bindings on a standard novel, shake all the pages loose, and you'll find a stray modernist poem at your feet. As one 1930 article about the crossword craze put it, 'Blessings on the head of whoever first gave us crosswords! It would be difficult to calculate how many poems they have saved from wreckage.'[102]

The barb certainly resonated with the compositional strategies of many prominent writers in the period, whose acquisitive frames of reference often seemed to be quasi-randomly reordered in the process of writing. Tristan Tzara's hat, out of which he plucked impromptu verse assemblages, or Raymond Queneau's 'Story As You Like It' (1967), made explicit structural reference to this combinatorial process of creation, whereas writers like Nabokov compiled his fiction on index cards and then reordered them to 'fill in the gaps of the crossword at any spot I happen to choose.'[103] As the next chapter will explore, Eliot advised Norman Nicholson to store up books 'in cold storage' until their component ingredients could 'coalesce', as Crawford has it, into a new form.[104]

For Torquemada, the notion that 'a modernist poem is [...] a species of crossword puzzle' was a complicated one. For one thing, he had perhaps the best claim to having realised the critic's snipe that a novel without links might create a puzzle: *Cain's Jawbone* (1934), his notoriously difficult novel, was published as 100 pages to be assembled in a to-be-ascertained order. In a memoir written by his wife Rosamond Mathers, and included in the preface to his posthumous *112 Best Crossword Puzzles*, she fondly writes that his verse 'was described by a reviewer as one of the very few writers of free verse that was poetry and not chopped prose.'[105]

Torquemada didn't mince his words when it came to the affinity between the modernist puzzle and the modernist poem. Or, rather, he minced his words very selectively to make the same point. Perhaps remembering the praise, or sarcastically leaning into the critical

[102] 'Boom of Crosswords', *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, 7 March 1930, p. 8.
[103] Vladimir Nabokov, 'The Art of Fiction No. 40', *The Paris Review*, 41 (Summer-Fall, 1967).
[104] Eliot, letter to Norman Nicholson (March 8 1940), in *TSEL*, IX, *1939–41*, p. 678.
[105] R. C. Mathers, 'Torquemada', in *T112*, p. 6.

chorus, Torquemada included a clue in the same collection: '[A problem in prose]' yields POSER, a kind of puzzle generated through 'chopped prose'.[106] His verse was often commended for its 'simplicity of diction' in spite of the intimidating 'diversity' of references it marshalled.[107] Though often only pretending to be multilingual, his verse translations 'surreptitiously cross and blur boundaries between literary cultures and languages' elegantly, according to Italia Maddalena's appraisal of his work on Sanskrit, often working 'un-philologically' to achieve clarity.[108]

Torquemada's puzzles are an experimental test of what it would mean for the 'links in the chain' to be radically reorganised, or reimagined 'un-philologically': for a poem to emerge out of modernism's 'conglomerate nightmare' of allusions, and enter a further dimension. In order to gain a place at Trinity College, Oxford — where Torquemada studied between 1910–14 — students were required to pass both a 'Responsions' examination set by the university (covering Latin, Greek, and Mathematics when Torquemada took it), and a more idiosyncratic Trinity entrance test. Though the unprepared components of the classics exams were 'easy' according to the *Regulations of the Board* (1909–1910), Responsions were contemporarily reckoned to require 'mastery of a considerable vocabulary' and 'conscious adjustment to the spirit of the language' in a successful candidate.

As early as 1896, the value of cleaving to this system of examination was already being questioned. In a letter to *Nature* querying an essay on 'Science at Oxford', H. B. Baker pointed out that some students were 'practically shut out from Oxford [...] however small the knowledge of Greek required for passing Responsions may seem to a classical man.'[109] Mildred Dean's survey of early twentieth-century Responsions papers notes, for instance, that despite no 'required course of reading,' Latin translations could be plucked from: 'the Gallic War,

[106] [39d], Torquemada, 'Puzzle 524', in *T112*, p. 189.
[107] Sackville-West, 'Fabulous Wind', *Observer*, 19 November 1944, p. 3.
[108] Italia Maddalena, 'Eastern Poetry by Western Poets: Powys Mathers' "Translations" of Sanskrit Erotic Lyrics', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 17.2 (2020), pp. 205–24 (p. 209; p. 211).
[109] H. B. Baker, 'The Position of Science at Oxford', *Nature*, 54 (July, 1896), p. 54.

three; the African war, two; the Civil War, two; Fasti, two; Fabulae Aesopiae of Phaedrus, one (adapted); Livy, one (adapted); Aulus Gellius, one (adapted); Metamorphoses of Apuleius, one (adapted); Cicero, De Divinatione, one.'[110] Among the approved set texts were the small matters of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Horace's *Odes*, and Virgil's *Georgics*, as well as exercises in translation into Latin and Greek.

The Trinity entrance exam taken by Torquemada required him to translate unlabelled verse from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Euripides' *Electra*, 'Illustrate from literature the social condition of England between 1340 and 1450', and extract the square root of '16*x* - 40*x* + 89*x* - 80*x* + 64.'[111] Torquemada must have demonstrated an early knack for translation that would later flower in his translations of poetry, working either with polyglot source material or with intermediate texts in an array of European languages: he passed, taking his place at Trinity College in Michaelmas, 1910. In a later review of Torquemada's collected *Love Songs of Asia* (published posthumously in 1944) written by Vita Sackville-West for *The Observer*, Sackville-West rues her comparative lack of Chinese, Sanskrit, Afghan, Annamese, Hindustani, Japanese, Tibetan, Turkish, Arabic, Burmese, Siamese, Cambodian, Pus'hto, Korean, and Persian, conceding it unsurprising 'that a scholar of such diversity should so successfully have worried the more intellectual of our crossword puzzlers for years under the sobriquet of Torquemada.'[112] Felicitously, Sackville-West and Torquemada had encountered one another in W. B. Yeats' *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892–1935* (1936), where Torquemada's 'English Girl' faced Sackville-West's 'The Greater Cats' on consecutive pages.[113]

It was to an earlier *Oxford Book*, however, that Torquemada would return again and again in a series of highly allusive, quasi-examinatory puzzles. The anthology and the crossword may seem unlikely bedfellows, but by 1983 *The Cambridge Guide to English*

[110] Mildred Dean, 'The Oxford "Smalls" and Some Other Matters', *Classical Weekly*, 22.8 (December 1928), pp. 58–60 (p. 60).
[111] Trinity College, Oxford, '1909/1910' [Entrance examination papers], provided by Clare Hopkins, email to the author, 15 March 2023.
[112] Sackville-West, 'Fabulous Wind', *Observer*, 19 November 1944, p. 3
[113] W. B. Yeats (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892–1935* (Clarendon Press, 1936), pp. 326–7.

Literature was being explicitly recommended for 'crossword fans' in its publicity run.[114] Simon Rae's introduction to *News That Stays News: The Twentieth Century in Poems* (1999) compares the production of the anthology to a crossword: 'Several poets have been pencilled in and then rubbed out more than once.'[115] Torquemada's 'Oxford Book' puzzle, included in his 1934 collection *The Torquemada Puzzle Book*, is both structurally and thematically designed around this principle.

The prefatory rubric to the puzzle declares up front the allusion that is more often submerged in his oblique clues, informing the solver that the entire puzzle is 'set on the Oxford Book of English Verse,' the familiar name for Quiller-Couch's *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250–1900* (1900), nearly 500,000 copies of which were sold before a revised second edition took its place in 1939. It is unclear when Torquemada first came across the anthology, but its prominence at Oxford University and through its commercial second wind during the First World War as a so-called 'knapsack book' on india-paper for officers posted overseas, are likely candidates. Like many Trinity students, Torquemada had served in the army during the First World War, though the Oxford *Roll of Service* shows that unusually he was never promoted beyond the rank of private. He was 'invalided out of the army after a year's service,' according to an obituary for Torquemada written in 1939 by Owen Rutter.[116]

Regardless of Torquemada's military exposure to the anthology, his experience as an undergraduate at Trinity College will inevitably have rendered him familiar with Quiller-Couch's work. Beyond Arthur Quiller-Couch's status as a Trinity alumnus, he was a celebrated novelist working at Oxford until his election as King Edward VII Professor of English Literature in 1912, where he would later mentor F. R. Leavis. Moreover, Trinity records show that he presented copies of each of his works to the college library upon publication. The surest sign of Torquemada's familiarity with the name, however, lies in Quiller-Couch's son,

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[114] D. J. Enright, 'All Ye Need to Know', *Observer*, 22 May 1983, p. 31.
[115] Simon Rae (ed.), *News that Stays News: The Twentieth Century in Poems* (Faber, 1999), p. xii.
[116] Owen Rutter, 'Torquemada: A Memory of Edward Powys Mathers', *Observer*, 5 February 1939, p. 7.

Bevil Quiller-Couch, who was a freshman at Trinity in the same year as Torquemada. Bevil Quiller-Couch initially failed his entrance exam, but was granted special permission to take it again because his father was a graduate of the college, and a close friend of the president Herbert Blakiston. The Trinity Tutorial Register records his original intention to read Engineering, though after failing Science Prelims he switched degrees to History. Concurrently, Torquemada failed his Law Prelims (his results were deemed *non satis*) before changing course to English. They each would have been subject to an interview with the Senior Tutor about their reasons for changing course at approximately the same time. Trinity was a relatively small college, admitting on average 50 men per year at the time. Bevil was famed in the college not only for his disciplinary warnings by the Dean, but also for his rowing prowess, having won the University Pairs in 1912 and 1913 consecutively while Captain of the Trinity Boat Club.[117]

Whether or not his son had made a mark, Arthur Quiller-Couch's anthology clearly formed an indelible impression on Torquemada's conception of the English literary canon. The scholastic tone of 'set' in Torquemada's note that the puzzle is 'set on the Oxford Book of English Verse', as an exam is set on a text, seems an echo of the broad reading required while Torquemada studied at Trinity. Like a *Responsions* examination, the 'Notes' to Torquemada's puzzle are almost illegible for their density of abbreviated authors, line references, and page numbers. *Observer* puzzles, indeed, often forewarned solvers of the literary object of next week's puzzle. The 'Notes' to the Torquemada grid following Sélincourt's grumble about the unliterary crossword, for instance, tells readers that 'next week's puzzle will be constructed from the works of Saki.'[118] These intimidating fragments of scholarship are tessellated harmoniously in the puzzle. Indeed, in the introduction to the *Torquemada Puzzle Book*, the explanation for the 'Oxford Book' puzzle is entitled 'Examinations.' Torquemada marks the anthology as a good site for examination because it does not require the 'mobile solver' to

[117] Clare Hopkins, *Trinity: 450 Years of an Oxford College Community* (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 341–2.
[118] Torquemada, 'No. 756', *Observer*, 6 October 1940, p. 12.

'load the rest of his person with a small library.'[119] The result is a feat of compression, a second press of the canon already filtered by Quiller-Couch's selection criteria.

Torquemada's 1934 'Oxford Book' followed the recent 1931 Impression of Quiller-Couch's anthology issued by Clarendon Press. The 'Notes' to the solution included in the *Torquemada Puzzle Book* feature poem numbers which correlate with this specific edition. The preface to Quiller-Couch's edition, in contrast to Torquemada's puzzles, abhors the publication of 'notes' to poems as an act of 'unwieldy' vandalism: 'the text has not been disfigured with reference-marks.'[120] Quiller-Couch justifies his decision to preserve the original form and orthography of poets in his collection under the principle that 'To modernise is to destroy.' *The Oxford Book of English Verse* held outsized influence as an arbiter of poetic tastes in the decades following its publication, attracting 'prestige as the most important pioneer example of the historically conceived and arranged anthology' in spite of its 'essentially Edwardian viewpoint', as George Woodcock summarises.[121] When Quiller-Couch revised it in 1939, the new date parameters only reached as far as 1918. Acknowledging the work of his predecessors, Quiller-Couch relishes the tactile qualities of his predecessors as much as he does their curatorial selection. In regard to Francis Turner Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics* (1861), Quiller-Couch recalls 'how it lies on the page' over and above the rationale for inclusion. These spatial aspects of the anthology form an impression on his memory, visualised as 'the dye' taken by the mind in a posture of allusive permeability.[122]

In an extended list mapping out his inspirations, Quiller-Couch writes a miniaturised anthology of the anthologies available to him, counting Bullen, Trench, Locker-Lampson, Miles, Beeching, Henley, Sharp, and Yeats among the 'treasuries' to which he owes a debt.

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[119] *TPB*, p. 16.
[120] Arthur Quiller-Couch (ed.), *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250–1900* (Clarendon Press, 1900), p. viii. Hereafter *OBEV*.
[121] George Woodcock, 'Old and New Oxford Books: The Idea of an Anthology', *Sewanee Review*, 82.1 (Winter, 1974), pp. 119–30 (p. 119).
[122] *OBEV*, pp. ix–v.

Quiller-Couch takes pains to emphasise, however, that his imaginative dues stand in 'trifling proportion to the labour, special or desultory, which has gone to the making of my book.' Preemptively guarding against the notion that an anthologist is nothing more than an overlibraried collector, a species of the '*dilettante*' as Quiller-Couch puts it, he positions his own anthology as the product instead of the double labours of 'special' and 'desultory' attention.[123] In a review of one of Quiller-Couch's lectures for *Granta* in 1928, a young Empson praised his 'mental trapeze-work'.[124] His use of the word 'desultory' does not refer to a lack of enthusiasm, as it does in the more common modern sense, but rather to the original idea of being directionally nimble, from the Latin *desultor*, someone jumping about acrobatically.

His anthology is organised both through historical chronology and the logic of free association: there is a 'whimsicality of choice' governing Quiller-Couch's selection criteria, as Woodcock terms it.[125] In this regard, Quiller-Couch does not so much avoid the question of dilettantism as reclaim it by valorising its attendant qualities: curiosity, connectivity, recognition. These are fundamental to the task of forming a modern anthology. 'To modernise is to destroy,' as he put it, with a wry nod to the prevailing task of the anthology being redemptive fragmentation.

Torquemada's choice of 'Oxford Book' as the title of his puzzle transfers the epithet from the anthology to the new work, embedding itself as another flower in the allusive daisychain (the *anthologia* being, etymologically, an exercise in flower collecting).[126] Selecting referents with one eye for the special and another for the desultory, Torquemada's broken anthology reconstitutes poets and poems in radically new forms under the logic of surprising intersection. In the introduction to the 'Oxford Book' puzzle, Torquemada explains his motivations for retooling the anthology:

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[123] *OBEV*, p. x.
[124] Empson, 'The Last Word — A Lecture on Lectures' (9 March 1928), in *Empson in Granta: The Book, Film, and Theatre Reviews of William Empson* (Foundling Press, 1994), p. 46.
[125] Woodcock, 'The Idea of an Anthology', p. 121.
[126] *anthology*, n. ('Etymology'), in *OED Online* (accessed 31 August 2023) [revised entry 2016].

> In solving puzzles of this kind the lover of poetry has, of course, an advantage, but it may be worth pointing out to the less passionate that the very nature of the crossword will enable him to fill in many of the words without knowing them.[127]

His prefatory remarks are a conspicuous echo of Quiller-Couch's own:

> To bring home and render so great a spoil compendiously has been my capital difficulty. It is for the reader to judge if I have so managed it as to serve those who already love poetry and to implant that love in some young minds not yet initiated.[128]

Puzzle and anthology claim a twin audience of initiates and the uninitiated, catering their work for the special and desultory reader alike. Quiller-Couch's use of 'implant' extends the horticultural metaphor to imagine the anthology seeding new readers. In another image he ventures, Quiller-Couch compares the seasoned reader with the weathered fisherman, modelling the literary instinct with knowing 'the fish at the end of his sea-line' by touch alone.

Extending the logic of the maritime simile (and its resonance with an idiom in use since 1885), both the anthology and the puzzle avoid merely giving a reader a fish, instead enjoining them to fish for a lifetime.[129] In Torquemada's puzzle, this claim to formative reading is taken more seriously, requiring at a structural level that the reader participate in dispersed and acquisitive acts of reading.

The model of reader-as-fisherman also raises the possibility of misreading the line. Quiller-Couch divides his selected poems into two varieties, 'lyrical or epigrammatic', the latter of which he differentiates because it preserves with 'exquisite deliberation' a formula for a preordained readerly response. By contrast, the lyric is a more wayward affair:

> The lyrical spirit is volatile and notoriously hard to bind with definitions; and seems to grow wilder with the years [...] The definition, if [the anthologist] can be clever enough to frame one, comes by after-thought. I don't know that it helps, and am sure that it may easily mislead.[130]

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[127] Torquemada, *Puzzle Book*, p. 16.
[128] *OBEV*, p. vii.
[129] 'If you give a man a fish he is hungry again in an hour. If you teach him to catch a fish you do him a good turn.' Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie, *Mrs Dymond* (Harper & Brothers, 1885), p. 340.
[130] *OBEV*, p. ix.

Quiller-Couch relishes the looser, evasive qualities of lyrical verse, glorying in its mischievous resistance to the straitjackets of precise definition. 'How it lies on the page' is often a matter of misdirection as much as transcription. Reducing poetry to schema only succeeds in 'misleading' the reader. Rather than lamenting these explanatory gaps, Torquemada's development of the cryptic clue seizes the opportunity to mislead with definitions as a way of restoring the original volatility of the verse. At once formulaic and volatile, Torquemada's clues aim at hybridity. The clues in the 'Oxford Book' puzzle are a tissue of direct quotations severed from their original contexts, and playful reworkings of snippets of poetry in odd new forms.

Torquemada draws attention to his allusive games, repeatedly selecting quotations that imagine acts of collection and distribution. The clue that opens the puzzle is an adjusted quotation from William Blake's 'To Spring': '[1. Scatter thy pearls, I wrote, Upon our lovesick land that mourns for thee].' Torquemada inhabits Blake, interrupting the quotation at the point of enjambement with an indirect speech marker. The quotation retains the capitalisation of 'Upon' despite the lack of a line break in the clue's rendering, reinforcing the idea that these lines have been plucked verbatim for their orthography as much as for their import.[131] Like the 'dye' immanent in Quiller-Couch's memory, individual poems are to be jigsawed 'how it lies on the page'. The 'Notes' to the solution of the puzzle give the precise reference required for the reader to fact-check the solution, BLAKE, in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*: '*Across*: 1. 484, *l.* 11.'[132] Torquemada makes good on his stated ambition to educate as well as frustrate, leaving precise coordinates for the stumped solver to track down an elusive allusion.

For the hyperliterate reader who knows their William Blake word-for-word, the solution may be obvious. For the more typical reader, who might deduce Blake as a likely candidate by solving one of its vertical intersections (BLUNT, LATE, AU, KSA, and EW), Torquemada provides enough information to send them to the anthology. There are nine

[131] William Blake, 'To Spring', in *OBEV*, pp. 558–559.
[132] ibid, p. 179.

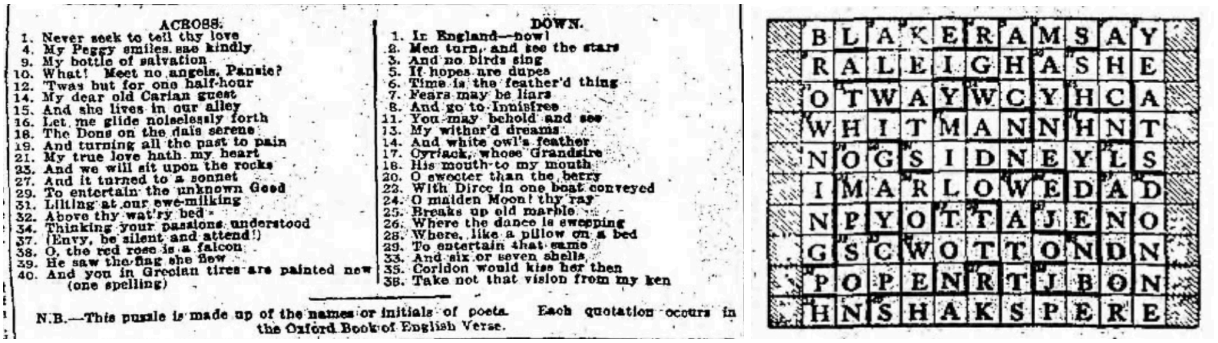
poems by Blake included by Quiller-Couch, and the reader can verify the answer by reading each of them until they find the line in question. The guiding mechanical principle of the puzzle is that it immediately redresses knowledge deficits by asking a solver to perform an act of close reading on an unfamiliar poem, and then giving them (in this case) five alternative opportunities to solve it.

The clue at 9 Down knowingly tropes the metaphor of the *anthologia*, conjuring the Senecan image of a worker bee chasing the faint scents of faraway flowers: '7. Wrote: Of primroses too faint to catch A weary bee.'[133] The answer is initialised as R.B. within the grid. Solvers might ascertain these initials through the solutions to 6 and 15 Across, which intersect RB with HENRYSON and WOLAB (a reversal of 'Balow' from an anonymous 16th-century lullaby). The initials R.B., however, are wilfully ambiguous, pointing in more directions than one. They could also refer, at first glance, to Robert Burns, Robert Browning, Robert Bridges, Richard Blackmore, Richard Barnefield, Robert Blair, Robert Bloomfield, Robert Bradstreet, Rupert Brooke, or Richard Barham. To whittle down this shortlist, the solver can then turn to the contents page of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, and find that Quiller-Couch only included poems by Barnefield, Blackmore, Bridges, Browning, and Burns. These five poets account for 38 poems in the anthology (spanning 36 pages), requiring a feat of ergodic reading matched in breadth by the wide historical range they compass. The line in question in fact belongs to Robert Browning, and occurs midway through 'Thus the Mayne glideth,' the third poem attributed to Browning (and the seventeenth poem within the presumed 38 contenders).[134] The scent of the primrose is indeed faint, but the anthology rewards the weary bee.

Almost a decade before the 'Oxford Book' puzzle, Torquemada ventured an earlier iteration of the same idea in *The Observer* in 1926 for his tenth puzzle, only a couple of months into his residency with the weekly newspaper. In contrast to the 1934 edition, which set poets

[133] *OBEV*, p. 50.
[134] Robert Browning, 'Thus the Mayne glideth' in *OBEV*, p. 856.

alongside titles, keywords, and refrains, the 1926 edition uses only 'the names or initials of poets.' The clues are rendered with less editorial intervention, consisting only in quotations rather than in personifications or in amendments. The 1926 puzzle is marked, however, by the careful sequence of its clues, which aspire to the condition of found poetry. Torquemada synthesises disparate lines of poetry, drawn from eclectic reference points, into a makeshift poem that makes sense continuously between clues. The Across and Down clues, each ending with a kind of hybridised rhyming couplet, form a kind of duologic patchwork stanza. The resultant interactivity was a challenge even for literary polyglots like C. S. Lewis, who recorded in his diary on June 3rd 1930 that he had 'Stayed for some time in the smoking room after dinner doing an impossibly difficult crossword puzzle with J.A. and Wrong' (the Aristotelian philosopher J. A. Stewart, and historian E. M. Wrong): it's almost certain to have been Torquemada's 'Oxford Book' puzzle published a few days earlier.[135]



ACROSS.

1. Never seek to tell thy love
4. My Peggy smiles me kindly
9. My bottle of salvation
10. What! Meet no angels, Pansie?
12. 'Twas but for one half-hour
14. My dear old Carian guest
15. And she lives in our alley
16. Let me glide noiselessly forth
18. The Dons on the dais serene
19. And turning all the past to pain
21. My true love hath my heart
25. And we will sit upon the rocks
27. And it turned to a sonnet
29. To entertain the unknown Good
31. Lilting at our ewe-milking
32. Above thy wat'ry bed
34. Thinking your passions understood
37. (Envy, be silent and attend!)
38. O, the red rose is a falcon
39. He saw the flag she flew
40. And you in Grecian tires are painted new (one spelling)

DOWN.

1. In England—now!
2. Men turn, and see the stars
3. And no birds sing
5. If hopes are dupes
6. Time is the feather'd thing
7. Fears may be liars
8. And go to Innisfree
11. You may behold and see
13. My wither'd dreams
14. And white owl's feather
17. Cyriack, whose Grandsire
18. His mouth to my mouth
20. O sweeter than the berry
22. With Dirce in one boat conveyed
24. O maiden Moon! thy ray
25. Breaks up old marble
26. Where the dance is sweeping
28. Where, like a pillow on a bed
29. To entertain that same
33. And six or seven shells
35. Coridon would kiss her then
36. Take not that vision from my ken

N.B.—This puzzle is made up of the names or initials of poets. Each quotation occurs in the Oxford Book of English Verse.

	B	L	A	K	E	R	A	M	S	A	Y
	R	A	L	E	I	G	H	A	S	H	E
	O	T	W	A	Y	W	C	Y	H	C	A
	W	H	I	T	M	A	N	N	H	N	T
	N	O	G	S	I	D	N	E	Y	L	S
	I	M	A	R	L	O	W	E	D	A	D
	N	P	Y	O	T	T	A	J	E	N	O
	G	S	C	W	O	T	T	O	N	D	N
	P	O	P	E	N	R	T	J	B	O	N
	H	N	S	H	A	K	S	P	E	R	E

Figure 20: Torquemada, 'The Oxford Book', *Observer,* 30 May 1926

Each line of poetry, severed from its original author, is grafted into a poem of multiple authorship. The grid, in turn, acts as a visual model for this allusive network, a punnett square for crossbreeding influence. Poets are latticed, crushed, and made topsy-turvy, as if dragging the anthology through a hall of mirrors. Inscribing the solution means creating a dot-to-dot taxonomy of poets, sanctifying the literary canon in the same stroke as radically dispersing it.

[135] C. S. Lewis, *All My Road Before Me*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Harcourt, 1991), p. 406.

Torquemada's gamified allusions were not bounded by individual puzzles, often corresponding intertextually with other clues in separate works. In order to identify the quotation at 22 Down in the 1926 'Oxford Book' puzzle — 'With Dirce in one boat conveyed' — the reader must intersect AD (Austin Dobson), JBO (John Boyle O'Reilly), and SHAKESPERE (the variant spelling in this case being useful for Torquemada's purposes), fill in the blanks in ▫🄰▫▫🄾🅁, and then verify the solution by finding it in any of the 20 poems under Walter Savage Landor in Quiller-Couch's anthology. The answer can be found in the second line of Landor's 'Dirce' quatrain, a poem that would later recur in another Torquemada puzzle. 'Hell, Said the Duchess' (1934) restages 'Dirce' paratextually, with omitted information slotting together to generate the entire stanza at the moment of solution.[136]

The title refers to the trope of the ultimate *in media res* opening to a commercially viable story, recently iterated in Michael Arlen's mystery novel *Hell! Said the Duchess* (1934). The earliest extant trace of the phrase appears in a discussion of magazine fiction in *The Vancouver World* in 1915, and by 1919 it was widespread enough to figure as a punchline in William Somerset Maugham's *Home and Beauty: A Farce in Three Acts*. The title is apt, in that the solver must coordinate placeholder words inside a partially clued grid in order to generate a poem. Torquemada's prefatory instructions spell this out for the solver:

> N. B. — Words for which there are no clues will be found to build up a complete and delightful poem in four lines when arranged in the following order:
>
> 47, 1 *dn*., 9, 16 *rev*., 19, 49 *rev.*
> 36, 10, 44, 15, 45, 28 *ac.*
> 46, 1 *ac.*, 43, 31 *rev.*, 24
> 38, 8, 37, 5, 41, 7 *dn*., (a), 7 *ac*.

Torquemada's clues generate new words in the intersection of clued solutions, which can be correctly ordered as instructed in order to compose a poem. The appeal to the solver's detective sensibilities was not uncharacteristic: Torquemada, under his puzzle pseudonym,

[136] Torquemada, 'Hell, Said the Duchess', in *TPB*, pp. 64–5.

reviewed more than 1,200 detective novels for *The Observer*, adoring above all their 'technique of misleadership'. The clue motif in the whodunnit, in Franco Moretti's formulation, 'alters the link between the signifier and the signified,' hence 'creating an audacious poetic work' in the crime committed.[137] Torquemada's clues rely on this kind of alteration, persistently doubling the semantic function of individual words in order to generate a poem hiding in plain sight. The solver sets upon the material at hand, and through plotting revelations in the grid (as if mimicking the cliché of the detective's messy, string-choked pinboard), cracks the case:

> Stand close around, ye Stygian set,
> With Dirce in one boat conveyed!
> Or Charon, seeing, may forget
> That he is old and she a shade.

Torquemada's allusion to Landor dynamically buries and unearths an entire stanza, with the poem itself evoking life-death liminality on the Styx. The second line, which had first starred in Torquemada's earliest anthology puzzle, lives a submerged afterlife. Though unacknowledged, the stanza perhaps occurred to Torquemada for its SWOT acrostic as a wry salute to the kind of close attention required to solve each level of the literary game. The point of the category of attention encouraged by Torquemada's puzzles is that it might well have been, and that in any case it does not matter, because once initiated into a different way of seeing, the solver cannot help but discover additional meanings even as they examine and exhume others. Everything (as Agatha Christie's Poirot often murmurs) is 'significant', not least because it goes beyond ordinary meaning. The economy of solution nurtures further dimensions of understanding, laminating every inconspicuous word with possibility.

Inversely, Torquemada published a series of puzzles that appropriated conventional poetic structures to mask their prize. The solver poses as a literary critic, performing (or caricaturing) close reading in order to unlock a secret. The word 'unlock' is apt, in that these

[137] Franco Moretti, 'Clues', in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Form*, trans. by Susan Fischer (Verso, 1983), p. 146.

puzzles were often titled 'With This Key'. An early example published in 1927 notifies the solver that 'the clue is contained in one word or in two or more consecutive words of each line.'[138] The set of clues, without metrical or formal deviation, form three consecutive Shakespearean sonnets. Here is the first, with the solution overlaid:

1. Even as lilies turning to the moon	[SELENOTROPIC]
11. From backwards gardens where they lie concealed	[FO]
13. Team ever after in the bronze of noon	[ELEVEN]
15. With paleness gathered from that frozen field,	[GLACIER]
17. So there's a property of love to feed	[LIVING]
19. For ever on the body of unrest,	[AYE]
20. The horror of an ancient spleen to breed	[RHEUM]
22. A tribe of Armadillos in the breast;	[XENURUS]
24. Then, since this type of anguish plays the rat	[ITALIC]
26. Within the wainscot of the house of dreams	[CIEL]
27. Until the poor dried flesh rebel thereat	[PEMICAN]
28. That so betrays itself and so redeems,	[SIC]
29. Wisdom will breathe into the pipe of wind	[TRACHEA]
32. And leave the shattered madman far behind.	[AMNCAI]

The clues borrow a mechanism more akin to a wordsearch than a cryptic clue per se, though transactional solutions are counterweighted with cryptic wordplay: 'shattered madman' shatters *maniac* into AMNCAI, while 'From backwards' reverses *of* into FO. Solutions like ELEVEN (to clue 13) and SIC (in a crossword where scribal error is encouraged) appear to poke fun at Torquemada's own conceit. Like the clues, the grid aspires to the condition of materiality, ripped at its corner as if a found document.

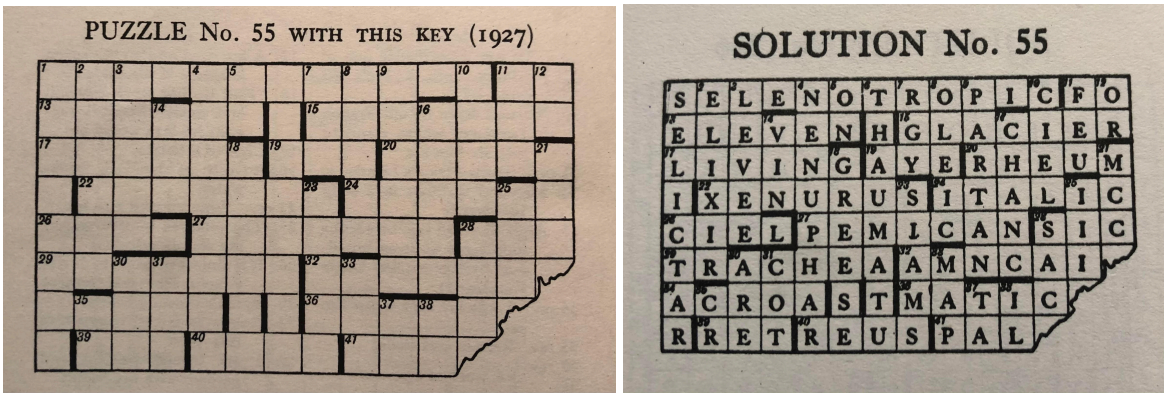


Figure 21: Torquemada, 'With This Key' (1927)

[138] Torquemada, 'Puzzle No. 55: With This Key (1927)', in *T112*, p. 56.

The sonnet's surface reflects on dark concealment as a theme, while the sonnet-puzzle hybrid makes this dark concealment structural: trickier words like SELENOTROPIC ('turning to the moon') are constructed as if parodying the light/dark dichotomy levied critically against crosswords. For Heidegger, poetry's particular domain was to voice the non-identity of word and thing, its shadows attesting to 'the concealed emitting of light' rather than the impossibility of definitional illumination.[139] Torquemada's lilies, tilting selenotropically towards the moonlight, thrive in this indirect glow; his clues, or 'lights', in turn radiate outward to the solver.

Familiarity (of poetic form, of puzzle type, of word choice) belies surprising interiority, access to which is granted through the double-sighted reading of the text. Cook defines the enigma by its ability to reconfigure 'familiar border lines' so that 'things change their look.'[140] As Torquemada would clue in 1936, '[34d. Self-interruptions disturb the thing]'.[141] The thing quite literally changes its look — slyly modifying the same *res* from which the puzzle 'rebus' was conjugated — to materialise the sound of uncertainty. Torquemada's idiosyncratic *Observer* grids, going beyond the simple imagery of his *Cross-Words in Rhyme*, made a virtue of this ability to change how things look. Beyond Nabokov's crossword butterfly, Torquemada offered an entire bestiary of crossword animals, as if parodying the cliché that word puzzles mobilised arcane taxonomic creatures alone: cryptozoology, as it were. One Torquemada grid even conceals a Lorax, a full forty years before Dr. Seuss claimed to have invented it (suggestively, Seuss studied at Oxford during the peak of Torquemada's popularity).[142]

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[139] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 57.
[140] Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles*, p. 224.
[141] Torquemada, 'Puzzle No. 527 (1936)', in *T112*, p. 194.
[142] Torquemada, 'Puzzle No. 239: By the Waters of Shannon (1931)', in *T112*, p. 180.

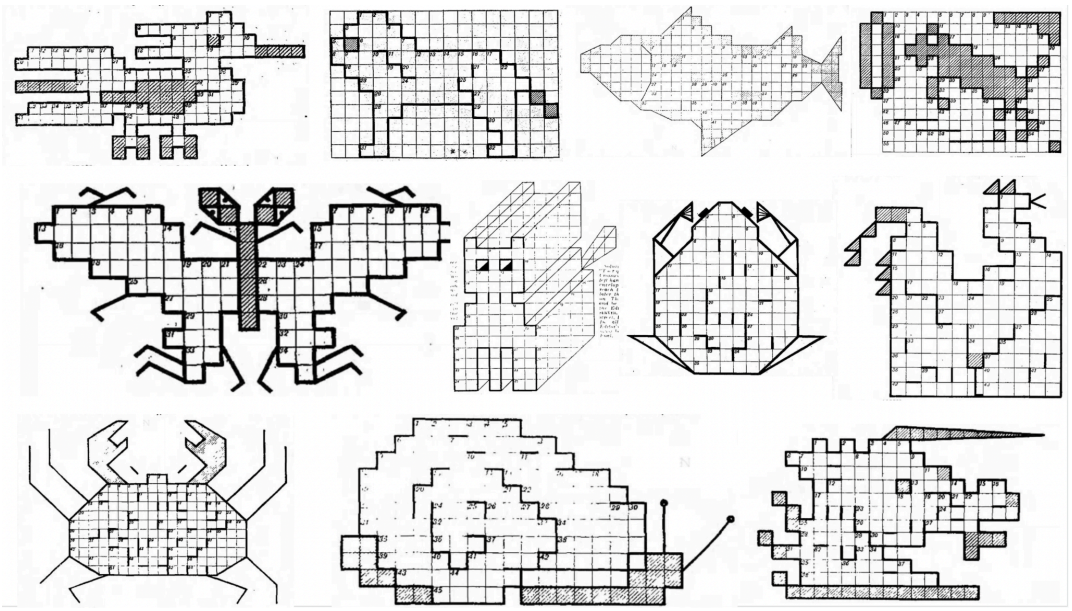

Figure 22: A selection of Torquemada's beastly grids.[143]

Cook explains her definition of the enigma with recourse to Donatus, who prized the form's capacity to show off 'the hidden likeness of things': it is a 'trope' in the etymological sense of the word, a turning. The clue 'turns' meaning, activating verbally what Aaron Jaffe calls 'the explosive capacities that reside in what seems like the inanimate matter of modernity.'[144] Though his case study (the Rube-Goldberg machine) 'edits out human agency', the peculiar verbal quiddity of cryptic clues demands it.

Just as magic returns us to a state of natural astonishment by stimulating our childhood fascination with hiddenness, so might a solver, spell-bound, peer inside a word. For Baudelaire, the urge to envision new dimensions within playthings is our first 'metaphysical tendency'; for Mutlu Konuk Blasing, poetry sates this curiosity by offering readers a return to the psychological stage of language acquisition, estranging 'the material body of language'

[143] (Top right to bottom left) 'Crossword: 24 — 'The Ugly Duckling', *Observer*, 5 September 1926, p. 20. 'Crossword: 12 — The Lion', *Observer*, 13 June 1926, p. 22. 'Crossword: 41 — White-Faced Squinch (Piscator Ignotus), *Observer*, 2 January 1927, p. 22. 'Crossword No. 33 — 'Houp-La', *Observer*, 7 November 1926, p. 27. 'Crossword: 97 — 'Four-Eyed Blip', *Observer*, 29 January 1928, p. 24. 'Crossword: 80 — 'A Runcible Cat', *Observer*, 2 October 1927, p. 25. 'Crossword: 103 — 'Jade Toad', *Observer*, 11 March 1928, p. 25. 'Crossword: 81 — 'The Second Cock', *Observer*, 30 October 1927, p. 26. 'Crossword: 48 — 'Dressed Crab', *Observer*, 20 February 1927, p. 23. 'Crossword No. 66. — 'On the Thorn', *Observer*, 26 June 1927, p. 24. 'Crossword No. 71. — 'The Unicorn', *Observer*, 31 July 1927, p. 24.

[144] Aaron Jaffe, *The Way Things Go: An Essay on the Matter of Second Modernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 2.

anew.[145] Baudelaire's example — the childhood tendency both to personify and burrow into dolls — is oddly paralleled in an aspect of Torquemada's character described by his wife: 'All the things he ordinarily used were apt to take on the qualities of toys; he had a happy way of naming all the common household objects so that each had its temperament, predominantly mischievous or benevolent.'[146] Torquemada, we are told, was not content with words staying in their lanes, and preferred when composing verse to be 'confronted by a haphazard collection of words' rather than a neat one, often using randomly picked Scrabble tiles to achieve this dehierarchisation.[147]

Torquemada certainly equates this call of the word with literary curiosity, often aligning the materiality of his puzzles with reading acts: '[1. Turn over and you'll find me at once] (CATCHWORD).[148] Torquemada's ripped grid beckons the solver to turn the puzzle over and enter a new topsy-turvy dimension. Chapter 1 discussed technological advancements that exposed readers to a combinatorial language system, whether through typewriters, Morse code, sentence diagramming, or alphabet soup. The specific construction of the newspaper puzzle inculcated a similar attention. Torquemada's puzzles merely exaggerate the verbal defamiliarisation already native to newspapers, whose translucent pages so often exposed readers to the incongruity of writing glimpsed backwards, or the sudden juxtaposition of unrelated events.

Crosswords, indeed, often left spaces for jotting, like a playpen for anagrammatical experiment, and inscribing your own solution leaves a trace inversely visible on the following page. Clippings from Empson's crossword collection, discussed in Chapter 4, attest to this readerly behaviour. In Torquemada's puzzles, at every stage the solver is forcibly reminded of the thingness of words. 'Johnny Head-In-Air' and 'The Carpenter' (1928) parody the

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[145] Charles Baudelaire, 'A Philosophy of Toys', in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. by Jonathan Mayne (Da Capo Press, 1964), pp. 197–203 (p. 202). Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 58.
[146] R. C. Mathers, 'Torquemada', in *T112*, p. 8.
[147] ibid, p. 19.
[148] [1a], Torquemada, 'Puzzle No. 381', in *T112*, p. 110.

inattention of crossword solvers through incomplete and distended grids. In Spanish a jigsaw is a *rompecabeza* (literally that which breaks the head): the task is mind-boggling, in a structural sense. In a 1957 Ximenes clue paying tribute to Torquemada, FEAGUE (an archaic verb of whipping) is constructed out of this image of cruciverbal head-smashing: '[26. Makes fellows' heads get a fever, i.e. emulate the earliest Torquemada (6)].'[149] One such solver appears in 'Carte Blanche' (1939) as APATHETIC, a grid left entirely blank, and to be constructed as if a jigsaw by the solver.

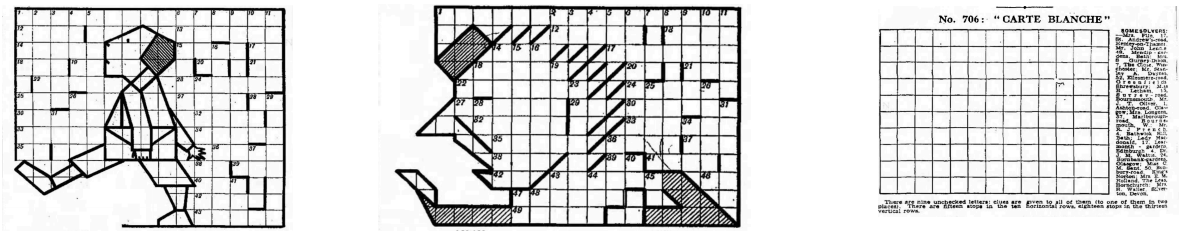

Figure 23: Three self-reflective Torquemada grids in *The Observer*.[150]

Tweaking Keats' equation in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819), Torquemada often seems to speak for his puzzles through his clues: '[13. I am made by art and art itself in truth]' renders ARTIFACT (art i[n] fact), testifying to the provisionality of the text.[151] Daniel Tiffany wonders if 'obscurity, in a literary sense, is itself already an artifact, the glowing remains of a darkness apprehended by language.'[152] It is less a case of 'transient language borrowing and sanctifying the permanence of objects', as Alice Oswald puts it, than the simple fact of objects being liable to change and chance.[153] The crossword reifies imperfectly, but by insisting on unfamiliar disclosures, captures the vibrant qualities of a world for which language is necessarily indirect.

[149] [26a], Ximenes, 'Crossword: 429', *Observer*, 31 March 1957, p. 15.
[150] Left: 'Crossword: 118 — 'Johnny Head-in-Air', *Observer*, 24 June 1928, p. 25. Middle: 'Crossword: 93 — The Carpenter', *Observer*, 1 January 1928, p. 19. Right: 'Crossword: 706 — Carte Blanche', *Observer*, 22 October 1939, p. 16.
[151] [13a], Torquemada, 'Puzzle No. 521', in *T112*, p. 184.
[152] Daniel Tiffany, 'Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity', *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 (2001), pp. 72–98 (p. 93).
[153] Alice Oswald, 'On Behalf of a Pebble', lecture (University of Oxford, 4 March 2021).

iv. 'I made self into poet (9)': Devilled Verse

Rosamond Mathers fondly recalls Torquemada 'drawing marginal decorations in vari-coloured chalks while he brood[ed] on some uninspiring word,' a behaviour that would later be reciprocated by his many solvers, including J. R. R. Tolkien, whose crossword doodles combine solving with ambitious geometric architecture.[154] Torquemada's capacity for rehabilitating even the most 'uninspiring' words to puzzling intrigue was vindicated when Rosamond sifted through more than 30,000 clues for the posthumous *Torquemada: 112 Best Crossword Puzzles* (1942). She was surprised to find singular words 'cropping up fifty times and more' without replicated wordplay: 'it was astonishing how he varied the clue,' she says, noting his gift 'for using words in a sense remote from the intention of their author.' One 'uninspiring word' over which Torquemada certainly 'brood[ed]' (in the avian sense) was OVOID.[155]

7. In shape nothing more than a poet (5)

OVOID is generated by adding O ('nothing') to 'a poet' (OVID). Torquemada concretises the allusion, taking apart and reconstituting a literary object, hatching a new word which refers to eggs, and thereby regeneration. The clue is alive with association, and nudges the heteroglot imagination of the solver one way while its surface inconspicuously reflects on Torquemada's own vexed poetic status. The outcome of this allusion — transformative on the one hand, but on the other hand explicitly non-additive (it adds 'nothing' to Ovid) — is a debate miniaturised within the clue itself.

This section argues that as the cryptic crossword evolved, its clues gradually developed a poetics of ambiguity that subverted the traditional 'modernist' referential economy; rather than plumbing allusive depth into a given line, cryptic clues often used allusion up front to

[154] R. C. Mathers, 'Torquemada', in *T112*, p. 19. See Tolkien's copy of 'Puzzle 9,443', *The Times*, 9 August 1960, <https://museoteca.com/r/en/work/7362/j_r_r_tolkien/the_crossword_puzzle_and_designs_on_the_times/!/> (accessed 18 February 2025).
[155] [7d], Torquemada, 'Puzzle 246', *Observer*, 27 May 1934, p. 27.

divert a reader's attention away from a more material form of associative linguistic logic. The above clue for OVOID usefully illustrates this idea. Some of Torquemada's plain or proto-cryptic clues, as discussed in Section 3, are explicitly engineered to encourage the reader to read widely and beyond the puzzle. In this sense, they match any of the comparable Ovidian references in, say, Eliot or Pound, which use 'nightingale' as a whistle to beckon a reader's attention towards submerged transhistorical affinities and echoes. In this cryptic clue, by contrast, Torquemada's poetic debt is instead declared within the 'surface' of the clue to camouflage a syntactic equation enlisting words and letters rather than canonisation. Though many solvers associated Torquemada with 'Everests of Encyclopaedias' (as *Esquire* put it in 1935), his private 'ideal' (according to Rosamond) was to construct 'puzzles so that a complete solution *could* be arrived at without any work of reference.'[156]

Insofar as cryptic clues evolved teleologically, it was towards a puzzle text which was saturated with allusion but was lexically self-sufficient: the allusion (a mode of play, etymologically) shifting from the library shelf towards the lived experience of language use. As if abiding by his idiom that solvers should beware 'Greeks bearing gifts' in the preface to *TPB*, a clue like '[Urgent cry Socrates gave when he dropped the packing case]' for SOS (SO[crate]S) demands that we suspiciously scan any mysterious packages from literary history.[157] Hence (and echoing Torquemada's ovoid hatchling), a clue such as 'Bacon's correspondent is provocative (4)' can play on a reader's familiarity with philosophical men of letters, while yielding a much simpler double definition, EGGS.

Torquemada's puzzles displayed this allusive strategy with increasing frequency as they evolved from the couplets of *TCR* towards a pre-Ximenean standard of alphabetic mischief. The dictionary, mapping 'unsteady, shaky' tendrils of polysemy, as he would put it in a rhyming clue of 1926, afforded opportunities to reenchant language by drawing attention to

[156] Hartswick, 'Mr Torquemada', p. 46. R. C. Mathers, 'Torquemada', in *T112*, p. 15.
[157] Torquemada, *TPB*, p. 15.

its vibrant multiplicity.[158] Puns abound in Torquemada's puzzles, often reflexively describing the hermeneutic acts required to solve them, from '[19. Solutions in a particular hobby]' (BATHS) to '[34. Sentence that isn't really what it sounds] (LIFER).[159] Apparently 'high' references to literary predecessors could mask more straightforwardly alphabetic solutions, from '[9. This was prisoner's favourite part of Dunbar]' (UNBAR) to '[13. The author of *The Waste Land* is almost one in a way]' (TOILER).[160] Recursively applying one synonym to another, Torquemada could redeem ugly sequences of letters — the necessarily evil of ambitious visual grid designs — as apparently intentional creative choices, whether in '[1. Mad!] (ENAS, a crazed version of SANE), '[48/50. Arranges disarranged] (SS/ET, having unset SETS), or '[38/37. Backward forward]' (EP/TR, reversing PERT).[161] These were all specimens of the 'tangled clue' (CLEU) that could teach us 'What poetry really / Is', as he put it in a set of versified clues of 1928.[162]

With persistent regularity, the topoi for trying out these verbal convolutions were poetic. One exemplar clue in his *Puzzle Book* concretises this claim to bardhood, setting up '[I made self into poet]' to give (John) MASEFIELD anagrammatically.[163] ANODE is syllabically divided so that it could define a poem written by Faraday; Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB) is evoked by her lack of need 'To change these letters on her lingerie' after being wed (she had been Elizabeth Barrett Barrett before marriage).[164] Though Torquemada's 'Oxford Book' had disregarded the canon beyond the turn of the twentieth century, his puzzles attest to a reader acutely engaged in contemporary verse. 'Fourteen Americans' (1930), a patchwork crossword combining cryptic clues with find-the-poet quotations, lifted lines from Moore's 'The Monkeys'

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[158] [22d], Torquemada, 'Crossword: 12 — The Lion', 13 June 1926, p. 22.
[159] [19d], Torquemada, 'Crossword: 80 — A Runcible Cat', 2 October 1927, p. 25. [34a], Torquemada, 'VII', in *TPB*, p. 33.
[160] [9d], Torquemada, 'I', in *TPB*, p. 20. [13a], Torquemada, 'Puzzle No. 523', in *T112*, p. 186.
[161] [1d], Torquemada, 'Crossword: 35 — Mrs Porter and Her Daughter', *Observer*, 21 November 1926, p. 27. [48/50a] Torquemada, 'Crossword: 100. — Torquemada', *Observer*, 19 February 1928, p. 25. [38/37d] Torquemada, 'Crossword: 102 — Mother Goose', *Observer*, 4 March 1928, p. 25.
[162] [9d/22a], Torquemada, 'Crossword: 93 — Modern Love', *Observer*, 5 February 1928, p. 22.
[163] Torquemada, *TPB*, p. 13.
[164] [25a], Torquemada, 'Puzzle 6', in *TPB*, p. 30. [29a], Torquemada, 'The Black Mill', in *TCR*, p. 23.

and Eliot's 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales'.[165] Inversely, grids like 'Stanzas' (1929) sequenced their clues as if free verse to simulate quasi-modernist diction:

1. Half a brace of shakes	CONQUASSATE
2. Piercing in sound	ARGUTE
3. A riding dromedary	DOOD
4. rev A sandy mound	ENUD
5. Keen in the Land of Cakes	SNELL
6. In Alice blue, but not in Tenniel hairy	CATERPILLAR

The ABCBAC rhyme scheme of the clue-stanza requires that we consider the clues not as separate hermeneutic entities, but complementary parts of one unified system.[166] Thematically, sense operates continuously across each enjambement and, by extension, the bars of the grid that divided component solutions. Metonymically, the networked stanza comprises words derived from Latin (*conquassate*, *argute*), Bengali (*dood*), Scots (*dune*), and refers openly to the hookah-smoking caterpillar of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. DOOD, derived from a mistransliteration of the Bengali *uṭ*, is paired with ENUD, a reversal of the word *dune*, thus achieving a reader-activated rhyme through the manipulation of errant philology. Nodding at the 'camels, galled, sore-footed, refractory' of Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' (1927), Torquemada's palindromic camel actuates a poetic effect precisely through its refractory treatment in language.[167]

The notion of syntactic error — like Eliot's camels, etymologically error is a mode of wandering — was enacted in 'Printer's Devilry' puzzles composed by Afrit, crossword setter for *The Listener* between 1932–1948. Alastair Ferguson Ritchie (1890–1954), the second 'great influence' on Ximenes, selected his pseudonym after a demon of Arabian mythology which happened to begin with his initials. Afrit believed in a difficult (necessarily, as *The Listener* offered a prize for each correct submission) but legislated contract between writer and reader: 'I need not mean what I say, but I must say what I mean.'[168] Benevolent

[165] Torquemada, 'Crossword: 210 — Fourteen Americans', *Observer*, 6 April 1930, p. 24.
[166] Torquemada, 'Crossword: 164 — Stanzas', *Observer*, 19 May 1929, p. 19.
[167] Eliot, 'Journey of the Magi', l. 6, in *TSEP*, I, p. 101
[168] Afrit, *Armchair Crosswords* (Frederick Warne & Co., 1949), p. 10.

misdirection is encouraged, but misstatement is transgressive. Setters were to exploit the poetics of lexical association to their fullest, but never overstep into unintelligibility. A 'Printer's Devilry' clue operates by a mechanism of omission, as if overrealising Pound's dictum that poetry should trim its connective tissue to allow the reader to calibrate their own responses. An example from Azed requires the insertion of INSTATE into 'A galling remark — an effective riposte is difficult' to form 'Against a telling remark, an effective riposte is difficult.'[169] The sentence is repunctuated to achieve the effect. Like so-called 'garden path' sentences (a term coined by Charles Hockett in 1961), in which syntactic expectations are weaponised to force re-reading, the form thrives on glossing innocuous sentences with hermeneutic possibility.[170]

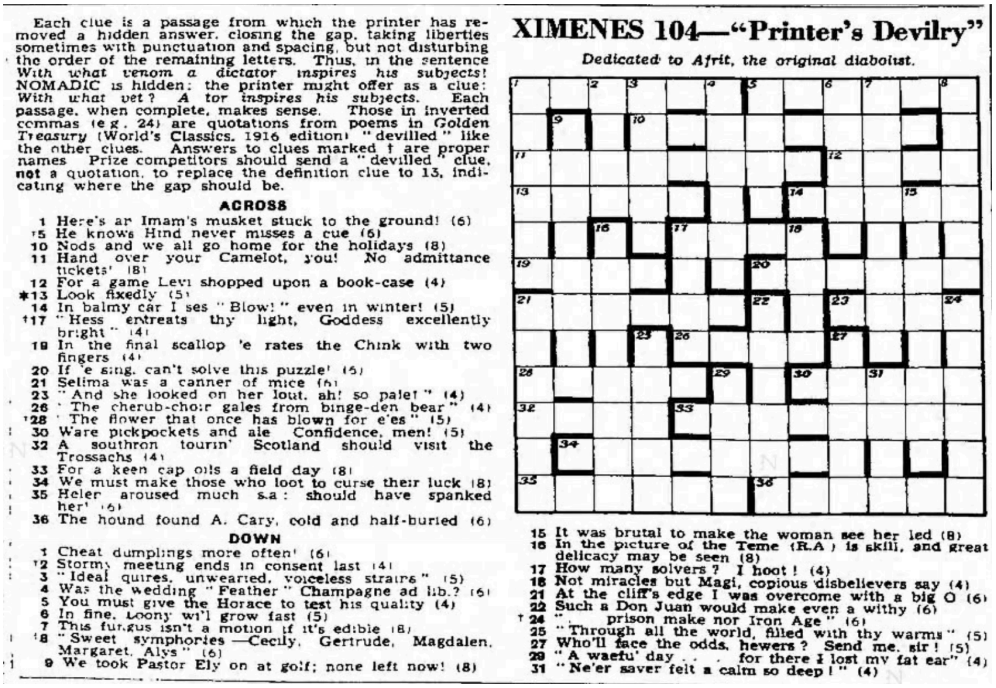
In Afrit's introduction to *Armchair Crosswords* (1949), words are subdivided into 'those which are hard work for you' and 'those which are hard work for the composer'.[171] Crosswords ought to be the domain of the latter class, 'old friends' over which 'the composer has taken a bit of trouble to catch them bending in some way [...] When you do recognise it, it is all the more fun.' The principle is one of reenchantment: words atrophied in common usage, calcified into algebraic usage, can be liberated and personified through unexpected cryptic treatment. Tellingly, Afrit's descriptions of clue types often enlist algebra to clarify their object. Although '$a + b = x$' suffices in explanatory language, the clue only really comes alive once it is populated with semiotic variables: '[7. There may be no reason why a heroine of fiction should follow an American writer, but she'll probably produce rhyme (7)]' (POE + TESS = POETESS).[172] One comparable classic cryptic clue, now so hackneyed as to be clichéd, relies on spotting that POETIC is 'quote work' (CITE + OP) backwards.

Afrit's clues often evoked poetry to draw attention to the verbal felicity of their own

[169] Azed, 'No. 1,888: Printer's Devilry', *Guardian*, 30 July 2008.
[170] Charles Hockett, 'Grammar for the Hearer', *Structures of Language and its Mathematical Aspects*, ed. by Roman Jakobson, 12 (1961), pp. 220–37 (p. 223).
[171] Afrit, *Armchair*, p. 9.
[172] [7d], Afrit, 'Crossword 1', in *Armchair*, p. 2.

construction, and the formal constraints under which language could nonetheless shimmy free. Clues like '[11. Six geese will supply the interpretation (8)]' for EXEGESIS (with 'supply' ambiguously operating as a link word and an adverbial anagram indicator), or '[4. Mince-pies and poetry? Well, they certainly do occur (8)]' for EPISODES (pies* + odes), delight in reimagining standard poetic units in unconventional new forms.[173] Conversely, idiomatic language in the form of sayings or nursery rhymes could provide a scaffolding for using cryptic algebra to dealgebrise highly familiar language: '[6. He's a jolly good twister, and so say all of us! (6)]' produces WEAVER (a punning nod to the 'text' of the poet), while '[28. The result of employing too many cooks. It brings your heart into your mouth (5)]' stirs up THROB, an indirect anagram of *broth* indicated by the idiom of spoiling.[174]

Ximenes, whose *On the Art of the Crossword* (1966) codified many of the syntactic strategies in relation to Afrit's paradigmatic decree, also composed a 'Printer's Devilry' puzzle in *The Observer* in tribute to 'the original diabolist' in 1949:



XIMENES 104—"Printer's Devilry"

Dedicated to Afrit, the original diabolist.

Each clue is a passage from which the printer has removed a hidden answer, closing the gap, taking liberties sometimes with punctuation and spacing, but not disturbing the order of the remaining letters. Thus, in the sentence *With what venom a dictator inspires his subjects!* NOMADIC is hidden; the printer might offer as a clue: *With what vet? A tor inspires his subjects.* Each passage, when complete, makes sense. Those in inverted commas (e.g. 24) are quotations from poems in *Golden Treasury* (World's Classics, 1916 edition) "devilled" like the other clues. Answers to clues marked † are proper names. Prize competitors should send a "devilled" clue, **not** a quotation, to replace the definition clue to 13, indicating where the gap should be.

ACROSS

1 Here's an Imam's musket stuck to the ground! (6)
†5 He knows Hind never misses a cue (6)
10 Nods and we all go home for the holidays (8)
11 Hand over your Camelot, you! No admittance tickets! (8)
12 For a game Levi shopped upon a book-case (4)
*13 Look fixedly (5)
14 In balmy car I ses "Blow!" even in winter! (5)
†17 "Hess entreats thy light, Goddess excellently bright" (4)
18 In the final scallop 'e rates the Chink with two fingers (4)
20 If 'e sing, can't solve this puzzle! (5)
21 Selima was a canner of mice (6)
23 "And she looked on her lout, ah! so pale!" (4)
26 'The cherub-choir gales from binge-den bear" (4)
†28 'The flower that once has blown for e'es" (5)
30 Ware pickpockets and ale Confidence, men! (5)
32 A southron tourin' Scotland should visit the Trossachs (4)
33 For a keen cap oils a field day (8)
34 We must make those who loot to curse their luck (8)
35 Helen aroused much s.a: should have spanked her! (6)
36 The hound found A. Cary, cold and half-buried (6)

DOWN

1 Cheat dumplings more often! (6)
†2 Stormy meeting ends in consent last (4)
3 "Ideal quires, unwearied, voiceless strains" (5)
4 Was the wedding "Feather" Champagne ad lib.? (6)
5 You must give the Horace to test his quality (4)
6 In fine, Loony will grow fast (5)
7 This fungus isn't a motion if it's edible (8)
†8 "Sweet symphories—Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen, Margaret, Alys" (6)
9 We took Pastor Ely on at golf; none left now! (8)
15 It was brutal to make the woman see her led (8)
16 In the picture of the Teme (R.A.) is skill, and great delicacy may be seen (8)
17 How many solvers? I hoot! (4)
18 Not miracles but Magi, copious disbelievers say (4)
21 At the cliff's edge I was overcome with a big O (6)
22 Such a Don Juan would make even a withy (6)
†24 "... prison make nor Iron Age" (6)
25 "Through all the world, filled with thy warms" (5)
27 Who'll face the odds, hewers? Send me, sir! (5)
29 "A waefu' day . . . for there I lost my fat ear" (4)
31 "Ne'er saver felt a calm so deep!" (4)

Figure 24: Ximenes, '104. — Printer's Devilry', *Observer*, 29 May 1949, p. 8.[175]

[173] [11a], Afrit, 'Crossword 7', in *Armchair*, p. 14. [4d], 'Crossword 12', in *Armchair*, p. 24.
[174] [11a], Afrit, 'Crossword 1', in *Armchair*, p. 2. [28d], Afrit, 'Crossword 2', in *Armchair*, p. 4.
[175] Ximenes, '104. — Printer's Devilry', *Observer*, 29 May 1949, p. 8.

Notably, the clues extend beyond prosodic fragments, also including 'devilled' lines from poems in *Golden Treasury of Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*, a 1916 anthology. In a step beyond Torquemada's 'Oxford Book' puzzles, Ximenes doctors the original lines of poetry in order to yield secondary meanings, as if taking too seriously the task of the interpreter. The passages chosen typically attest to the grid itself. '[24. "… Prison make nor Iron Age" (6)]' deviates from Richard Lovelace's 'To Althea, from Prison' to yield BARSAC (a type of wine): together, they form the original 'Stone walls do not a prison make / Nor iron bars a Cage'. The altered quotation gestures at an anachronism literalised in the act of its solution; the 'bars' and 'Cage' imagery supplement the puzzle itself, constituting standard cruciverbal idiom for a grid's bold dividers.

Further poetic clues by Ximenes spy the opportunity for constructive misbehaviour in lines from the canon. '["Never saver felt a calm so deep" (4)]' trims a line from Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' to conceal WINE. '[23. "And she looked at her lout. ah! so pale!" (4)]' requires VERB to form a line from Thomas Campbell's 'The Maid of Neidpath', as if parsing through a sentence diagram in reverse. Eliot's 'Magi' return in '[18. Not miracles but Magi, copious disbelievers say (4)]', the answer for which is URIM (a Hebrew emblem of divine light). The clue speculates on distinguishing divinity from trickery, and ultimately provides an answer that vindicates the idea of providence. The solver, reversing the 'devilment' of a quotation, regains paradise in miniature. Akin to intelligent design, Ximenes endorses the idea that a thoughtfully constructed world requires both rational and faithful responsiveness: '[If 'e sing, can't solve this puzzle! (6)] needs ARGUES to confirm 'I fear guessing can't solve this puzzle', switching the subject pronouns to make a universal hypothesis delicately personal.

Ximenean regulation of cryptic syntax effectively encouraged the free association of ludolinguistics to adopt a framework; to borrow the terms of Caillois' scheme for play

discussed in the 'Introduction', Ximenes preferred *ludus* to *paidia*.[176] Though the embrace of rules has on the one hand to buttress the cryptic crossword against lapsing into an unplayable game, the Ximenean scaffolding has also shored up its function as an alternative mode of poetic production.

Cryptic clues often subverted the referential economy of twentieth-century writing (with its lateral synthesis of allusions high and low), instead using allusion as a means of distracting from a complex network of vertical semantic associations on the level of individual lexical units. Poets of this period are, after all, often touted for their interest in etymology as a means of tracking the unpredictable lineage of thought, a kind of magic trick for personifying the units of a poem.[177] The period's cryptic setters shared this interest, but crucially spied an opportunity to perform a kind of disobedient etymology to weave new ancestries for unsuspecting verbal components. That is to say that although the cryptic crossword emerged in dialogue with homologous forms of combinatorial writing, it quickly developed its own framework for reenchanting otherwise standard language, ultimately transferring this logic from the literary canon to the word itself. Like Joyce's belief in the 'ineluctable modality of the visible', cryptic setters grappled with the physicality of language in order to grant readers access to this modality in even the most quotidian words.[178]

[176] Caillois, *Les Jeux et Les Hommes*, p. 23.
[177] See David-Antoine Williams, *The Life of Words: Etymology and Modern Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Victor P. H. Li, 'Philology and Power: Ezra Pound and the Regulation of Language', *boundary 2*, 15.1 (Autumn 1986), pp. 187–210.
[178] Joyce, *Ulysses* (Shakespeare and Company, 1922), p. 37.

3. Thinking of the Key: Playing Dead with T. S. Eliot

Introduction

> Egyptian skies were ominous
> When Agamemnon went to bed,
> And bat-faced babies upside down
> Did jig-saw puzzles in his head.
>
> Francis Cole, 'Sweeney Furens' (1934)

In 1934, *The Harvard Advocate* published a series of parodies of T. S. Eliot, who had newly taken up a teaching post for its undergraduates.[1] Following 'Irascible Ballade' (in which the speaker yawns at 'Eliot's wails') and a *Harvard Crimson* editorial which redirected the river Charles into *The Waste Land*, 'Sweeney Furens' was aimed at 'Eliot fans [who would] appreciate it after puzzling through the "Sweeney" poems.'[2] Like the interiorised 'game' nested within Agamemnon, Eliot's supposed puzzlingness recurs within the parody. Cole cannily adjusts Eliot's 'bats with baby faces' which, in draft material for *The Waste Land*, morphed into an

> Infant hydrocephalous, who sat
> At a bridge end, by a dried-up water course
> And fiddled (with a knot tied in one string).[3]

Cole's parody reimagines the 'knot tied in one string' as a 'jigsaw puzzle', and thereby ventures an alternative model of puzzlement. The 'knot tied in one string' could stand for the elliptical convolutions of singular lines of poetry, whereas a 'jigsaw puzzle' relies on the global combination of disparate parts.

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[1] Francis Cole, 'Sweeney Furens', *Harvard Advocate* (April 1924), p. 27.
[2] 'Harvard Literati Discover T. S. Eliot', *Daily Illini*, 8 May 1934, p. 2.
[3] Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. by Valerie Eliot (Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 75.

Though Helen Vendler is right to connect this 'large-skulled child' to the figure of a kingfisher, it may also echo T. E. Hulme's 'The Embankment' in 1912 (a poem that Eliot, after all, considered one of 'two or three of the most beautiful short poems in the language').[4] Hulme's poem ventriloquises a 'fallen gentleman' at the side of the Thames considering the ecstasy discoverable 'in finesse of fiddles' and its connection with 'the very stuff of poesy.'[5] Desiccating Hulme's riverscape into a 'dried-up water course', Eliot appropriates these 'fiddles' for the acoustically adjacent 'riddles' of knotting that they evoke.

This chapter seeks to explore why Eliot was so naturally comparable with puzzles in responses to his work, and furthermore to understand why such comparisons have been trivialised in critical accounts of his poetics. Querying Robert Crawford's notion in the introduction to *Young Eliot* (2015) that Eliot's verse shared little with his beloved puzzles, this chapter considers how puzzles represented for Eliot both a way of rehearsing both theological impasses and how poetry might hurdle them.[6] I combine close reading of major works with unpublished manuscripts and correspondence to show that puzzlement was not an impediment to Eliot's poetics, but one of its sought preconditions.

Section 1 considers Eliot's interest in the card game Patience. Eliot's fixation with Patience was fodder for contemporary mythology, being, as one of his housekeepers put it, conspicuously more prominent than his writing: 'No, no, I've known many a writing man, and he's no writing man, Mr Eliot. He's a very holy man [...] it'll be playing patience I've only seen him doing.' Building on accounts of his obsession in the newly available Emily Hale correspondence, this section considers Patience as a resonant and versatile model for verse: card games like Patience simultaneously inherited older cartomantic networks, of the kind Madame Sosostris practises, while also putting randomness centre stage, and as such, was a natural framework for the shuffling whims of poetry.

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[4] Helen Vendler, '*The Waste Land* Revisited', in *Yale Review*, 1 December 1990.
[5] Hulme, 'The Embankment', in *Ripostes of Ezra Pound, Whereto are appended the Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme* (Stephen Swift, 1912), p. 63.
[6] Ellen Cross, quoted in Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 278.

Section 2 explores the *Fireside Magazine*, a scrapbook magazine written in Eliot's youth that contains multiple 'Puzzell' sections. Beyond evidencing Eliot's juvenile engagement with contemporary wordplay conventions, these puzzles exhibit an early knack for the generative opportunities raised by using combinatorial logic in application to poetry. This section also suggests the earliest extant example of Eliot's famous process of revision.

Section 3 contextualises these puzzling consideration within Eliot's broader oeuvre, analysing puzzle mechanisms and references in Eliot's canonical poems and lesser-studied works of theory. Stimulated by the natural encryption of a fallen world, Eliot was drawn to puzzles as a means of recapturing the recalcitrance of the material reality in miniature. Finally, Section 4 considers Eliot's own fondness for cryptic crosswords, examining archival puzzles he owned in light of the quasi-ritualised status they held in his compositional routine, thereby considering their influence on his approach to poetry's ability to categorise the external world.

i. 'With a Little Patience': Eliot's New Deal



Figure 25: Gerald Festus Kelly, *T. S. Eliot* (1962)[7]

[7] Gerald Festus Kelly, *T. S. Eliot*, 1962, oil on canvas, 114cm x 94cm, National Portrait Gallery Collection, United States.

Asked by W. H. Auden why he made a nightly ritual of the card game Patience, T. S. Eliot responded: 'Well, I suppose it's because it's the nearest thing to being dead.' In Stephen Spender's original retelling of the encounter in *Eliot* (1975), which triangulates the remark to the early 1950s, Eliot's tone was 'gravely' reflective after a few moments of observed silence.[8] In later restagings of the anecdote, however, it has taken on an oddly loose character. In Peter Ackroyd's *T. S. Eliot* (1984), the comment — offered either 'severely' or 'ironically' — evidences a lifestyle wilfully 'containing as few surprises as possible.'[9] Tony Sharpe (1991) and John Gordon (1995) both conclude that Eliot took to Patience for its 'termitic numbness' as a kind of 'anaesthesia' for existential hardships following the death of Vivien in 1947.[10] In Joseph Maddrey's *Simply Eliot* (2018), which wrongly attributes the conversation to Spender, rather than Auden, Eliot mutters it in a 'despairing' fit of pessimism.[11] In Robert Crawford's *Eliot After The Waste Land* (2022), the quip attests to the 'bleak' state of Eliot's private life.[12] Reviewing Crawford, Anthony Domestico (2022) further transfigures the retort into a 'campy' response to Auden's impertinence.[13] The war of descriptors waged over Eliot's hobby is in some sense appropriate. Questing after ludic deadness, after some kind of 'extinction of personality' as he had put it in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in 1919, Eliot's remark has enjoyed something of a restless afterlife in the hands of biographers.[14]

Eliot clearly did not object to the contemporary image of him as a Patience player. In a portrait he purchased for Valerie in 1962 by his friend Sir Gerald Festus Kelly, a deck is spread across a baize-felted card table in front of him. Eliot's books, including a full set of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, adorn the shelf behind him. In a commentary on the painting, Niall MacMonagle lists the items of Eliot's 'life's work and interests: his own poetry volumes, novels,

[8] Stephen Spender, *Eliot* (William Collins, 1975), p. 240.
[9] Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2018), p. 278.
[10] Tony Sharpe, *T. S. Eliot: A Literary Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), p. 38. John Gordon, 'T. S. Eliot's Head and Heart', *English Literary History*, 62.4 (Winter 1995), pp. 979–1000 (p. 993).
[11] Joseph Maddrey, *Simply Eliot* (Simply Charly, 2018), p. 71.
[12] Robert Crawford, *Eliot After The Waste Land* (Jonathan Cape, 2022), p. 910.
[13] Anthony Domestico, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Grown Man', *Baffler*, 1 September 2022.
[14] Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (Harcourt Brace, 1975), pp. 37–45 (p. 40).

books on art and artists.'[15] In the hierarchy of perspective, however, the literary is subordinated to the ludic: the cards are in motion, unaligned and scattered in dynamic piles, while the books rest inertly in the background.

When he made his comment about Patience to Auden, he was sharing a flat in Carlyle Mansions with John Hayward, whose reported tetchiness as a housemate was trying another kind of patience altogether. Mary Hutchinson thought their kinship bewildering, speculating that Eliot sought to 'expiate his guilt by shouldering a burden; perhaps the pain of living with an often irritable [Hayward] came from a masochistic need.'[16] Hayward certainly shared Hutchinson's estimation of asceticism in Eliot's lifestyle, nicknaming his bedroom 'the confessional,' sparsely dressed with 'one bare bulb,' 'an ebony crucifix over the single bed,' and cruciform wooden panelling.[17] When considerable royalties trickled in after the debut of *The Cocktail Party* in 1949, Eliot's only concession to Hayward's interior design agenda was to upgrade his bulb from 60 to 100 watts.[18] Visitors to Eliot's quarters remarked on its 'spartan, almost monastic taste,' and were warned by his French housekeeper Madame Amory: '*C'est le bureau de Monsieur Eliot. Il est un saint.*'[19] Another housekeeper, Ellen Cross, would record: 'No, no, I've known many a writing man, and he's no writing man, Mr. Eliot. He's a very holy man [...] it'll be playing patience I've only seen him doing.'[20]

There is, I suggest, more than a little aptness in the observations drawn by Amory and Cross. Patience is so named because of the virtuous suffering required to play it. It is an exposure to difficulty, rather than the kind of anaesthetic lapse from it diagnosed by Sharpe and Gordon. Patience games are played alone (hence one popular variant, *solitaire*), without intercession or distraction. A player makes progress through 'pairing' and 'discarding' cards.

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[15] Niall MacMonagle, 'What Lies Beneath: *Portrait of T. S. Eliot* by Sir Gerald Festus Kelly', *Independent Ireland*, 31 October 2016.
[16] Mary Hutchinson, quoted in Crawford, *Eliot After The Waste Land*, p. 909.
[17] John Malcolm Brinnin, *Sextet* (André Deutsch, 1982), p. 253.
[18] T. S. Matthews, *Great Tom: Notes Towards the Definition of T. S. Eliot* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), p. 158.
[19] Amory, quoted in John Smart, *Tarantula's Web: John Hayward, T. S. Eliot and Their Circle* (Michael Russell, 2013), p. 194.
[20] Ellen Cross, quoted in Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 278.

Sorting the deck into a pattern before discarding it, mandala-like, is at once a time sink and a test of resolve. The pattern is predetermined, but its calibration is spontaneous. The guiding structural condition of Patience is that it resists conforming to — or converging on — a guaranteed outcome. As David Parlett summates in his *History of Card Games* (1991), 'the excitement of a given Patience lies in whether or not it will 'come out': it would be dull or boring if you knew you could always reach the required finishing position.'[21] Crucially, Parlett notes, Patience necessitates 'closed elements.' In other words, the player is not able to see all the cards at the start, hence an inbuilt mechanism for revelation, for dawning discovery. Playing Patience thus requires patience in a specifically virtuous sense: forbearance and endurance even in the face of adverse and opaque circumstances.

Patience was one still point in Eliot's turning world, conspicuously prominent enough to eclipse literary matters in his own housekeeper's understanding of his profession. In his biography of Hayward, Smart itemises Eliot's typical daily routine at Carlyle Mansions:

> Each morning he left at 6:30 for early mass at St Stephens' and knelt, winter and summer, in prayer on the cold stone floor. He then returned home, ate a large breakfast, did the *Times* crossword and said good morning to Hayward.[22]

Eliot could then be found playing Patience at any time of the day, often poring over the deck late into the night. The habit, however, predated his cohabitation with Hayward in Chelsea. Beyond playing, Eliot kept abreast of developments in the field: in one letter to Lady Richmond in 1949, Eliot shared his fondness for Spyder, a variant named only earlier in the same year.[23] In 1933, Eliot wrote to Emily Hale to tell her a variant he had learned from Ada Eliot Sheffield, and again in 1936 to share that a 'lonely old lady' taught him 'two quite good new games' much to her elderly delight.[24] In 1942, Eliot played blackjack for the first time, and

[21] David Parlett, *A History of Card Games* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 152.
[22] Smart, *Tarantula's Web*, p. 197.
[23] Eliot, letter to Lady Richmond, quoted in *TSEP*, I, p. 808.
[24] Eliot, letter to Emily Hale (11 May 1936), in *Eliot-Hale Correspondence*, ed. by John Haffenden (2022), <https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters>. Hereafter *EHC*.

thought it 'enough to defray most of my expenses at poker.'[25] In Italian, *pazienza* also refers to the construction of jigsaws; in a letter to Doris Tandy in 1936, Eliot recommended a diet of 'jigsaw puzzles' and 'Miss Milligan', a Patience variant venerated by aficionados for its 'amazing tendency to enable complete recovery from seemingly hopeless conditions,' as if simulating a redemption narrative in miniature.[26]

In a letter to Hayward in 1937, he confessed: 'I enjoyed last evening very much and as usual, but I think I drank too much of your whisky, because when I came back I played a game of Patience, and I don't do that at that hour when I am completely rational.'[27] Eliot's correspondence with Hale documents how often his Patience lapsed out of virtue in this regard. Eliot confides in Hale about having returned 'home and read Don Chapman and played patience until midnight' and often ended his letters by shrugging that he only had enough energy to 'play a game of Patience and go to bed [...] I feel rather washed out,' as he put it in one missive.[28] Notably, in later life, he had a similarly addictive relationship with the board game Scrabble. Valerie Eliot recalls his wont to 'stay at home and drink Drambuie and eat cheese and play Scrabble,' even leaving her billets-doux spelled in the tiles during the day.'[29] One 1950 letter to Hale speaks of playing Ombre (a variant of Patience) over 'claret and cheesecake'; a month earlier, sailing to Cape Town with Geoffrey Faber, the friends interspersed their entertainment by 'porpoises and flying fish' with 'considerable amounts of gin [and] a great many games of patience.'[30]

Eliot's Patience, however, was demonstrably more than a game dealt out in the throes of convivial tipsiness or morbid sobriety. Dealt at the crossroads of spiritual doctrine and secular contemplation, Patience could offer a little model of the universe, shuffling and shifting disparate parts into contingent wholes. In its Biblical formulation, Patience is not

[25] Eliot, letter to Hale (19 January 1942), in *EHC*.
[26] Eliot, letter to Polly Tandy (18 February 1936), in *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–38*, p. 1278. Peter Arnold, *The Complete Book of Card Games* (Octopus, 2010), p. 236.
[27] Eliot, letter to Hayward (18 January 1937), in *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–38*, p. 1236.
[28] Eliot, letter to Hale (29 May 1934), in *EHC*.
[29] Lorien Kite, 'Keeper of T. S. Eliot's Poetic Flame', *Financial Times,* 16 November 2012.
[30] Eliot, letter to Hale (4 March 1932), in *EHC*.

merely about the passive endurance of externally generated misfortune, but instead the active embracing of God's unknowable will. Appreciating God's patience is not only a demonstration of faith, but the opportunity of hope to redeem suffering. One ought to be 'patient in tribulation' (Romans 12:12), 'wait patiently for Him' (Psalms 37:3), 'have patience [so] you may receive what is promised' (Proverbs 16:32), and 'preach [with] complete patience (2 Timothy 4:2). God, the object of this mandated patience, is in turn 'patient towards you' (2 Peter 3:9), a 'God of patience' (Romans 15:5), and 'abounds in patient love' (Numbers 14:18).

Patience games rely on the reconciliation of a teleological system (cards in order, patterned into sequence) with a dysteleological game mechanic where playing well doesn't guarantee success. It is, in this regard, a postlapsarian game, set at the interface of intelligent design and fallen randomness. Eliot might have preferred to play the game 'at that hour when [he was] completely rational,' but the essence of the game is its exposure to elements that defy rational treatment. Being drunk on whisky is no handicap; indeed, like Michel de Montaigne's fondness for subjects that rendered him 'befuddled [with] natural drunkenness,' the head-spinning recalcitrance of essaying Patience ensures that the game never goes stale.[31]

The defining feature of the game mitigates against deadening familiarity by laminating each card with new and always unique interrelations. Patience was, after all, originally a cartomantic game favoured for its generously randomisable structure for generating prophecies. The wide-ranging variants of Patience, between which Eliot hopped with ease during his life, are each individuated by 'imaginative layouts or tableaux which act as a workspace for the partial arrangements of cards,' as Parlett puts it.[32] Each format stages a process of haphazard divination, of kings bumping into queens and of witches dolling out fates and fortunes tethered to numeric values.

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[31] Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. by Donald Frame (Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 610.
[32] Parlett, *Card Games*, p. 124.

Suggestively, the earliest extant references to Patience in 1783 occurred 'within a few years of the invention of card layouts for cartomancy,' and collections as late as Mary Whitmore-Jones' *Games of Patience* (1895) were issued with the exclusive selling point of 'affording young ladies a glimpse of their future destiny.'[33] In the 1783 edition of *Das neue Königliche L'Hombre-Spiel*, 'patience' is listed synonymously with 'cabale', a cognate of 'cabal' and 'cabalistic' in English that survives in a suite of Scandinavian languages in which patience is referred to as *Kabal*.[34] In French, by contrast, the game is synonymous with *réussite*, meaning success or a good outcome, and was defined in Émile Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1877) as 'a combination of cards by which superstitious persons try [...] to divine the success of an undertaking.'[35] A subsidiary, alchemical definition notes that French *patience* was also *la pierre philosophale* — the philosopher's stone — famed for metallurgic transformation and the potential for immortality: of transfiguration, of living death.

Eliot's Patience was a game about imaginative patterning; a game with constantly evolving formats; a game fallen from a richly allegorical heritage; a game about wrestling order from chaos without the guarantee of it staying that way; a game plumbed with networks of relational signification; a game populated by characters in ever-changing consortium; a game about how things don't always fit together, and how surprisingly they do. Patience, in the era Eliot played it, was undergoing a live process of radical transformation as it transitioned from one symbolic tradition into another. Codified cartomancy, of the kind Eliot brought to life most prominently with Madame Sosostris in *The Waste Land*, was being dehierarchised and fragmented, reshuffled for a new deal: a model of play based on the double labour of 'pairing' and 'discarding,' of fugitive and contingent interrelation.

Rowan Williams has evoked the metaphor of puzzles to argue that both poetry and faith avail themselves of disparate elements shocking us with flashes of astonishing congruity:

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[33] Mary Whitmore-Jones, *Games of Patience, 2nd series* (L. Upcott Gill, 1895), p. 9.
[34] Parlett, *Card Games*, p. 128.
[35] *réussite* (n.); *patience* (n.), in Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1872–1877).

'We cannot rationally predict or organise or guarantee [...] The fact of representation in our language points us towards a dimension that systematically excludes final expression.'[36] For Williams, language is therefore a site for understanding the world as a 'puzzle', 'a constantly regenerating act of faith that the sheer connectedness of sounds will enlarge what we understand' even if it resists logic. The puzzle-solver relationship is a little human model, perhaps, of the subject's troubled relation to a *deus absconditus*, an absent Father. Games are not merely a response to a difficult world but the form this difficulty takes in the imagination.

In 'Fragment of a Prologue' (1924), one of two scenes for the ultimately abandoned *Sweeney Agonistes* project, Eliot foregrounds Patience at the outset. A contemporaneous sketch by Vivien Eliot entitled 'Felice at the Card Table' (1924) is constructed around 'a mad kind of Bridge' which, coupled with 'a *little* whisky' (in a manner proleptic of Eliot's later card-addled inebriation) 'whip[s them] up into a kind of frenzy in which they develop the most witty conservation [...] with several meanings.'[37] If Bridge relies on leveraging interpersonal intuition, on the commonwealth of deductive reasoning between intelligent partners, then Patience is its solitary opposite. Eliot's introductory stage direction specifies that Doris, a prostitute, is 'playing patience' on the stage. The opening lines, a circular conversation between Doris and Dusty, herald a model of interaction that is utterly desiccated, with wit crowded out by whip-lashing reiteration:

DUSTY: How about Pereira?
DORIS: What about Pereira?
I don't care.
DUSTY: You don't care!
Who pays the rent?
DORIS: Yes he pays the rent
DUSTY: Well some men don't and some men do
Some men don't and you know who
DORIS: You can have Pereira
DUSTY: What about Pereira?[38]

[36] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 137.
[37] Vivien Eliot, 'Felice at the Card Table', quoted in *TSEP*, I, p. 808.
[38] Eliot, 'Fragment of a Prologue', ll. 1–5, in *TSEP*, I, p. 117.

The dialogue is daisychained, constructed around rhyming, replication, and metrical incompleteness. Doris and Dusty require one another to make sense of their conversation, and yet their conversation only progresses insofar as it goes around in a circle. They talk like they're playing Patience: they pair up and discard themselves in the act of essentially saying the same thing again and again.

Even the rhymes that seem to move onwards, like 'do' and 'who', broker an implicit knowledge that is already shared between them, and slip from direct action to referential uncertainty. Midway through the scene, Doris announces that she will begin to 'cut the cards for tonight,' initiating a sequence of prophecies based on the luck of the draw:

DUSTY: Yes I know you've a touch with the cards
What comes next?
DORIS: What comes next. It's the six
DUSTY: 'A quarrel. An estrangement. Separation of friends.'
DORIS: Here's the two of spades.
DUSTY: The *two of spades!*
THAT'S THE COFFIN!!
DORIS: THAT'S THE COFFIN?
Oh good heavens what'll I do?
Just before a party too
DUSTY: Well it needn't be yours, it may mean a friend.
DORIS: No it's mine. I'm sure it's mine.
I dreamt of weddings all last night.[39]

Doris is anxious about the import of randomly selected cards, and their rhymes of significance with her own past and future. Dreaming of weddings, and fearful of separations, Doris plays a game of rhyme with Dusty, drawn into repetition and inviting its reciprocation with every line. Reverberating refrains bridge the two speakers, at once identical and differentiated with punctuation. '?' becomes '.' and '!!' becomes '?': puzzles become statements, statements become puzzles. Denied the prospect of true pairing in an emotional, specifically matrimonial sense, Doris lives out a parody of affinity with Dusty, at once the duplicative Echo and the Narcissus trapped by reflection.

[39] Eliot, 'Fragment of a Prologue', ll. 67–77, in *TSEP*, I, p. 117.

In 'Fragment of an Agon' (the other scene in *Sweeney Agonistes* eventually published in *The Criterion*), this tendency towards assimilation takes on a predatory tone, with Sweeney mirroring Doris to the extent of 'convert[ing]' her 'Into a stew. / A nice little, white little, missionary stew.'[40] Doris and Dusty's cartomantic deadlock transitions from predictive instinct into uncertainty, with Doris ironically sighing that 'It's no use asking more than once' before immediately querying 'I'd like to know about that coffin.' Cards beckon to Doris and Dusty with a network of ordered, assured predestiny, but are ultimately riven with randomness, with stuttering reiteration. In the Emersonian sense, rhyme may afford a 'splendid architecture' but it must nonetheless traverse 'Chaos and Old night.' Confronting puzzlement with patience, in both a virtuous and patterned manner, is the challenge and opportunity of poetry: of 'bridging the impassable, and calling aloud on all the children of morning that the Creation is recommencing.'[41]

Eliot, indeed, in his 1917 'Reflection on *Vers Libre*' had argued that 'a liberation *from* rhyme might as well be a liberation *of* rhyme,' a motion itself rhyming with Emerson's decree that 'rhyme shall not suggest a restraint but contrariwise the wildest freedom.'[42] A device like rhyme that coaxes communicative strength out of a substantively arbitrary phonetic system is a model of intelligent design in microcosm. Rhyme, and the patterning it stands for, does not solve life's questions, but points at serendipitous answers drawn fleetingly and provisionally within the wastes of a fallen tongue. In 'Why Rhyme Pleases' (2011), Simon Jarvis sketches the tradition of 'rhymophobic' criticism, ultimately contending that rhyme's preeminent affordance is that it can suspend the self of the poet. Rhyme does the opposite of affirming 'that thinking is all our own work,' he argues, instead formulating 'the question how we shall in the right way lose our voice into those of the dead and of the unborn' — or, to borrow one of

[40] Eliot, 'Fragment of an Agon', ll. 8–9, in *TSEP*, I, p. 121.
[41] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by William H. Gillman, 7 vols (Harvard University Press, 1960–78), VII, p. 219.
[42] Eliot, 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*', in *Selected Prose*, pp. 31–37 (p. 36).

Eliot's lines from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', how to 'drown' successfully among 'human voices'.[43]

Patience afforded Eliot the opportunity to approximate death: in his words, for the 'extinction of personality' that writing within tradition must involve. If rhyme is fundamentally a social principle, coordinating not only words but different speakers immersed in a common reservoir of language, then games deploy the same means to socialise the task of creation and interpretation. Games are inherited, modified, tweaked and trimmed, navigated impersonally even when they are played solitary. For a poet whose theory of impersonality — articulated most completely in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' — was paramount, games offered one appealing mechanism for suspending the ego, or for being dead. Eliot's request for separation between 'the man who suffers and the mind which creates' in the ethos of poetry was answered in part by the mechanisms of the puzzle.[44]

Eliot's 'suffers' is charged with experiential richness, a resource which must be distinct from the creative instinct; his subsequent clause is dusted with more suffering, etymological residue of 'the passions which are [the mind's] material.' Patience, from the same root (in Latin, *patienta*), stretches and challenges these competing impulses by gamifying the dual tasks of creating and suffering; in so doing, it provides one pathway to a 'continual self-sacrifice' alike with the alchemical journey of 'a shred of platinum' (*patience*, as discussed, also denoting the metallurgy of the eternal). Robert Giroux, one of Eliot's American publishers, describes how 'the typical image of the period was Eliot playing solitaire,' ironically validating his quip about being dead by subordinating his complexity as a person to one prevailing popular caricature.[45]

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[43] Simon Jarvis, 'Why Rhyme Pleases', in *Thinking Verse*, 1 (2011), pp. 17–42 (p. 20). Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', l. 131, in *TSEP*, I, p. 9.
[44] Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by M. H. Abrams, 2 vols (W. W. Norton & Company, 1968), II, pp. 1501–8 (p. 1505).
[45] Robert Giroux, quoted in Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 278.

Eliot's other personae, Possum among them, brought with them a penchant for 'playing dead': playing at death, communing with others both chronologically and laterally in a hermeneutic, puzzled mode that sublimates the self. He was demonstrably familiar with the idiom, correctly solving a clue for PLAYING POSSUM in the sixth *Times Crossword Puzzle Book* in 1962: '[1. Enjoying a game as I can in Rome though most deceptive (7,6)].'[46] Geoffrey Faber's 'How to Pick a Possum', a poem dedicated to Eliot in *Noctes Bianianae* (1939), defines Eliot by his flair for card games —'He's skilful at solitaire patience' — and its palpable parallel with his private ethos as an increasingly religious figure grappling with, as he saw it, 'the puzzling and mysterious [...] dogmas of the Church.'[47] This posture has persisted in accounts of Eliot's personality, with Seamus Perry for instance recently characterising Eliot's guiding philosophy as 'devoted patience' while 'plod[ding] along at Faber making himself useful', or putting up with Hayward in their sterile flatshare.[48]

In a letter to E. R. Curtius, the German translator of *The Waste Land* in 1927, Eliot made clear the centrality of this forbearance to his intended sense of the opening of 'What the Thunder Said':

> He who is living is now dead
> We who were living are now dying
> With a little patience[49]
>
> I note that you have translated 'with a little patience' by the imperative. Is this right? I meant that we were dying patiently but without any great struggle or revolt, and therefore not much patience was necessary. It is intended to convey a state of torpor or exhaustion after a great or overwhelming event; not as an exhortation.[50]

Eliot corrects Curtius's imperative rendering, explaining patience as a mode of torpor reactive to the exhaustion of an overwhelming external stimulus. The root of this suffering, from the Latin *patior*, was a deponent verb: an aptly impotent kind of agency, being grammatically

[46] Eliot's copy of *The Times Crossword Puzzles, No. 6* (1962), p. 94, in 'T. S. Eliot Ephemera: Crossword Puzzle Books', 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/14.
[47] Geoffrey Faber, 'How to Pick a Possum', l. 19, in *TSEP*, II, p. 321. Eliot, letter to John Middleton Murray (30 December 1929), in *TSEL*, IV, *1928–9*, p. 1771.
[48] Seamus Perry, 'Eeyore Reports for Duty', in *Times Literary Supplement*, March 11 2022, p. 18.
[49] Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 328–30, in *TSEP*, I, p. 68.
[50] Eliot, letter to E. R. Curtius (4 February 1927), quoted in *TSEP*, I, p. 689.

active only insofar as it cloaks itself in the passive mood. 'With a little patience' is thus related to 'dying' adverbially, at once a consequence and a precondition of the living death that ghosts the poem.

Lilacs emerge from dead land, however, and Eliot's patient morbidity yields a little life. Despite how often Eliot's remark to Auden about playing patience — 'it's the nearest thing to being dead' — is reiterated in works of biography, it does not appear to have been postulated that Eliot is winking at these very lines from *The Waste Land*. Ricks and McCue's edition of the *Poems* (2015), for instance, assiduously traces precursors to Eliot's use of 'patience' in *Inventions of the March Hare*, but none echo *The Waste Land* quite so familiarly as they are in Eliot's own remark thirty years later. Eliot's remark is quoted in the notes to Faber's 'How to Pick a Possum', indeed, but not *The Waste Land*. Usually read as a quip, a shrug, or some kind of subscription to the anaesthesia of middle age, I contend that Eliot was nodding back at his own poetry, redealing the cards of his own allusion. This is not to claim that Eliot's primary sense of 'patience' in *The Waste Land* was intended cartomantically — though he never capitalises the card game, either in poetry or in correspondence — but rather that the parallels between spiritual patience and ludic patience were of conspicuous significance in later life, as Eliot metabolised 'exhaustions' and 'torpors' of his own into the organising principles of poetry.

ii. 'Ptos! Tpos!': The *Fireside* Juvenilia

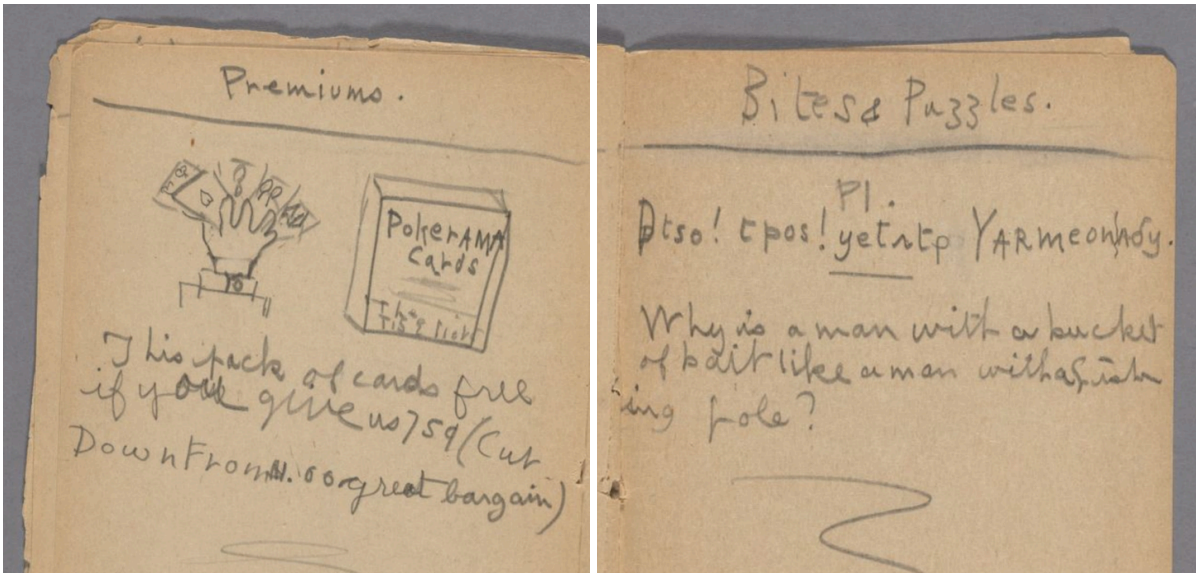

Figure 26: Eliot, *Fireside Magazine*, Issue 11 (11 February, 1899)

Eliot's interest in the poetic affordances of puzzlement found curious precedent in the fin-de-siècle word games he consumed and composed in childhood. Houghton MS Am 1635.5, held in Harvard University's Houghton Library, is a manuscript copy of Eliot's precocious *Fireside Magazine*, composed on scrap paper in a month-long publication run between January and February 1899 when Eliot was 10 years old. Prefiguring his later knack for Patience, the 11th issue includes a mock coupon for a deck of cards, generously discounted for *Fireside* readers.[51] It is branded with the insignia of the Poker AMA, and illustrated with a hand flashing all four suits and one card with a question mark, value withheld. Two pages earlier, and overleaf from the nuptials of one Mr. Haha to a Miss Hehe, Eliot confronts the reader with an unlabelled, exclamatory anagram: 'Ptos! tpos! Yetrtp YARmeon{ Ady.'

Like other anagrammatical 'Puzzles' in Eliot's first foray into journalism, the string of letters is erratically capitalised, respaced, squiggled through, and unindicated as an anagram. It offers neither any instruction nor solution to the reader. Indeed, the only issue of *Fireside* to

[51] Eliot, *Fireside Magazine*, in T. S. Eliot Juvenilia, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Am 1635.5, p. 104; 102. Hereafter *Fireside*.

include any clarificatory olive branch is the 14th and final, in which the conciliatory guarantee that '(Ans. will be in the next number)' is appended at the bottom of the page.[52] Eliot's parenthetical promise remained unmet, his scrawled afterthought the final line in the magazine's entire run save for three closing advertisements: a weight-loss pill, a weight-gain pill, and a hair-growth serum targeted at bearded ladies.

Since the *Fireside* manuscripts were made available to researchers, Kate Pfeffer is right to summate that 'comprehensive' attention has been paid to forming an inventory of references both forwards and backwards in time.[53] In one direction, *Fireside* brims with allusions to nonsense literature, with Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue's edition of the *Poems* (2015) identifying, among others, the recalibration of episodes from Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) in myriad forms, as well as Edward Lear's ramshackle recipes.[54] In the other, critics including Jayme Stayer and John Soldo have spotted early cameos from later Eliot mainstays, with characters such as 'Dr. Sweany M.D.' [sic] guest-starring to advertise some suspicious medicine for insomnia.[55] There is a certain irony, then, in the comparative failure to acknowledge his puzzles (omitted from the *Poems*), which exemplify a similarly ludic instinct for intertextual reference: the *Fireside* puzzles do such a good job of looking like sheer nonsense that even nonsense-forward critical readings have given them a wide berth. No research to date has considered (let alone solved) the puzzles; neglected, they nonetheless epitomise a literally combinatorial approach to allusion that is often read only abstractly elsewhere in his work.

The young Eliot's imaginary readers lauded *Fireside* in their correspondence, with 'two little sisters Minney and Smiley' dedicating their very first letter to thanking Eliot for his

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[52] Eliot, *Fireside*, p. 122.
[53] Kate Pfeffer, 'The Loud Lament of the Disconsolate Chimera: T. S. Eliot's Teatime Allusions', *Literary Imagination*, 16.2 (2014), pp. 157–70 (p. 163).
[54] *TSEP*, II, pp. 147–51.
[55] Jayme Stayer, *Becoming T. S. Eliot: The Rhetoric of Voice and Audience in Inventions of the March Hare* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), p. 19. John J. Soldo, 'Jovial Juvenilia: T. S. Eliot's First Magazine', *Biography*, 5.1 (Winter 1982), pp. 25–37 (p. 33).

custody of the 'beautiful magazine.'[56] Eliot's mischievous adherence to editorial conventions attests to, as Stayer puts it, 'a boy wholly immersed in turn-of-the-century magazine culture.'[57] Stayer rightly points to Eliot's magpielike ability to imitate generic staples, with diverse sections including Editorial, Fiction, Theater, Gossip, Elopements, Poetry, and Recipes. Eliot also aped the paratextual and marginal products of writing a magazine: there are manifold editorial abbreviations, pages diagonally traversed with 'SAMPLE COPY' and 'EXTRA SPACE', and plenty of eclectic advertisements.[58] In one from *Fireside* 3, Eliot dips a toe into more complex textual design, reusing the enlarged capital 'L' of 'Little' to begin and envelop 'Liver Pills' on sale to the hepatically distressed.[59]

Beyond the cognates meticulously listed by Stayer, however, are Eliot's Puzzle Sections, which hew to formats popularised in late-nineteenth-century publications. Eliot variously labelled these 'Puzzles' and 'Bites': in a sense now obsolete, these 'Bites' referred to 'deceptions', derived from a portion of *The Spectator* devoted to 'hoaxes and quizzes' and subsequently, into a broader lexicon of recreational wordplay.[60] Eliot also prefaced his anagrams with 'Pl.' or 'Pls.', doing his best impression of a journalistic shorthand while simultaneously, and perhaps coyly, appointing himself Poet Laureate: the same abbreviation peppers the verse transcribed elsewhere in *Fireside*, for example in a description of the fictional poet 'Paul Palavier, Pl.', whose cautionary verse warned against naughtiness.[61] From these specific headers, it seems likely that 'the speed and voraciousness of Eliot's absorption of journalistic and editorial conventions,' as Stayer summates, extended also to a suite of contemporary textual forms of puzzle, whether in a published collection or in print media.[62]

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[56] *Fireside*, p. 123.
[57] Stayer, 'T. S. Eliot as a Schoolboy: The Lockwood School, Smith Academy, and Milton Academy', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 59.4 (Winter 2013), pp. 619–656 (p. 628).
[58] *Fireside*, p. 1; pp. 23–24.
[59] ibid, p. 103.
[60] bite, *n.* (sense 9a): 'An imposition, a deception; what is now called a 'sell'; passing from the notion of playful imposition or hoax to that of swindle or fraud.' *OED Online* (accessed 12 April 2023) [revised entry 2004].
[61] *Fireside*, p. 121.
[62] Stayer, *Rhetoric of Voice*, p. 20.

Eliot's family, a more immediate intended audience than Minney and Smiley, may reasonably have felt 'bitten' by his sparsely dressed anagram. Without indication or solution, the scrambled sequence appears blandly nonsensical. I contend, however, that it derives from a line of poetry plucked from Eliza Lee Follen's 'Stop! Stop! Pretty Water' (first collected in *Little Songs* in 1832; recently republished in 1889):

> Ptos! tpos! yetrtp YARmeon⁞ Ady.[63]

> "Stop! stop! pretty water,"
> Said Mary one day,
> To a frolicsome brook
> That was running away.[64]

Eliot's homespun anagram takes its cue from Follen's babbling brook; not only is it fluidly respatialised, but it is also a deviation from Follen's original line. As if buoyed by the Heraclitean flow of Follen's stanza — the river is ever transformed, ever evading the speaker — 'Ptos! tpos! yetrtp YARmeon⁞ Ady' recombines to form 'Stop! stop! pretty MARY one day', cutely transferring the epithet from the water to Mary, and eliminating the indirect speech. In 1930, reflecting on a childhood spent roaming the banks of the Mississippi, Eliot wrote to Marquis Childs: 'There is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those people who have not.'[65] Follen's runaway river finds a new form, and mutable Mary finds herself continuous with the river. Follen's poem, indeed, puns on an analogous conflation, with the final stanza allowing the same verbs to 'run' between Mary and the brook itself:

> So Mary ran on;
> But I have heard say
> That she never could find
> Where the brook ran away.[66]

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[63] *Fireside*, p. 102.
[64] Eliza Lee Follen, 'Stop! Stop! Pretty Water', ll. 1–4, in *Little Songs* (Lee and Shepherd, 1889), pp. 16–1.
[65] Eliot, letter to Marquis Childs, quoted in *St. Louis Dispatch*, 15 October 1930.
[66] Follen, 'Stop! Stop! Pretty Water' ll. 13–16, in *Little Songs*, p. 17.

Mary pleads with the river to allow her toy boat to remain in place, but like Eliot's vision of the poet in discarded lines for *The Waste Land*, resurrectional transformation requires both 'things that stay and those that flow.'[67] In George Herbert's *The Temple* (1633), Mary had famously been reassembled in the guise of an army ('How well her name an *Army* doth present, / In whom the *Lord of hosts* did pitch his tent'); Eliot's Mary is herself an evolution from *Fireside* 8, in which the Mary of 'Mary had a little lamb' appears as Arym, in 'Arymadh a tteli ambl'.[68]

It is unclear whether Eliot had come across Follen's poem as part of a broader household consumption of children's literature, or in her capacity as an educationalist, whose poetry often aimed to teach the rudiments of word-building. Other poems in *Little Songs* refer directly to this instructive end, with nursery rhymes such as 'Trusty Learning ABC' drafting in an anthropomorphic dog as an avatar for the student. In this poem, the sceptical 'Tom' warns the speaker against trying to teach a dog the alphabet. In the 1889 edition, Trusty was illustrated as a large springer spaniel, considerably larger than the soft toy dachshund Eliot had recently acquired.[69]

Though the vocabulary on show in *Fireside* is notably advanced — one Editorial, for instance, soberly warns the reader that 'The situation in Turkey is threatening' — Eliot's spelling is typically improvised and unruly. He writes 'kornor' for *corner*, 'plesent' for *pleasant*, 'fulish' for *foolish*, and with appropriate error, 'puzzells' for *puzzles*. His anagrams, by contrast, are structurally spotless: the letters are scrupulously disordered, and dispersed in strictly the correct quantities. (Incidentally, or perhaps felicitously, Eliot's line also generates 'My poet's art: poetry and typos').[70] It seems probable, therefore, that Eliot composed his anagrams with

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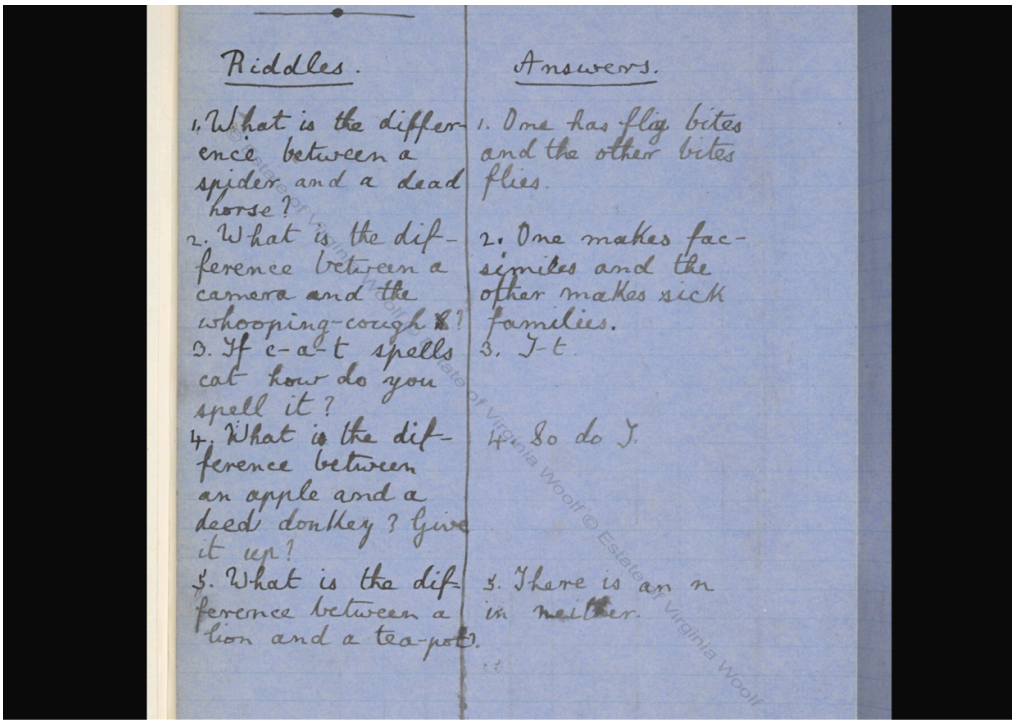
[67] Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. by Valerie Eliot (Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp. 110–111.
[68] George Herbert, 'Ana|gram', in *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (Thom. Buck, Roger Daniel, 1633). Eliot, *Fireside*, p. 93.
[69] Follen, 'Trusty Learning ABC', in *Little Songs*, pp. 50–51; Crawford, *Young* Eliot, p. 20.
[70] My own anagram.

source material at hand, or at least scrap paper on which to ensure that the letters were faithfully transcribed and mixed responsibly.

The surviving eleven issues of *Fireside* contain nine puzzles, each hitherto unsolved; I suggest seven solutions (including Eliot's allusion to Follen), with two puzzles continuing to resist parsing. This is a relatively high density of puzzles compared to, say, comparable magazine juvenilia in Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell's *Hyde Park Gate News* (1891–1895) [British Library MS 70725–707326], in which 69 extant issues composed over four years contain only one page of riddles, in the very first instalment.[71] In contrast to Eliot's elliptical style, Woolf and Bell suffocate the mystifying properties of their riddles by immediately supplying the answer adjacently, rendering the sequence more akin to a joke book than a logical challenge. By contrast, the riddle in *Fireside* 11 asks: 'Why is a man with a bucket of bait like a man with a fishing pole?' Beyond one possible (and tautologous) pun on 'flies', the solution remains unclear, and in any case is not provided by Eliot.[72] It seems to be of his own devising rather than merely aped from a contemporary work; Woolf and Bell's Spoonerism of 'facsimile' with 'sick family' had appeared, by contrast, at least as early as the 1864 edition of *Routledge Every Boy's Annual*.[73]

[71] Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, *Hyde Park Gate News*, London, British Library, MS 70725–70726, p. 2.
[72] Eliot, *Fireside*, p. 102.
[73] Edmund Routledge (ed.), *Routledge Every Boy's Annual* (Routledge, 1864), p. 87.



Riddles.

Answers.

1. What is the difference between a spider and a dead horse?
1. One has flies bites and the other bites flies.

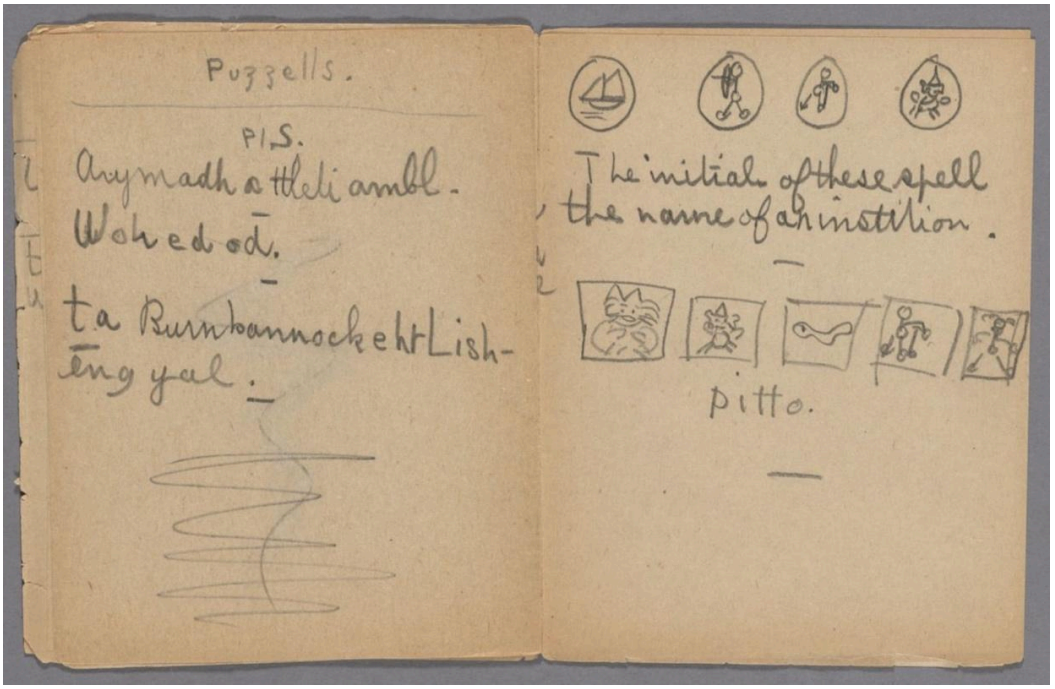
2. What is the difference between a camera and the whooping-cough?
2. One makes facsimiles and the other makes sick families.

3. If c-a-t spells cat how do you spell it?
3. I-t.

4. What is the difference between an apple and a deed donkey? Give it up?
4. So do I.

5. What is the difference between a lion and a tea-pot?
5. There is an n in neither.

Figure 27: Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, *Hyde Park Gate News*, Issue 1



Puzzells.

PIS.

Anymadh attleiambl.
Wohedod.
ta Burnbannockehtlish-
ingyal.

The initials of these spell the name of an institution.

pitto.

Figure 28: 'Puzzells' in *Fireside*, Issue 8 (30 January 1899)

Fireside 8 boasts the largest puzzle section in Eliot's run, with three sequential (and unlabelled) anagrams that reconstitute, I suggest, a nursery rhyme, a vernacular phrase, and a

line of poetry.[74] The first, 'Arymadh a tteli ambl', refers to 'Mary had a little lamb', which had first been published in 1830 by Sarah Josepha Hale (though of contested authorship).[75] The second, 'Woh ed od', recombines to form 'How de do', now recognisable as a colloquial contraction of 'How do you do?' but also, when Eliot was using it, a phrase for 'an embarrassing or awkward state of things'.[76] Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* (1886) used it to metonymise 'chaos', and in *Harper's Weekly* in 1890, it denoted a series of uncomfortable social situations.[77] The third, 'Ta Burnbannock eht Lish-eng yal', solves for 'At Bannockburn the English lay', the opening line of a poem by Robert Burns.[78] Eliot would later characterise Robert Burns as a 'decadent representative of a great alien tradition'; the young Eliot derived satisfaction from alienating Burns from his own words.[79] While at Smith Academy, St Louis, which Eliot attended between 1898 and 1905, Eliot had indeed been given 'Bannockburn' as a set text.[80] In his edition of *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996), Christopher Ricks tethered Eliot's free use of the ballad form (in service of a bawdy narrative poem titled 'Fragments') to that of Robert Burns.[81] In this earlier case, Eliot's reconfiguration is centred on Burns himself, shoring fragments for, rather than against, a kind of gamified ruin.

Across from Eliot's anagrams are two pictographic acrostics akin to rebuses in the tradition of the 'Hieroglyphic Proverb', popularised in contemporaneous works such as Planché's *Guess Me* (1879) and Hood's *Excursions into Puzzledom* (1879). Eliot asks the reader to deduce the name of an 'instition' [sic] (presumably 'institution') by combining the first letters of some representational doodles. The first of these, I hazard, yields 'YALE' by

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[74] Eliot, *Fireside*, p. 92–3.
[75] Sarah Josepha Hale, 'Mary's Lamb', in *Poems for our Children* (Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1830), pp. 6–7.
[76] how-de-do, *n.* (sense 3): 'A 'business'; an embarrassing or awkward state of things.' *OED Online* (accessed 12 April 2023) [revised entry 2020].
[77] W. S. Gilbert, *Original Comic Operas*, 2 vols (London: Chappell & Co., 1886), II, p. 31; *Harper's Weekly*, 24 May 1890, 406.2.
[78] Robert Burns, 'Bannockburn', l. 1, in *A New Library of Poetry and Song*, ed. by William Cullen Bryant, 2 vols, (New York: J. B. Ford & Co., 1876) I, p. 513.
[79] Russell Hope Robbins, 'The T. S. Eliot Myth', *Science and Society*, 14.1 (Winter 1950), pp. 1–28 (p. 16).
[80] Bernard Bergonzi, *T. S. Eliot* (Macmillan Press, 1978), p. 4.
[81] Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (Faber, 1996), p. 314. For the controversy of attributing this poem to Eliot, rather than Burns, see David Chinitz, 'T. S. Eliot's Blue Verses and Their Sources in the Folk Tradition', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23.2 (Winter 1999), pp. 329–333 (p. 329).

concatenating Yacht, Archer, Left, and Elf (Eliot, suggestively, was a 'keen and practised amateur' childhood yachtsman).[82] Each diagram exploits the multivalence of words as concepts and words as things, subversively atomising Yale, a lofty seat of learning, into a sequence of quotidian squiggles. The second, despite sharing some glyphs with the first (and with earlier illustrations in *Fireside*, including what Eliot captioned a 'FAT QUAKER CAT') has proven resistant to solution; it is potentially TESLA (an 'institution' in the sense of prominence), formed from Tiger, Elf, Snake, Left, and Ant.[83]

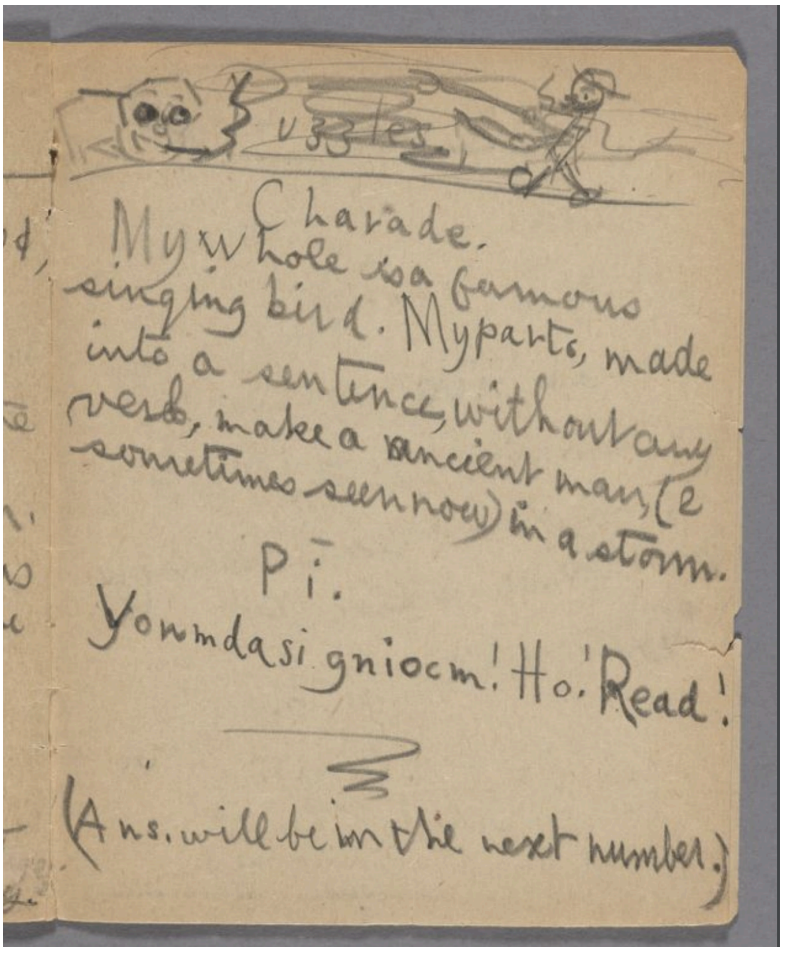

Figure 29: *Fireside Magazine*, Issue 14 (19 February 1899)

The final issue of *Fireside* is the first and only to include a charade, 'a kind of riddle in which each syllable of a word […] is enigmatically described.'[84] Charades in the tradition of Planché

[82] *TSEP*, I, p. 703.
[83] *Fireside*, p. 35.
[84] charade, *n.* (sense 1), in *OED Online* (accessed 12 March 2023) [revised entry 2022]. Eliot, *Fireside*, p. 122.

were often personified, voicing the disguised referent with a plaintive guess-me character. Follen's *Little Songs*, for instance, includes an anti-charade in this style titled 'Do You Guess It Is I?', borrowing the language of riddles to describe a child with deliberately obvious clues: 'I have a little head, / All covered o'er with hair, / And I hear what is said / With my two ears there.'[85] Eliot's 'famous singing bird' is in fact a *nightingale*, made by soldering together the soundalike of a *knight* — 'a ancient man (& sometimes seen now)' [sic] — *in* [a] *gale* ('in a storm'). Eliot performs an Ovidian *Metamorphosis* in miniature, multiplying the classically transformed bird through the associative logic of the homophone.

Of particular intrigue, however, is the sinister skeletal face looming in the top left of the page, whose plume of smoke overwrites the capital P of the scrawled-out 'Puzzles' title. Though the character is anonymous, their identifying features — a monocular eyepatch, and a pencil-thin cigarette — have only one match in the rest of *Fireside*, the writer J. W. Riley:

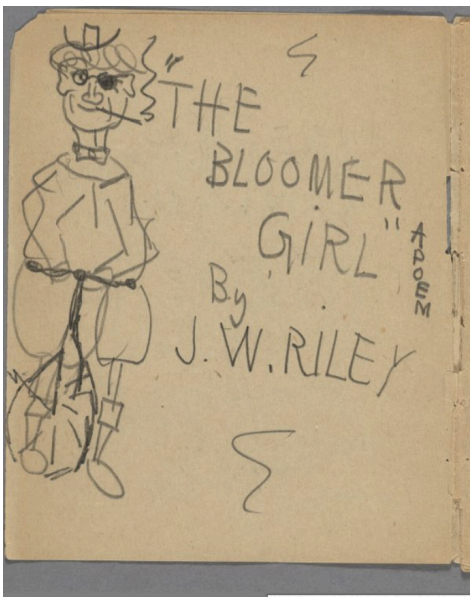

Figure 30: *Fireside Magazine*, Issue 5

J. W. Riley was a nineteenth-century American children's author, conscripted for Eliot's purposes as the writer of a made-up poem entitled 'The Bloomer Girl.' His odd outfit, however, does not match J. W. Riley's actual appearance, and it seems more likely that Eliot is here

[85] Follen, 'Do You Guess It Is I?', ll. 1–4, in *Little Songs*, pp. 52–54.

playing on a contemporary folk song called 'One-Eyed Riley' that would later appear in *The Cocktail Party* (1949), as sung by an unidentified guest (Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilley):

> As I was drinkin' gin and water,
> And me bein' the One-Eyed Riley,
> Who came in but the landlord's daughter
> And she took my heart entirely.[86]

Herbert Knust has ventured that Eliot's use of the folk song in *The Cocktail Party* is intended to hark back to Madame Sosostris' Tarot deck in *The Waste Land*, with its reference to the one-eyed merchant, and the 'wide possibilities of association licensed by cartomantic structures.'[87] The comparison, indeed, seems appropriate:

> Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
> And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
> Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
> Which I am forbidden to see.[88]

The blank card, an explanatory gap in a deck where every card is supercharged with signification, is itself an echo of the question mark perforating Eliot's Poker AMA cards. In *Fireside*, however, the motif said by Knust to originate in *The Waste Land* is iterated at an earlier date. *Fireside* is woven through with little threads of reference like this, not only on the level of instantiating allusions that then reappear in later, more canonical works by Eliot, but also within its own unbound pages. The puzzle cages a nightingale, dissected for its phonemes, presaging the Ovidian myth that Eliot would later raid in *The Waste Land*, or 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales' — a Sweeney himself ghosting *Fireside* in the form of Dr. Sweany. The Quaker cat in *Fireside* 4 provides a component answer to the rebus in *Fireside* 8; Riley's appearance at the end of *Fireside* 14 is foretold in the coat of arms that adorns the same issue's cover.

It is as if *Fireside*'s sustained self-reference is itself a kind of puzzle designed by Eliot, one in which threads between issues not only take the form of in-jokes, as Stayer has argued,

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[86] Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* (Faber, 1949), p. 50.
[87] Herbert Knust, 'What's the Matter with One-Eyed Riley?', *Comparative Literature*, 17.4 (Autumn 1965), pp. 289–298 (p. 293).
[88] Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 51–4, in *TSEP*, I, p. 56.

but also tissues of allusion that require interactive decryption by the reader in order to proceed. The same hermeneutic logic of Eliot's puzzle pages, which demand recognising the pluripotent potential of innocuous things — that L can be a letter and an envelope — is also an early demonstration of intertextual reference, and of Eliot's feeling for allusion as an essentially ludic act.

The anagrammatical flourish in *Fireside* 8, 'Yonmad si gniocm! Ho! Read!', is then an appropriately reflexive puzzle with which to end the page. According to Valerie Eliot's biographical commentary on the early years of Eliot's life, included in the prefatory material to Volume I of his collected *Letters*, Eliot wrote his first poem in 1897: 'four little verses, about the sadness of having to start school again every Monday morning.'[89] If this is accurate, then I suggest that 'Yonmad' is perhaps Eliot's first extant poetic revision. Lamenting the transience of the weekend, the anagram solves for 'Monday is coming! Oh! Dear!', aptly ending on 'Read' in the imperative. Given that every other anagram in *Fireside* is referential, either to poetry or idiom, it seems that Eliot is tipping his hat at his own eight-year-old poetry from a new perspective.

The anagram's structural insistence on transformation, on reassessing face value, not only found its object in the literature of the Eliot household and Smith academy, but also of the young Eliot himself. W. H. Auden would later write a palindrome enlisting Eliot's name: 'T. Eliot, top bard, notes putrid tang emanating, is sad, I'd assign it a name: gnat dirt upset on drab pot toilet.'[90] Eliot had perhaps beaten him to it in 'The Triumph of Bullshit', a poem which reflects on the poet's own 'Etiolated' merit: a manoeuvre typically read as performatively self-deprecating, but made more complex, I venture, by the nested anagram of Eliot in the otherwise obscure adjective.[91]

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[89] *TSEL*, I, *1898–1922*, p. xxiii.
[90] Charles Osborne, *W. H. Auden: The Life of a Poet* (Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. 316.
[91] Eliot, 'The Triumph of Bullshit', l. 3, in *TSEP*, I, p. 252.

Eliot would later muse in a letter to Conrad Aiken in 1914 that 'It's interesting to cut yourself to pieces once in a while, and wait to see if the fragments will sprout.'[92] In *Fireside*, we are granted some of the earliest instances of how poetry might make that happen. The poet of impersonality relished the generative potential of puzzling anagrams, licensing a 'turning world', as he would put it in *Four Quartets,* wherein *T. S. Eliot* and *toilets* were not unexchangeable, nor an example of *litotes*, as in the preceding clause.[93]

iii. 'Hints and Guesses': The Encrypted World

The transformative puzzles that Eliot penned in *Fireside* held in focus the double possibilities of recreation, both as a kind of play and a kind of reassembly. His attitude towards nurturing poems in later life, indeed, was often gradualist, procedurally and attentively glossing ideas with new signification through slow accretion over time. Rejecting a proposal made to Faber by the young Norman Nicholson, Eliot advised that the best way to reinvigorate the manuscript was to 'put this book into cold storage for a time,' as if cryogenically sustaining the life of a poem for later reanimation.[94] Robert Crawford, indeed, characterises Eliot's poetic *modus operandi* as magpie-like, 'saving up poems and bits of poems in a secret drawer, waiting for them to coalesce.'[95] Recreational thinking could promote an organic process of poetic growth on a scale unbidden by demand or deadline, assembling what Conrad Aiken calls a 'mosaic' out of 'part-poems' rather than insisting on any premeditated unity.[96]

In 1936, delivering a lecture in the series *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot conscripted a sea-anemone to illustrate how this transformation appeared to him: 'There might be the experience of a child of ten, a small boy peering through sea-water in a rock-pool,

[92] Eliot, letter to Conrad Aiken (September 1914), in *TSEL*, I, *1898–1922*, p. 63.
[93] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, I, ii, 16, in *TSEP*, I, p. 181.
[94] Eliot, letter to Norman Nicholson (March 8 1940), in *TSEL*, IX, *1939–41*, p. 678.
[95] Crawford, 'The Most Important Poem of the 20th Century: On T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* at 100', in *LitHub* (24 October, 2022).
[96] Conrad Aiken, 'An Anatomy of Melancholy', *New Republic*, 33, 7 February 1923, pp. 294–5 (p. 294).

and finding a sea-anemone for the first time: the simple experience (not so simple, for an exceptional child, as it looks) might lie dormant in his mind for twenty years, and reappear transformed in some verse-context charged with great imaginative pressure.'[97] The rockpool, a miniaturisation of 'the manymermaidcrowded sea' as he would put it in a letter to Ezra Pound in the same year, could act as a transformative chamber for ideas and images.[98] The sea-anemone, however, is more than merely illustrative of this process: for Eliot, it is that process itself, floating again and again into his corpus and correspondence. In *Four Quartets*, the sea and the river meet at crowded rockpools:

> The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
> Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
> Its hints of earlier and other creation:
> The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone;
> The pools where it offers to our curiosity
> The more delicate algae and the sea anemone.[99]

The sea-anemone features as an avatar for intrigue, a 'hint of earlier and other creation' remote to the human mind but nonetheless constitutive of its curiosity. The debris of an organic and inorganic world aggregate in the water, buoyed into unlikely and unfamiliar juxtaposition, each one of 'many gods and many voices' in chorus, as if the symbolic tradition of the sea is now scuttled into flotsam and jetsam: 'tosses' running into 'losses', as Eliot rhymes it, arranging only two of those many voices.

Eliot returns to the image of a sea-anemone to metonymise the permeation of influence in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), where one of the choruses chants: 'I have lain on the floor of the sea and breathed with the breathing of the sea-anemone, swallowed with ingurgitation of the sponge.'[100] Picking up his own terms, Eliot reportedly compared Germans to 'sponges or sea-anemones, soaking up foreign influence for a while, then rejecting it all' in an obituary he

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[97] Eliot, 'Wordsworth and Coleridge', in *TSECP*, IV, *English Lion 1930–33*, ed. by Jason Harding and Ronald Schuhard, pp. 625–636 (p. 632).
[98] Eliot, letter to Ezra Pound (22 October 1936), quoted in *TSEP*, I, p. 968.
[99] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, III, i, 16–21, in *TSEP*, I, p. 193.
[100] Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1935), p. 64.

wrote in 1965.[101] In earlier life, his dissertation on F. H. Bradley (1916; published 1964) had mused that 'the sea-anemone which accepts or rejects a proffered morsel is thereby relating an idea to the sea-anemone's world,' echoing the metaphor recently iterated by William James in *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911), who argued that without intellectual abstraction, the human would live 'as the sessile sea-anemone on its rock receives whatever nourishment the wash of the waves may bring.'[102] For James, the sea-anemone represents the failure of proactive conceptual thinking; for Eliot, the self-sublimation this could afford was in some ways appealing. As early as 1915, Eliot had written to Conrad Aiken contemplating 'the idea of a submarine world of clear green light — one would be attached to a rock and swayed in two directions — would one be happier or most wretched at the turn of the tide.'[103] The ambivalence of the sea, a focal point for conversions unmoored from moral trajectories, charms as a site of passivity, of submarine patience.

Readers have broadly read Eliot's marine imagery as an expression of his interest in disintegration, availing themselves of the convenient reflexivity of the sea-anemone, itself a childhood experience dashed on the shores of multiple poems. Rachel Murray argues that Eliot's 'encounter with the sea anemone retains its hold over Eliot as something that his mind cannot fully metabolise, functioning instead as a kind of sticking point in his imagination that gains an affective charge by virtue of its refusal to submit to the workings of the intellect.'[104] This is persuasive in regard to Eliot's relish for the inscrutable world, of which marine icons stand out as an appropriately unintuitive topos, but the notion that this amounts to 'refusal' alone is reductive. Rather than enjoying how the mind blanks at the sea anemone, it is more faithful to Eliot's own terms that he enjoyed how the mind races under the charming burden of trying to figure it out. It is not metabolisable, for certain, but this does not preclude the

[101] Eliot, quoted in William Turner Levy, 'Letter to the Editor: A Memoir of T. S. Eliot', *New York Times Book Review*, 31 January 1965.
[102] William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Longmans, Green, and Company, 1911), p. 64.
[103] Eliot, letter to Conrad Aiken (25 February 1915), in *TSEL*, I, *1898–1922*, p. 88.
[104] Rachel Murray, 'Things that Cling: Marine Attachments in Eliot', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 45.3 (Spring, 2022), pp. 21–38 (p. 33).

opportunity for chewing. Specifically, Eliot's lecture argues that it is 'experience' that is transformed, rather than the sea anemone. The 'verse-context' changes, rather than the creature. Eliot's sea-anemones, notably, are never inflected by an adjective: rather, they inflect the surrounding verse, an emblem of puzzlement thrust through the cogs and pulleys of a curious outlook, and one that is ultimately additive by virtue of being baffled. We call such things 'refractory', after all, not because they are opaque to us, but rather because they scatter how we read them.

The metaphor of refraction is indeed appropriate. Eliot's sea-anemone appears in water, glimpsed through the filmy distortion of the rockpool: a surface as reflective as it is translucent. In his dissertation on the philosopher F. H. Bradley (1916), Eliot constructed an earlier version of the image to illustrate the head-scratching promiscuity of seeing things as they are:

> In the case of the stick in water, for example, the real object for the psychologist may include not only the 'real' stick but an instance of refraction. That the object in the illusion is quite as real as the 'real' object is a truth to which the new realism has well called attention. The new object and the false, we may add, are continuous, and the new object has been constructed by adding to the old object elements which were first experienced and not contemplated.[105]

Seeing, or the translation of objects into the mind, necessitates a degree of 'sense-deception' that is no less real to the perceiver than the object itself. The stick in the water is a perceptual puzzle, but rather than stigmatising the sense deficit as subtractive, Eliot emphasises that the experience is additive. Objects which require attention, which refuse to settle in the mind, and which prolong aesthetic experience by rewriting the world in an unfamiliar form, are to Eliot akin to 'the obscurity of any flower: something simple and to be simply enjoyed, but incomprehensible as anything living is incomprehensible.'[106] The original object — the stick, the sea anemone, the memory, the word — is plumbed with depth, laminated with new possibility by the puzzled condition of the perceiver.

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[105] Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 25.
[106] Eliot, letter to Geoffrey Curtis (17 June 1930), in *TSEL*, V, *1930–31*, p. 734.

This is the kind of double vision that Eliot speaks of when he describes the naturally encrypted world as being laden with 'cognate realities […] We can thus approach no solution as long as we regard the world as made up of objects.'[107] What Eliot terms 'cognate reality' is, in essence, another way of formulating the imagination as the inevitable lens for an external world built on freely associative logic. Eliot described the stimulus for writing 'Gerontion' (1920) as 'associative memory,' an engine for poetry fuelled by the capricious and subjective whims of remembering things in relation to each other.[108] The world is populated with intractable, ineffable things, but the broken relationship between Appearance and Reality, sign and signifier, also heralds the moment of redress, of language to revitalise the world without fixing it in place. The world is a puzzle — the corollary to Eliot's precise use of the term 'solution' — but this is not an obstacle to the 'imaginative pressure' that forms poetry but rather the pressure cooker itself.

The imagination, then, can do things that reason alone cannot, just as a person without the ability to contextualise sense data is no more than an oyster, according to Plato's originary iteration of the Jamesian metaphor in *Philebus*.[109] In the preface to his translation of Saint-John Perse's *Anabasis* (1930), Eliot ventured a binary between 'a logic of the imagination' and 'a logic of concepts,' implicitly arguing that the latter is the domain of the everyday, and the former is the opportunity of poetry.[110] The sermons of Lancelot Andrewes, on which Eliot wrote in 1928, describe the two sides of the rift in evocative detail. Andrewes' strength, Eliot argues, is at its most dizzying when he 'takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the world until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess.'[111] Eliot enacts a squeeze of his own, simulating Andrewes'

[107] Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, p. 119.
[108] Eliot, letter to Seán Ó Faoláin (21 February 1944), quoted in Matthew Hollis, *The Waste Land: A Biography of a Poem* (Faber, 2022), p. 128.
[109] See *TSEP*, I, p. 968.
[110] Eliot, 'Preface', in *Anabasis: A Poem by St. -J. Perse* (Faber, 1930), p. 9.
[111] Eliot, 'Lancelot Andrewes', in *TSECP*, II, *The Perfect Critic 1919–26*, ed. by Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard, pp. 817–26 (p. 822).

tight grip by inflating 'word' into 'world' before juicing it back into 'word' before the end of the line. By contrast, quotidian and utilitarian usage is fuelled by:

> the vague jargon of our time, when we have a vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing — when a word half-understood, torn from its place in some alien or half-formed science, as of psychology, conceals from both writer and reader the meaninglessness of a statement […] a language of tergiversation.[112]

Eliot's adjectives are those of privation — 'half-understood […] 'half-formed' […] meaninglessness' — precisely pointing to the capacity of vague and jargonistic language to annihilate precision. This is the universe desiccated and disenchanted: words wielded by 'counter-mongers,' as T. E. Hulme had put it in *Cinders* (1907), or, as Viktor Shklovsky had it in 'Art as Technique' in 1917, 'algebrised' into an utterly shallow logic of formulae.[113]

This is the glass half-empty side of Eliot's equation: the 'word half-understood', decontextualised and starved of relational and imaginative possibility. *Four Quartets* uses the same adjective, however, to describe instead the opportunities licensed by Incarnation:

> These are only hints and guesses,
> Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
> Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
> The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
> Here the impossible union
> Of spheres of existence is actual[114]

Eliot repeats the noun 'hints' from earlier in 'The Dry Salvages' to describe 'hints of other and earlier creation' in the toss and loss of the sea, which churn up the phonemes of 'hint half guessed' (my emphases) to make 'gift' by felicity. The human, fallen 'language of tergiversation' is 'half-understood' because it is deficient; by contrast, the divine 'hints' of creation are 'half guessed […] half understood' because they charm our curiosity without yielding to it. In the explanatory gap between a world of 'hints' and a world of 'guesses,' puzzled contemplation is the moment of faith.

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[112] Eliot, 'Lancelot Andrewes', p. 823.
[113] Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Nebraska University Press, 1995), pp. 3–25 (p. 11). Hulme, 'Cinders', in *TEHW*, p. 19.
[114] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, III, v, 29–34, in *TSEP*, I, p. 200.

Robert Crawford characterises the speaking voice of *Four Quartets* as one of 'clear-eyed resilience' as if the tasks of 'prayer, observance, discipline' were marks of passive hardiness alone; rather, they are active expressions of faith, of 'guess[ing]' at the beyond.[115] Incarnation (Eliot notably drops the definite article) is expressed in the half-guessingness of the mind, rather than in spite of it. The 'impossible union' of Incarnation, a synapse between the immanent and the transcendent world, is licensed through a posture of puzzlement, through the additive process of guesswork.

The separation Eliot constructs between 'hint' and 'guess' is one mode of a broader duality peppered throughout his critical writing, comparable with, say, 'suffer' and 'create' in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), 'object' and 'feeling' in his dissertation (1916), and 'reality' and 'strangeness' in 'The Imperfect Critic' (1920). The latter essay is conspicuous in this regard, because like *Four Quartets* it advocates for puzzlement not only as a natural quality of the human mind, but as the precondition of seeing beyond the objective world. Romantic poets, Eliot argues, are talented in 'curiosity' but fail by forging 'a shortcut to the strangeness without the reality, and it leads its disciples only back upon themselves.'[116] By contrast, modern poetry might more faithfully harness curiosity by combining the *real* with the *strange*; the quotidian and the transcendent.

G. Douglas Atkins draws attention to Eliot's use of 'half' to qualify adjectives in light of the two-handedness of Incarnational aesthetics, understood by Eliot as an intersection by which timelessness meets time itself. 'Half', he argues, is not the same as 'partly': it is a specific proportion consistent with Eliot's patterning. Atkins, however, argues with reference to *Four Quartets* that this means 'we get one half of that union, either immanence or transcendence (as always), but not both and at the same time.'[117] Eliot's interest in how patient, penitent Christian faith actuates 'the impossible union / Of the spheres of existence' seems to negate

[115] Robert Crawford, 'T. S. Eliot and Biography', unpublished lecture (University of Oxford, 25 January 2023).
[116] Eliot, 'Imperfect Critics', in *The Sacred Wood* (Methuen & Co, 1920), p. 28.
[117] G. Douglas Atkins, *Eliot Materialised: Literal Meaning and Embodied Truth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 9.

Atkin's notion that we can only access one side of the coin at once. The 'intersection' is unintelligible because it is divine, but Eliot positions faith — and by extension, poetry — as a mode of curiosity that breaches this stalemate, stimulated by the half-success of our guesses. Correspondent with 'hints', 'objects', 'reality', and the world as 'suffered', poetry enables 'guesses', 'feelings', 'strangeness' and the world as 'created' that come halfway to sublimity.

Four Quartets is constructed topologically around such a multidimensionality, returning again and again to the figure of the 'intersection' to map out the hybridity of 'timelessness / With time' latent in every aspect of the world around us.[118] In order 'to apprehend / The point of intersection', one must be saintlike: patient in 'selflessness and self-surrender,' or perhaps in 'self-sacrifice' like Eliot's archetypal poet. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a child raised in St Louis' metropolitan grid system, Eliot's interest in the spatial possibilities of intersections went beyond poetry alone. In a letter to Emily Hale on 11 August, 1933, Eliot wrote excitedly to share that: 'I look at *The Times*, but feel at the moment careless of politics, and interested chiefly in the composition of nonsense verses. In the evening we solve the *Times* crossword puzzles. I have just been invited to write a play!'[119] The following year, Eliot would write to Hale to say that he did not have enough energy to 'start a chorus [...] by the time I had finished dinner I felt too feeble to more than solve *The Times* crossword puzzle.'[120] The play was *The Rock* (1934), in which Eliot is fixated by interstices: 'Every moment you live at a point of intersection', the chorus murmurs, before later incanting that 'In every moment of time you live where two worlds cross.'[121] The figure of the cross, indeed, is one clear spatial metaphor for the Incarnation, and one of obvious resonance with Christian symbolism, especially in mysticism where 'the mystic union' with God is patterned as a moment of transcendent intersection. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), William

[118] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, III, v, 18–19, in *TSEP*, I, p. 199.
[119] Eliot, letter to Emily Hale (11 August 1933), in *EHC*.
[120] Eliot, letter to Hale (7 March 1934), in *EHC*.
[121] Eliot, *The Rock* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), p. 51.

Empson had likened the figure of the cross to 'an indecision and a structure' valuable to poets interested in leveraging words for the deliberate and secondary meanings at the same time.[122]

Suggestively, while Eliot was drafting the play, he was staying with Frank Morley in 1933 at the apex of his obsession with cryptic crosswords. In the same week Eliot first learned to bake bread — 'Tom was very proud of the first loaf he made; insisted on a photograph with him holding it forward to make it appear bigger' — Morley recalls Eliot whiling away the evenings 'inventing various kinds of crossword games, in different languages.'[123] Greek, Latin, French, German, and Italian were all successes, though Hebrew reportedly proved more difficult.[124] By 1934, Eliot and Morley would play games of 'secrets' by correspondence: taking a published crossword puzzle and, obeying the numeration and available space, attempt to retrofit new clues. Morley would chastise Eliot for not knowing the plural of *arcanum* is *arcana*: 'How you expect to hole yo haid up among classical people?' [sic], he mocked.[125]

Words, little portals into unfamiliar worlds, could actuate the specific hermeneutics of Incarnation, as it appeared to Eliot, because they rely on multidimensionality. They are transacted in horizontal and vertical space on the page, and intersected in another dimension with a chronological tradition, brought to life and reanimated in the act of reading. Responding with poetic 'guesses' to a world of puzzling 'hints', poetry in some sense iterates a second creation by beginning the cycle again, letting readers revel in the delightful impossibility of complete understanding.

Incarnation is omnipresent, universalised through the dropping of the definite article and, as Herman Servotte describes it, 'made flesh' in the poem's formal attention to 'echo and reiteration.'[126] While Incarnation is indefinite, Eliot's 'hint' is first plural ('hints') and then generalised as a textual mode ('the hint'). Critical responses to this 'hint' have been

[122] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2nd edition (Chatto & Windus, 1949), p. 192.
[123] Frank Morley, 'A Few Recollections of T. S. Eliot', in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and his Work*, ed. by Allen Tate (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p. 34.
[124] Morley, quoted in *TSEL*, VI, *1932–3*, p. 673.
[125] Eliot, letter to Morley (13 August 1934), in *TSEL*, VII, *1934–5*, p. 270.
[126] Herman Servotte, 'The Poetry of Paradox: 'Incarnation' in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*', *English Studies*, 4 (1991), pp. 377–386 (p. 377).

surprisingly scant considering its repetition at revelatory moments in 'The Dry Salvages', and ignore the obvious lexicon of puzzlement it prescribes. Another piece of puzzle vernacular that has escaped critical attention, all the more surprisingly given how often it is discussed, is Eliot's use of 'key' in *The Waste Land*. Eliot's notes on *The Waste Land* quote Bradley in supplement to an often-quoted passage from What the Thunder Said':

> DA
> *Dayadhvam*: I have heard the key
> Turn in the door once and turn once only
> We think of the key, each in his prison
> Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison[127]

Every time Bradley uses the word 'key' in *Appearance and Reality* (1893), he uses it in the sense of decryption; half the time, this decryption has a 'puzzle' as its direct object. When Bradley speaks of philosophy enabling 'a new point of view,' he hopes it might 'supply us with any key to the whole puzzle about reality.'[128] On self-consciousness, he wonders if any 'key to the self and also the world' can be found; a few pages later, he finds that 'the self [...] gave us no key to our puzzles.'[129] Bradley uses the word 'puzzle' seventeen times in his treatise to define philosophical difficulty; compound nouns in the form 'the old puzzle / dilemma / doubt / confusion', and so forth, occur 34 times, with corollary 'keys' and 'solutions' appearing a combined 49 times.

At no point does Bradley pair the key with a prison, or indeed in any metaphorical configuration wherein the key acts physically. Bradley's primary sense of the key is literary: 'A word or other device which enables the interpretation of an allegorical, cryptic, or other obscure work.' The key acts as more than a vague metonym for escaping solipsism: in the period, it could denote a 'solution,' the 'section of a textbook containing answers to problems,' and a 'means of translating a foreign text.'[130] The latter sense was demonstrably familiar to

[127] Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 410–4, in *TSEP*, I, p. 70.
[128] Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 73.
[129] ibid, p. 82.
[130] key, *n.* (senses 4a, 5aa, 5b, 7, 20), in *OED Online* (accessed 17 April 2023) [revised entry 2022].

Eliot, given that his Sanskrit copy of *The Twenty-Eight Upanishads* (1906) — from which the scaffolding for 'What the Thunder Said' is taken — was prefaced by a 'manuscript key' by C. R. Lanman which translated 'Da-da-da = *damyata datta dayadhvam*.'[131] In this sense, Lanman's key might be said to contain a key for deciphering the source text, which in turn acts as a key (in its architectural sense) for *The Waste Land*'s final section.

The world presents itself as a conundrum without solution, but the act of guessing is a patient and worthy response that is imaginatively rich precisely because its object resists comprehension. Ultimately, 'the solution of the world's enigma' lies in recognising 'the Absolute' that straddles 'without subtraction all those dualities' that snake their way into Eliot's later thinking. As Eliot surmised in his dissertation on Bradley, the imaginative potential of 'an animal or the infant mind' reckoning with a puzzle is equally transformative as 'the mind of the mathematician engaged upon a problem.'[132] The 'puzzles of immanent and transcendent object, of unreal and imaginary' as Eliot put it, naturally occur at all levels of experience, and as he would come to hold in *Four Quartets*, it is in these puzzles that humans venture beyond the condition of immanence, and imagine their way into new realities.

This is to say that the philosophical resonance of puzzlement was live in Eliot's thinking as early as his 1916 dissertation. Even earlier in Eliot's academic career, however, he was using puzzle metaphors to metonymise reading acts. In a seminar paper on causality delivered in March, 1914, Eliot dismissed explanatory efforts to subjugate puzzles to quantification: 'Causality is one of those puzzles which can be explained away but not explained: and to explain away is to dispose of only from a particular limited point of view.'[133] In a 1915 meeting of the Moral Sciences Club, Eliot rallied against philosophy's convergence on empiricism, arguing that 'to reduce the world into a set of formulae is to let it slip through our fingers in a fine dust; but to fly into an emotional orgy or retire into a sunlit stupor is to let

[131] Quoted in *TSEP*, I, p. 699.
[132] Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (Faber, 1964), p. 16.
[133] Eliot, 'Cause as ideal construction', in *TSECP*, I, *Apprentice Years 1905–18*, ed. by Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard, pp. 126–128 (p. 126).

the world slip through our fingers in a thin smoke.'[134] Again, Eliot is endorsing a middle ground that harnesses both sides of the duality. At the beginning of the lecture, Eliot defined the task of philosophy as one of simplification using a textual-editing metaphor: 'to disentangle the riddling oracles of the world, to paragraph and punctuate them and insert the emphases; a work of great but certainly of only relative value, our pride in which must be ever corrected by the reflection that what is explained outlasts any of its explanations; explanations which it generates, sustains, and to which it allows that scant measure of validity which they possess.' The explanatory gap is the lacuna into which poetry rushes, *horror vacui*, to do something that more formal modes of philosophy cannot. Poetry leverages the double domain of the formula and the emotion, the dust and the thin smoke.

Eliot's notion of the naturally encrypted condition of the world, indeed, found specific expression in some drafted lines ultimately abandoned for *The Waste Land*. In a sequence struck through by Pound, who censorially deemed it 'B—ll—S', Eliot describes the tremulous world of the London pavement:

> Some minds, aberrant from the normal equipoise
> ~~(London, your people is bound upon the wheel!)~~
> Record the motions of these pavement toys
> And trace the cryptogram that may be curled
> Within the~~se~~ faint perceptions of the noise
> Of the movement, and the lights![135]

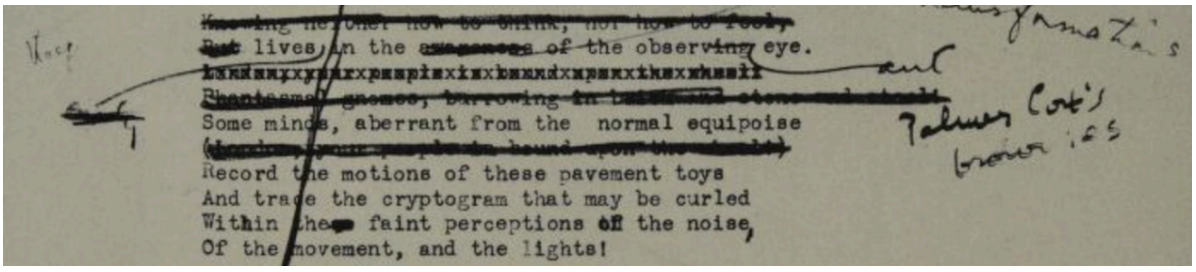

Figure 31: Pound's comments on discarded lines from *The Waste Land*

[134] Eliot, 'The Relativity of the Moral Judgement', in *TSECP*, I, *1905–18*, pp. 197–213 (p. 198).
[135] Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. by Valerie Eliot (Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp. 30–31.

Helen Vendler has drawn attention to these discarded lines as evidence of Eliot's self-positioning as a 'watchful seismograph' of the metropolitan space, a zone of generative 'musical cryptograms' and 'psychic heartbeats.'[136] A cryptogram is 'a piece of cryptographic writing; anything written in code or cipher,' and was first recorded in 1827.[137] Eliot went on to endorse the comparison of the metropolitan order with perceptual puzzles in his editorial feedback for Frederick Prokosch's *The Carnival* (1938), in which Eliot singled out the verb 'puzzles' as something that must be retained for publication:

> Many now sleep in the swarming arms of the cities:
> In listless Vienna, and southward where sinking
> Venice nuzzles her waters; and broken Toledo
> And Prague, the city of endless saints and scholars;
>
> And sulky Berlin, instinctive and strict as a beetle,
> And deep in her webs, the puzzles of Moscow,
> And eastward the enormous wall no longer the guardian
> Of magic and poise; and frightened, frightening Tokio.[138]

Eliot's approval of Prokosch's stanzas is due perhaps in part to their similarity to Eliot's 'Falling towers' sequence in *The Waste Land*, narrating in a list the rupture of contemporary international cities. His singular approval for 'puzzles' as an internal rhyme for 'nuzzles' in the preceding stanza also recalls by echo the 'muzzle' of 'yellow smoke' in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915).[139]

Vendler's characterisation of Eliot's cryptogram as essentially sonic or rhythmic, however, stops at the line break, and ignores the enjambed genitives: 'Of the noise / Of the movement, and the lights!' It is not noise alone that forms Eliot's traceable cryptogram: it is the sensory overload of the urban world at large, creating perceptual puzzles 'within the faint perceptions' of these elements, rather than within them unmediated. Rather than being about rhythm in particular, Eliot's use of 'cryptogram' elsewhere evokes the difficulty of textual

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[136] Helen Vendler, '*The Waste Land* Revisited', in *Yale Review*, 1 December 1990.
[137] cryptogram, *n* .(sense 1), in *OED Online* (accessed 15 April 2023) [revised entry 2022].
[138] Frederick Prokosch, 'Ode', in *The Carnival* (Chatto & Windus, 1938), pp. 41–49; Eliot to Prokosch (undated), in *Letters*, VIII, p. 981.
[139] Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', l. 16, in *TSEP*, I, p. 5.

hermeneutics, alike with John Maynard's notion about Newton's cryptographic imagination. Contemporaneously, Eliot's preface to *Homage to John Dryden: Three Essays on Poetry of the Seventeenth Century* (1924, collecting essays of 1921) refers to profound notions 'preserved in cryptogram' that require serious scholarly attention.[140] In 'Author and Critic' (1955), Eliot describes the 'partial deciphering of cryptograms' that form a verbal 'tissue' in *Finnegans Wake* as the central feature of the work.[141]

In the same year *The Waste Land* was published, Pound described Paris for *The Dial* with similar recourse to the metropolitan space as a kind of palimpsest, prefiguring the syntactic notion of 'urban texts' that Michel de Certeau would later theorise in 'Walking in the City' (1980).[142] Pound argues that 'In a city the visual impressions succeed each other, overlap, overcross […] They are often a flood of nouns with verbal relations.'[143] Pound's prepositional liberty with 'overcross' enacts the verbal relativity at work, with the city's interrelations even encroaching on the prefixes levied at it; he converts the universe into a sentence diagram.

There is certainly an affinity between the sensory overload and puzzlement that Vendler evokes, but it is more specifically about how these *qualia* create and confound reading acts, and is clearly used to service more than mere 'sarcasm', as Stephen Matthews has argued.[144] The 'cryptogram', indeed, had one primary association for readers in the era: the 'Agony Column' of *The Times*, in which public announcements were encoded for the sake of frivolous and solemn solving alike. Examples of these range from the straightforwardly enciphered — 'ftq nqzf ar qhqdk ymze yuzp' for 'the bent of every man's mind' (*The Times*, 1853) — to the stubbornly impenetrable — 'S. lmpi. F. npi' for 'All is well' (*The Times*, 1855).[145] The latter is taken from a popular sequence of cryptograms known by the moniker 'J. de W.',

[140] Eliot, *Homage to John Dryden: Three Essays on Poetry of the Seventeenth Century* (Hogarth Press, 1924), p. i.
[141] Eliot, in 'Author and Critic' (1955), in *TSECP*, VIII, *Still and Still Moving, 1954–65*, ed. by Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard, pp. 53–61 (p. 58).
[142] Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City', in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (University of California Press, 1984).
[143] Pound, quoted in Hollis, *Biography of a Poem*, p. 229.
[144] Stephen Matthews, *T. S. Eliot and Early Modern Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 81.
[145] See Jean Palmer, *The Agony Column Codes and Ciphers* (Authors OnLine Ltd., 2005).

which ran from 1850–1855 and accrued a cult status because of being, as editor Alice Clay put it in 1881, 'couched in an unintelligible style.'[146] The anagrammatical varieties of these cryptograms are, indeed, strikingly similar with the poetry encoded in Eliot's *Fireside* puzzles. In separate (though also discarded) draft lines for *The Waste Land*, Eliot's scribbled revision equates (mis)spelling with the cryptogram:

> cryptogram/~~s~~ may ~~is~~/be curled
> And trace the ~~painful, ideal meaning~~ which ~~they spell~~
> ~~Indistinctly Vaguely~~
> ~~Doubtfully into~~ these faint perceptions
> faint of the noise
> Within ~~this penumbral s/consciousness~~[147]

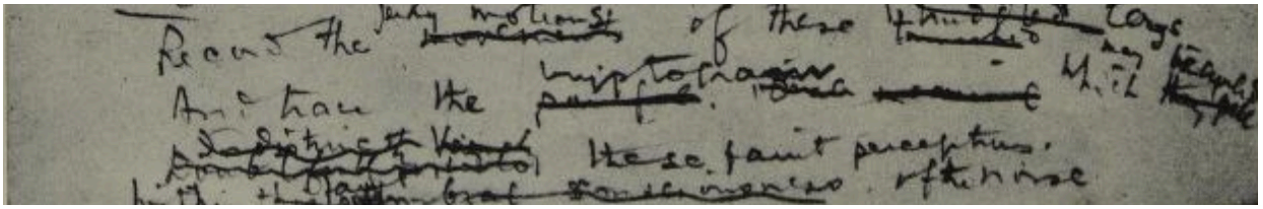

Figure 32: Manuscript draft of *The Waste Land*

The 'spell[ing]' capacity of the 'painful, ideal meaning' is replaced squarely with the word 'cryptogram'. Spelling captures this meaning with a suite of qualifying adverbs ('Indistinctly', 'Vaguely', and 'Doubtfully'), but the 'cryptogram' instead makes a deliberate virtue of all these deficiencies. Ironically, it clarifies and crystallises a more complex web of verbal referents. Cryptograms are at once an ideal meaning and the waywardness of the system that signifies them. If Eliot's revisions attest to his habit of cutting descriptors, tending to 'syntactic ellipsis rather than elaboration' as Hannah Sullivan has described it, or proceeding by 'deletion' according to Sebastian Knowles, then Eliot's revision has this in common with the cryptogram itself, insofar as Eliot describes it.[148] A 'good poem', after all, can bear 'a sort of cryptogram of a

[146] Palmer, *The Agony Columns*, p. 7.
[147] Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile*, p. 36.
[148] Hannah Sullivan, *The Art of Revision*, p. 102; Sebastian D. G. Knowles, *At Fault: Joyce and the Crisis of the Modern University* (University Press of Florida, 2018), p. 145.

mysticism only visible to the initiate,' as he put it in a review of Edmund Blunden's *On the Poems of Henry Vaughan* (1927).[149] The cryptogram does not displace the abstract notion of an imprecise lexicon, but rather compresses it into a form enriched by aporia, by interactive reading.

Hollis has argued that the collaborative revision performed on *The Waste Land* made it 'an event occurring in both men in unison, in creator and critic, in poet and reader, in two halves of a combining mind.'[150] Cryptograms function analogously, holding in focus the logical disjunct between different consciousnesses while simultaneously creating a space for their imaginations to intertwine. In this regard, *The Waste Land* is a little like a fallen chessboard, 'mak[ing] company between us' through a text where networked pieces redeem the opacity of one player to another. Caterina Fornero rightly points to the chess metaphor from Frederic de Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916), wherein words are arranged as counters of arbitrariness, opposition, and differentiality, to support the notion that *The Waste Land*'s fragmentary allusions have been referentially excised and newly constellated. An allusion signifies not only in relation to its original context, but within the chance juxtapositions of its new surroundings.[151] The original title of the section, 'In the Cage', intimates a certain immobility that Eliot made more mobile, more mechanically free in 'A Game of Chess'; like 'chess, but with dice', to paraphrase Peter Krawietz on sport's capacity to blend structure and contingency.[152]

Chess, after all, was one of Eliot's self-described 'passions', and in the 1936 inventory of the Eliots' library (Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. b. 20), a chessboard was indexed as if it were

[149] Eliot, 'The Silurist', in *TSECP*, III, *1927–29*, ed. by Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli and Ronald Schuhard, pp. 190–194 (p. 190).
[150] Hollis, *Biography of a Poem*, p. 363.
[151] Caterina Fornero, 'Chess is the Game Wherein I'll Catch the Conscience of the King: The Metaphor of the Game of Chess in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*', *Yeats Eliot Review*, 22.2 (Summer 2005), pp. 2–6 (p. 5).
[152] Peter Krawietz, quoted in Ahmed Walid, 'Football is like chess, but with dice' (29 May 2022), <https://zuishek.medium.com/football-is-like-chess-but-with-dice-dbd5861419b9> (accessed 17 March 2025).

a book, sandwiched between an edition of Seneca and Roger Fry's *A Sampler of Castile*.[153] Eliot was surrounded by literary figures for whom chess was more than a mere diversion.[154] After reading Alfred Kreymborg's *Puppet Plays* in 1923, Eliot wrote to the poet to inquire after how he might stage his own production: 'By the way, how do you make a puppet? As I think I told you, I want to build a small theatre — a box small enough to stand on a table 3 x 3 ft. — and preordain every move and gesture and grouping. How do you make faces for the little devils?' Responding to Eliot's desire to preordain, with more than a hint of Prufrock in the desire to 'make faces,' Kreymborg responded to advise that he use 'papier mâché and chess pieces.'[155] Kreymborg was a semi-professional chess hustler, perhaps explaining the surplus of pieces available to him. Neither John Bell, nor Kenneth Gross, two academics specialising in the use of puppets in modernism, recall having seen a puppet so designed.[156] It is unclear whether Eliot took up Kreymborg's advice, though he had recently inherited a set of chess pieces (as well as a pocket chess set) from his father after his death in 1919. His father was midway through an ultimately unfinished postal chess game with Eliot's brother, Henry, when he died; Eliot later continued the tradition, sending his mother chess problems in 1919, challenging John Middleton Murray to correspond with him in a game of chess in 1927, and convening with John Hayward once a week in 1934 for a game.[157]

Eliot often wrote to Hale to recount these games, narrating in one instance how he overcame his shyness through chess aboard a transatlantic cruise in 1932:

> The voyage was like most voyages: first I was able to speak to myself and speak to no one; then my passion for chess got the better of me, and so I made the acquaintance of a couple of chess-playing professors from Toronto; and finally a very touching little girl of twenty or so,

[153] Vivienne Haigh Eliot, 'Personal account book; Household account books, Dec 1927–Apr 1932, Jan 1929–Jul 1930, Jul 1930–Apr 1932', in the Archive of Vivienne Haigh Eliot, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. misc. c. 621–3.
[154] Eliot, letter to Hale (29 September 1932), in *EHC*.
[155] Eliot, letter to Alfred Kreymborg (23 August 1923) and Kreymborg, letter to Eliot (14 January 1924), in *TSEL*, II, *1923–5*, p. 485.
[156] John Bell, email to the author (20 January 2023). Kenneth Gross, email to the author (19 January 2023).
[157] Henry Ware Eliot, letter to Thomas Lamb Eliot (3 January 1919), in *TSEL*, I, *1898–1922*, p. 314. Eliot, letter to Charlotte Champe Eliot (4 May 1919), in *Letters*, I, p. 164. Eliot, letter to John Middleton Murray (30 September 1927), III, p. 1751; Eliot, letter to Hale (23 March 1934), in *EHC*.

> who was with her father (also a professor from Toronto) made me dance and play shuffleboard.[158]

This was quite a literal case of the chessboard 'mak[ing] company' by allowing interpersonal communication through a non-verbal medium, and energising the notoriously embarrassable Eliot to the point he felt comfortable dancing. Real life may be incomprehensibly complex, but puzzlement mitigates that incomprehensibility by socialising the task of interpretation; puzzles are navigated interpersonally, and require that the individual mind experiences them in a manner conditioned by another. They programme the action of their reading while concurrently making space for free-footed, undetermined association.

Eliot's close friend and co-editor, Frank Morley (with whom Eliot stayed and bonded over cryptic crosswords and Monopoly while writing *The Rock* in 1933), foregrounded the capacity of chess to transcend intersubjectivity in his *My One Contribution to Chess* (1947). Morley, a mathematician by training, suggests a variant of chess based on an oversized board [see Figure 9] which would, by facilitating new interrelations, allow 'new possibilities, new openings, new combinations, new thoughts let loose in new directions.'[159]

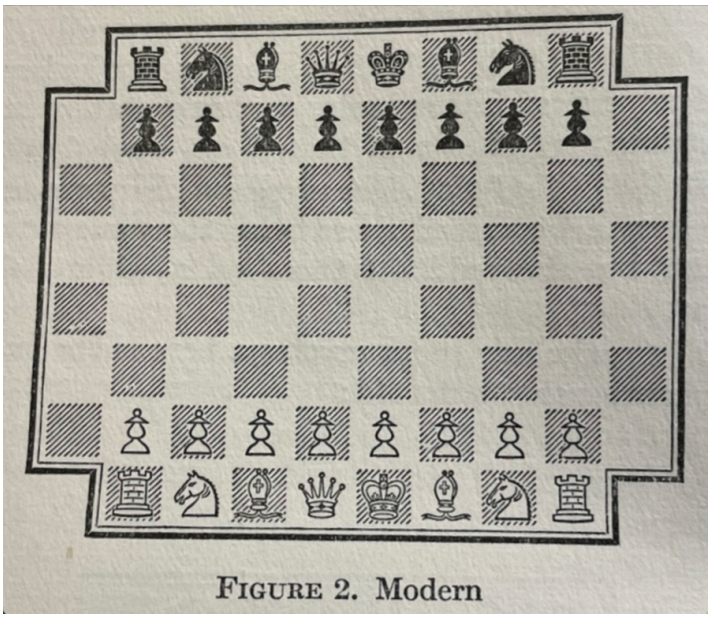

Figure 33: Morley's 'Modern' Chessboard

[158] Eliot, letter to Hale (29 September 1932), in *EHC*.
[159] Frank Morley, *My One Contribution to Chess* (Faber, 1947), p. 12.

The terms Morley uses to justify and rationalise his adjustments to the standard chessboard are striking for foregrounding combinatorial logic not as a route to dizzying solitude, of the mind blanking at itself, but instead as a way to ensure that you can understand your opponent. It is not, as Morley has it, 'a reaction by yourself, in isolation, but in a confident companionship.'[160] Sending out a gesture of this companionship, the epigraph to Morley's third chapter is from Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' — 'But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation' — as a way of explaining the need for chess to respond to the fracture of the modern world. Eliot, writing on 'The Metaphysical Poets' in 1921, had indeed suggested one way that poetry might likewise license 'new thought let loose in new directions':

> We can only say that it appears likely that poets, in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.[161]

Eliot's argument on the changing whims of modern poetry is often reduced to the single issue of 'difficulty' as if 'difficulty' were one flat, undynamic impasse. The verbal mode of the variety and complexity that forges this difficulty, indeed, is 'playing,' and the techniques that Eliot ventures for achieving the difficult play of modern poetry lie in the seemingly incompatible tasks of comprehension, allusion, and indirectness. The cryptic crossword — the puzzle to which Eliot would turn when he 'felt too stupid' for writing poetry — answered the extremes of this call with verbal felicities, redeeming the dislocation of language by making it do surprising things.[162]

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[160] Morley, *Contribution to Chess*, p. 79.
[161] Eliot, in *Selected Essays* (Faber, 1951), p. 13.
[162] Eliot, letter to Hayward (27 February 1938), in *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–38*, p. 1331.

iv. 'Higher Scrabble': Effanineffable Wordplay

Turning his attention away from 'literary matters' in 1924, the critic J. C. Squire reviewed two puzzle books for *The Observer*. He deemed Ronald Knox's *A Book of Acrostics* essential to the 'national cultivation of character,' but expressed disappointment at Hodder and Stoughton's *Cross-Word Puzzle Book*: 'It has the soothing effect of an easy kind of Patience,' he commented, though ultimately fell flat by being incapable of 'monstrous syntax' or 'dishonest tricks.'[163] The cryptic crossword had yet to be pioneered, though Squire would later champion Torquemada's puzzles in 1929, even complaining that if his own readers 'can look up words as egregious as these for Torquemada, you can look them up for me.'[164] In 1931, at a mock trial wherein the author Knox was accused of being Torquemada in front of a panel of celebrities (Dorothy Sayers was chief prosecutor), Squire even appeared as an expert witness.[165]

In 1924, however, Squire's prognosis for the crossword was pessimistic; as a bland hodgepodge of transactional synonymising, it was sure to lose out to the 'higher flights' of the acrostic. Ironically, Eliot had in 1921 accused Squire of similar literary traits. The figurehead of the so-called Squirearchy was a critic 'whose solemn trifling fascinates multitudes,' he claimed, diluting intellectual literary discourse with mass-market appeal.[166] Eliot later attacked Squire's proposal for a statue commemorating Frances Paulet, the inventor of Stilton. Eliot preferred Wensleydale; in 1939, Stephen Spender would nominate a wheel of Wensleydale as the prize for Faber's annual crossword competition.[167]

However performative their enmity, Eliot might have assented to Squire's 1924 comparison between crosswords and Patience. In the draft copy of the second of Eliot's Clark Lectures in 1926, there is a telling editorial intervention:

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[163] J. C. Squire, 'Puzzles', *Observer*, 30 November 1924, p. 4.
[164] Squire, 'The Multivious Man', in *The Observer* (April 7, 1929), p. 4.
[165] 'The Indictment of Father Knox', *Guardian*, 13 May 1931, p. 10.
[166] Eliot, 'London Letter', *Dial*, 70.6 (June, 1921), pp. 686–91 (p. 690).
[167] Eliot, letter to Spender (21 November 1939), in *Letters*, IX, p. 756.

> In the Kabbalah Donne was always interested. ~~It was the learned equivalent of the cross-word puzzle.~~[168]

Eliot's analogy was never issued, struck through on the manuscript copy from which he read his lecture. As discussed in Section 1, the homology between *patience* and *cabale* was still intact in an array of European languages. Eliot's separation between the crossword and intellectualism is perhaps explained by its nascency; in 1926, Eliot was not yet captivated by the crossword puzzle, the cryptic variety of which was still under development by Torquemada (Eliot later owned a 1964 copy of *The Connoisseur's Crossword Book* which featured selected puzzles by Torquemada, Ximenes, and Afrit).[169] This section will discuss Eliot's interest in cryptic crosswords, which would eventually become not only an insurmountable fixture in his daily routine, but also his coping mechanism for writer's block — a behaviour later inverted by Dylan Thomas, who once penned 'a long comic poem not to be published' precisely in order 'to prevent my doing crosswords.'[170]

The cryptic crossword has largely been the subject of posthumous denigration in critical accounts of Eliot's poetry. Angus Calder considers it a 'great pity' that Eliot suffered comparison with the 'crossword clue', an analogy that apparently makes Eliot seem 'remorselessly and schematically intellectual'.[171] Crawford disavows such an approach in *Young Eliot*, promising that 'the verse is nowhere here treated merely as a crossword puzzle' despite confessing that Eliot's poems 'still puzzle' him.[172] These critical responses, however, are typical of a reactionary mode against the early- to mid-twentieth-century notion that Eliot's poetry was puzzling, but one that reduces the 'puzzle' comparison to its most basic form, rather than considering its potential resonance with complex poetics. Eliot may have

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[168] Eliot, 'Donne and the Middle Ages', in 'The Clark Lectures: Lectures on the Metaphysical Poetry of the Seventeenth Century, with Special Reference to Donne, Crashaw and Cowley' (1926), in *TSECP*, II, *1919–26*, pp. 628–48 (p. 629).
[169] Eliot's copy of *The Connoisseur's Crossword Puzzle Book*, in 'Ephemera: Crossword Puzzle Books', 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/1–21.
[170] Dylan Thomas, *Letters to Vernon Watkins* (New Directions, 1957), p. 134.
[171] Angus Calder, *T. S. Eliot* (Humanities Press International, 1987), p. 3.
[172] Crawford, *Young Eliot*, p. 8; p. 2.

been an 'addict' of the crossword puzzle, as David Chinitz puts it, but there was more to his hobby than mere 'ostentation.'[173]

Indeed, when Huxley described modern poetry in 1935 as stimulating 'precisely the crossword puzzler's delight', the remark was not pejorative.[174] Cecil Day-Lewis criticised the use of the crossword in 1936 as a heuristic of difficulty, telling readers that 'puzzling out' a poem need not be incompatible with understanding it.[175] Though critics like W. T. Allison certainly deplored *The Waste Land* as a 'most puzzling poem [...] without any seeming coherence, logic, or anything else' in 1930, the poem was contemporaneously celebrated precisely for its puzzlement: for Mark van Doren, it was 'one of the greatest of modern poems' because it was 'one of the most puzzling.'[176] A poetry critic at the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* in 1932 thought maybe both were true: '*The Waste Land* may be a great poem; on the other hand, it may just be a rather pompous cross-word puzzle.'[177]

Since Louis Untermeyer's christening of the 'Cross-Word Puzzle School' of poetry in 1923 — wittily renamed 'Higher Scrabble' by D. E. S. Maxwell in 1977 — Eliot has been critically associated with the puzzle. In 1941, Eliot himself described 'the now familiar comparison of modern poetry to the crossword puzzle.'[178] Maxwell's mean-spirited comparison is unwittingly apt in Eliot's case. Valerie Eliot records Eliot's fondness for Scrabble in his later years: 'We used to stay at home and drink Drambuie and eat cheese and play Scrabble' (it is not recorded whether the cheese in question was Wensleydale).[179] Like his penchant for inebriated Patience, or indeed Torquemada's use of Scrabble tiles as a catalyst for anagrammatical rearrangement, Eliot was again and again drawn to the combinatorial alphabet as a valuable resource for recreation; illustratively, he described himself as 'puzzled

[173] David Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 155.
[174] Aldous Huxley, 'Puzzling Poetry', *Star Press*, 10 May 1931, p. 22.
[175] Cecil Day-Lewis, 'Advice on Modern Poetry', *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 29 February 1936, p. 6.
[176] W. T. Allison, 'Hog Butcher of the World', *Winnipeg Tribute*, 23 August 1930, p. 37. Mark van Doren, quoted in James Gabrielle, 'Mark van Doren not Disturbed by Advent of Machine Age', *Morning Call*, 25 October 1930, p. 20.
[177] 'Modern Authors and the Plain Man', *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 20 October 1932, p. 13.
[178] Eliot, quoted in Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, p. 184.
[179] Lorien Kite, 'Keeper of T. S. Eliot's Poetic Flame', *Financial Times*, 16 November 2012.

by the item of 5/1d' when querying a telephone bill, showing how the puzzle idiom could blend categories (in this case cruciverbal and monetary) in surprisingly generative ways.[180]

In a letter he wrote to Hayward in 1943, Eliot explained why he always brought along a copy of *The Times Literary Supplement* to Book Committee meetings:

> I always have the *TLS* for Book Committees, but confine myself to the list of recommended books and the crossword, which is insoluble, and therefore helps me through the duller parts of the session.[181]

Importantly, this followed his ritual of *The Times* crossword after breakfast: either at home according to Smart, or, as described in a 1950 *Time* profile of the poet, on the No. 49 bus to work.[182] Hayward himself compiled puzzles for *The Book Collector*, entries for which are now held in the group's archives.[183] As an endorsement of the notion that a puzzle need not be finished for it to have stimulated creative thinking, Eliot's esteem for 'insoluble' puzzles is striking. It also, perhaps, reinvests virtue into the kinds of puzzles that he often found too difficult to complete. Eliot had a sizeable collection of cryptic crosswords compiled by *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, alongside more specialist editions published by Penguin. While he recovered from a virus at a nursing home in 1960, Eliot used one of these Penguin cryptic collections to recuperate.[184]

Valerie Eliot retained 21 of Eliot's crossword books among his ephemeral archival material, as well as a folder of 23 newspaper clippings from *The Times*; unremarked on by researchers, none of these documents have been critically examined to date. Though three of the books in this collection dating to the last couple of years of Eliot's life are unattempted, the others — consisting of approximately 2,000 cryptic crosswords — are more or less completely solved.[185] In addition to his solutions, these books demonstrate an internally strict system of

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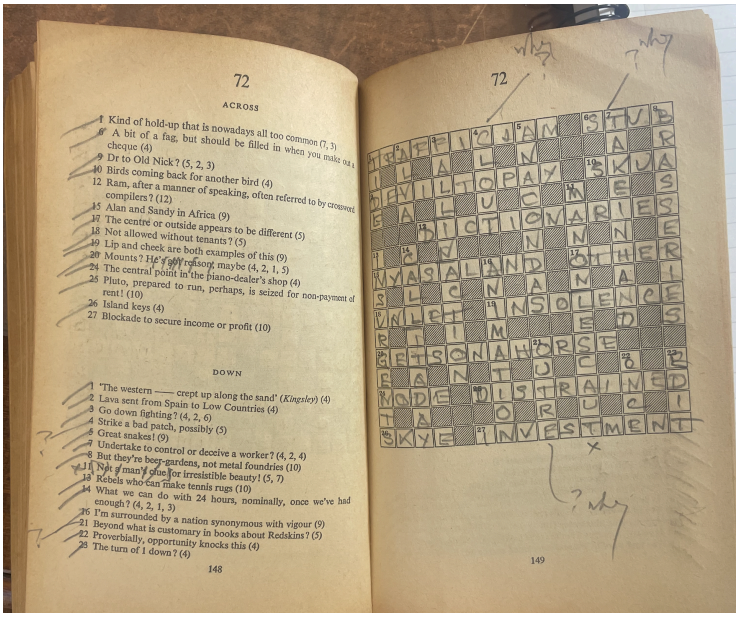
[180] Eliot, letter to Peter Jones Ltd (3 March 1926), in *TSEL*, III, *1926–27*, p. 356.
[181] Eliot, letter to Hayward (25 September 1943), quoted in *TSEP*, II, p. 184.
[182] 'Reflections: Mr Eliot', *Time*, 6 March 1950, pp. 22–6 (p. 22).
[183] 'Solutions to a Crossword Puzzle Set by Hayward, 1954', in *From the Fonds*, Cambridge University Library, GBR/0012/MS Add.9984/A/77.
[184] Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 331.
[185] Eliot, 'Ephemera: Crossword Puzzle Books', 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/1–20.

assessment: Eliot would score himself according to how many he had got wrong, though rarely surpassed a '-5' penalty for his efforts (apparently to keep his average up, these scores did not apply to majoratively abandoned puzzles).



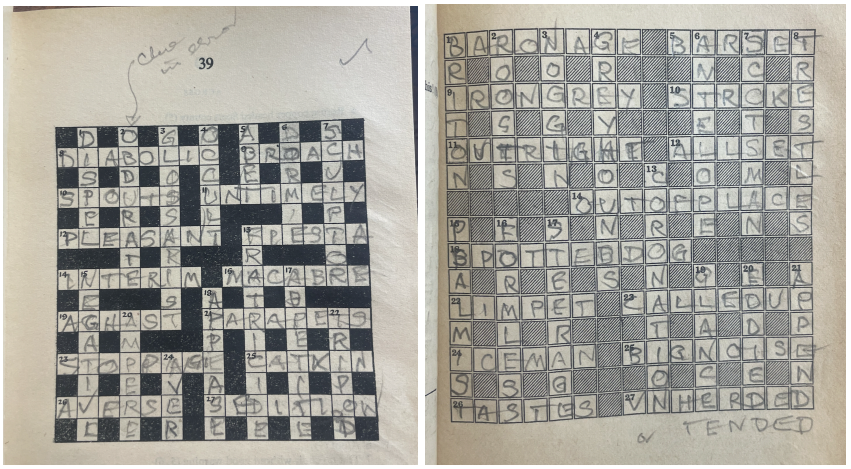


Figure 34: A selection of Eliot's marginal crossword annotations (c. 1960–62).

Eliot's cryptic collections bear witness to periods of sustained literary attention, dog-eared and palimpsestive as a result of the hundreds of hours it would have taken to solve each edition. Ever an editor, Eliot often appended commentary on clues he deemed particularly remarkable, for better or worse. In a 1962 collection, he circled a tricky pun on

the word 'wicked' (homographically, either an adjective for evil or for candles) for special plaudits, but later criticised a grid for its perplexity by repeatedly jotting 'why?' around it.[186] He spotted an anagrammatical mistake in the *Manchester Guardian*'s sixth collection, marking 'Clue in error', while venturing an alternative solution to '[Like sheep without a shepherd? (8)]' in *The Times*.[187]

Like Empson, Eliot often used these crossword puzzles — as sites of intense textual concentration — as apparent holding pens for other kinds of annotation. He scrawled sums over the covers of the fifth instalment in the *Daily Telegraph*'s crossword series, and in another Penguin collection, tallied uses of 'shepherd' versus 'swain' in an unnamed secondary text.[188] Interspersed with these curiosities are more recognisable instances of poetic inspiration. The inside back cover of Penguin's *Time and Tide* crossword collection (1954) contains a handwritten postscript:

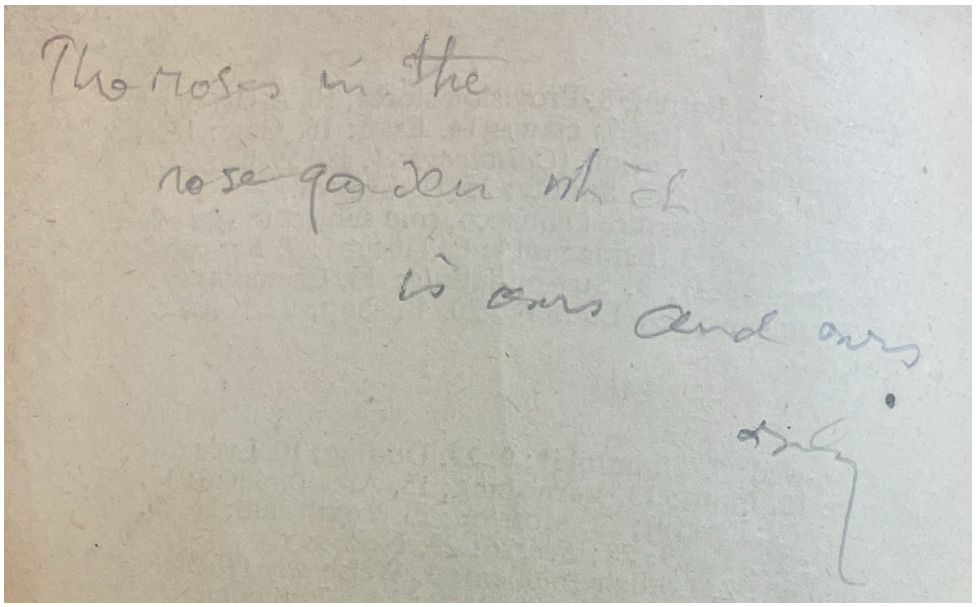


Figure 35: Marginal poetry in Eliot's copy of the *Time and Tide* crossword collection.[189]

[186] Eliot's copy of *Penguin Crossword Puzzle Book, No. 6*, 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/15, p. 160; p. 140.
[187] Eliot's copy of *The Manchester Guardian Fifth Crossword Puzzle Book*, 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/7, p. 39. Eliot's copy of *The Sunday Times Crossword Puzzle Book*, 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/10, p. 67.
[188] Eliot's copy of *Daily Telegraph Crossword Puzzle Book, No. 5*, 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/4. Eliot's copy of *The Manchester Guardian Fifth Crossword Puzzle Book*, 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/7, p. i.
[189] Eliot's copy of *Time and Tide: A Penguin Crossword Puzzle Book* (1954), 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/2.

An echo of the rose-garden motif in 'Burnt Norton', Eliot would several years later publish these exact words (removing the enjambement) in 'A Dedication to my Wife', a poem first published in 1963:

> No peevish winter wind shall chill
> No sullen tropic sun shall wither
> The roses in the rose-garden which is ours and ours only
>
> But this dedication is for others to read:
> These are private words addressed to you in public.[190]

According to Ricks and McCue's textual history of this poem, it was written between 1959–1962 specifically to furnish *The Elder Statesman* (1959) as an epigraph, though its final lines originally appeared in a modified form:

> To you I dedicate this book, to return as best I can
> With words a little part of what you have given me.
> The words mean what they say, but some have a further meaning
> For you and me only.[191]

The poem has conventionally been considered an address dedicating the play's publication event to Valerie; writing to Cyril Connolly in 1965, Eliot thanked him as 'the first sympathetic reader and critic to call attention to the unusual fact that I had at last written a poem of love and of happiness.'[192] Ricks and McCue assent to this chronology, noting that a further intermediate draft titled 'Dedication II' that appeared in *Valerie's Own Book* (an exercise book in which Eliot transcribed poems for his wife) dated to the 'late 1950s'.[193]

The surprising handwritten sketch for Eliot's 'Dedication' in his crossword collection, appearing as it does in one of few unstudied documents in his archive, seems to precede any one of these textual variants. Eliot typically completed his puzzle books within one or two years of their publication, for instance marking the front cover of *The Sunday Times Crossword Puzzle Book* (1961) with 'Done with 19 January 1962' to measure his solving speed with

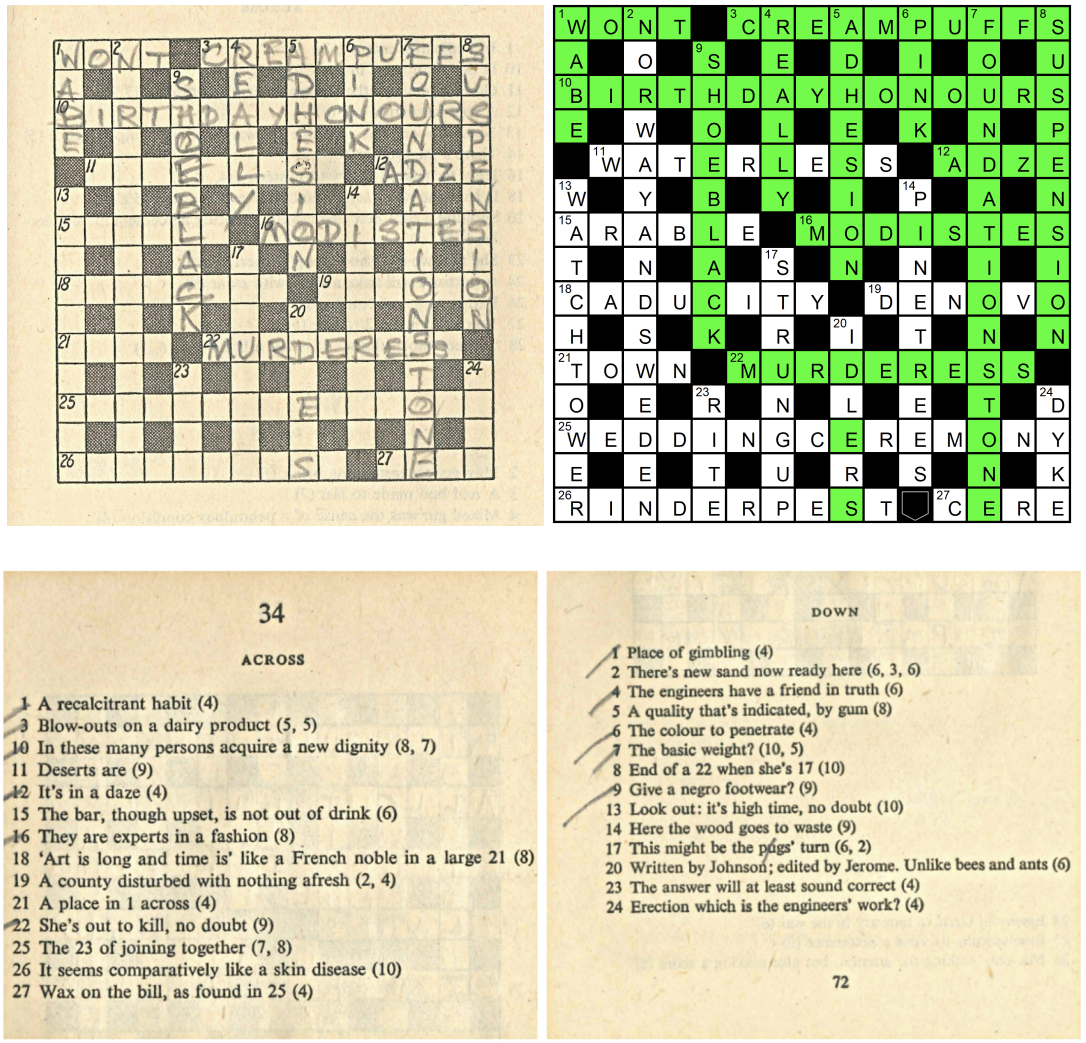
[190] Eliot, 'A Dedication to my Wife', ll. 8–12, in *TSEP*, I, p. 219.
[191] Eliot, 'To My Wife', ll. 8–12, in *The Elder Statesman* (Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1959), p. 10.
[192] Eliot, quoted in *TSEP*, I, p. 1061.
[193] *TSEP*, II, p. 920.

precision.[194] The publication of *Time and Tide* in 1954 suggests that Eliot penned this fragmentary rose-garden at least several years before the poem's later appearance. Its presence attests to Crawford's characterisation of Eliot's compositional process as 'saving up poems and bits of poems in a secret drawer, waiting for them to coalesce'; in this case, the crossword collection functions as a 'secret drawer' for verbal stimulation, apparently stirring up strands of poetry he could later tessellate, much like solving a crossword itself.

Seen in its original (though hitherto unnoticed) crossword context, Eliot's 'Dedication' begins to read a little differently. The idea of 'words mean[ing] what they say, but some have further meaning' could speak equally well for cryptic grammar as for the generative semiotics, perhaps, of being in love. While the dedication is 'for others to read', the words — first inscribed in a book traded between Eliot and Valerie — ultimately remain 'for you and for me' in 'private'. Eliot's metaphor of textual 'giving' and 'return', indeed, closely matches the terms in which he wrote notes at the front of several of his crossword books. The fifth edition of *Crossword Puzzles from The Times* includes a note from Eliot: 'Returned gratefully to Valerie by her lover Tom', a note repeated reciprocally in a shared copy of the fifth *Daily Telegraph Crossword Puzzle Book*. If *The Waste Land* used the chessboard metaphor to stage the torpor of a faltering or adversarial relationship, here crosswords figure as a redemptive ludic form, uniting souls through a commons of ambiguity rather than gridding them apart through brittle and automatic gameplay.

In 2017, Eliot's estate issued a challenge (hitherto unmet) for solvers to finish off one crossword that stumped Eliot.[195]

[194] Eliot's copy of *The Sunday Times Crossword Puzzle Book*, 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/13.
[195] T. S. Eliot's Crossword Puzzles' (blog post), T. S. Eliot Foundation, 10 March 2017, <https://tseliot.com/foundation/t-s-eliots-crossword-puzzles/> (accessed 7 February 2025).



34

ACROSS

1 A recalcitrant habit (4)
3 Blow-outs on a dairy product (5, 5)
10 In these many persons acquire a new dignity (8, 7)
11 Deserts are (9)
12 It's in a daze (4)
15 The bar, though upset, is not out of drink (6)
16 They are experts in a fashion (8)
18 'Art is long and time is' like a French noble in a large 21 (8)
19 A county disturbed with nothing afresh (2, 4)
21 A place in 1 across (4)
22 She's out to kill, no doubt (9)
25 The 23 of joining together (7, 8)
26 It seems comparatively like a skin disease (10)
27 Wax on the bill, as found in 25 (4)

DOWN

1 Place of gimbling (4)
2 There's new sand now ready here (6, 3, 6)
4 The engineers have a friend in truth (6)
5 A quality that's indicated, by gum (8)
6 The colour to penetrate (4)
7 The basic weight? (10, 5)
8 End of a 22 when she's 17 (10)
9 Give a negro footwear? (9)
13 Look out: it's high time, no doubt (10)
14 Here the wood goes to waste (9)
17 This might be the pugs' turn (6, 2)
20 Written by Johnson; edited by Jerome. Unlike bees and ants (6)
23 The answer will at least sound correct (4)
24 Erection which is the engineers' work? (4)

72

Figure 34: An unfinished cryptic crossword, partially filled by Eliot. My full solution (top right), with Eliot's entries highlighted in green.

The clues that Eliot solved correctly required the following verbal contortions:

1a. WONT, 'recalcitrant' because it is a homophone of the stubborn retort, WON'T.
3a. CREAM PUFFS, doubly defined in patisserie and in persons lacking moral fibre.
10a. BIRTHDAY HONOURS, a circuitous definition.
12a. ADZE, a self-indicating anagram of DAZE in a daze.
16a. MODISTES, a pun on the phrase 'in a fashion'.
22a. MURDERESS, an overliteral take on the idiom 'out to kill'.

1d. WABE, an allusion to Lewis Carroll's 'The Jabberwocky'.
4d. REALLY, a charade of RE (Royal Engineers) with ALLY.
5d. ADHESION, an overliteral take on the dialect phrase 'by gum'.
6d. PINK, doubly defined as a colour and as a verb of piercing.
7d. FOUNDATION STONE, a pun on 'basic'.
8d. SUSPENSION, euphemistically describing the fate of a MURDERESS STRUNG UP
9d. SHOE BLACK, a dehumanising charade.

By contrast, there were plenty of clues that eluded Eliot, including clues which made interlinear reference to the solutions he had already ascertained:

> **11a.** WATERLESS, a privative definition of deserts.
> **15a.** ARABLE, a reversal of BAR ('upset') within ALE ('is not out of drink').
> **18a.** CADUCITY, a charade of A DUC ('a French noble') inside CITY, a large TOWN.
> **19a.** DE NOVO, an anagram of DEVON ('A county disturbed') with O ('nothing').
> **21a.** TOWN, an anagram of WONT.
> **25a.** WEDDING CEREMONY, the RITE of union.
> **26a.** RINDERPEST, an imaginary comparative form of the adjective RIND PEST.
> **27a.** CERE, the wax on a bird's bill cleverly contained inside the letters of weddingCEREmony.
>
> **2d.** NORWAY AND SWEDEN, an anagram of NEW SAND NOW READY.
> **13d.** WATCHTOWER, a pun on 'high time' and 'look out' (n.).
> **14d.** PINE TREES, using PINE in its bereaved sense.
> **17d.** STRUNG UP, an anagram of PUGS TURN
> **23d.** RITE, a homophone of 'right'
> **24d.** DYKE, defined in a roundabout manner.

It is also worth noting Eliot's correct intuition for the E and S in 20d, despite not having the confidence to inscribe their correspondent solutions, WEDDING CEREMONY and RINDERPEST. Taken together, he had half the correct letters for the solution, but the clue — '[Written by Johnson; edited by Jerome. Unlike bees and ants (6)]' — gave him pause for thought. He had only made it as far as ▫🅳▢🅴▢🆂 before giving up, presumably at this point on the crossword at large. He had seemingly forgotten Samuel Johnson's *The Idler* (despite having written on Johnson extensively), as well as Jerome K. Jerome's *The Idler* (despite having been his neighbour in Marlow from 1917–1920), which, alongside a nod to nature's busiest workers — the classical models of allusion itself — yielded the answer, IDLERS.

Ironically, or perhaps felicitously, Eliot's beloved *The Times* had warned in 1925 that the craze for crosswords threatened to zombify the literary habits of the nation, and that 'everywhere, at any hour of the day, people can be seen cudgelling their brains for a word meaning idler, or whatnot.'[196] Eliot's voracious appetite for puzzles certainly seemed idling to his colleagues, who often found him covertly smuggling *The Times* crossword into 'tedious'

[196] 'Cross-Word Puzzles: An Enslaved America', *The Times*, 9 December 1924, p. 17.

editorial meetings.[197] Undeterred by Ezra Pound's disdain for such games as 'an abomination' in his *ABC of Reading* (1934), Eliot held the puzzle in enough esteem to consider 'finding a reference to myself and my works in *The Times* crossword' a crowning achievement, aspiring to the same allusive network in which he had chewed, without satisfaction, over Johnson and Jerome.[198] His own crossword collection testifies to these moments of self-recognition: in his copy of the seventh edition of *The Times Crossword Puzzles* (1963), the very last clue he solved was [16. Mr Eliot's was a family one (7)] for REUNION before leaving the rest of the collection unattempted.[199]

Flummoxed by bees and ants, Eliot nevertheless wound up as a fly. In a strange misdirection of his ambition for an afterlife in the cryptic crossword, he is often abbreviated and doubled to clue tsetse, an African insect known for transmitting insomnia (the same malady Dr Sweany had offered to cure in *Fireside*). There is an aptness in an author some found deterringly sleep-inducing, and lampooned after *The Waste Land* as 'a maggot breeding in the corruption of poetry' by F. L. Lucas in 1923, metamorphosing posthumously into a tsetse.[200] The persona went beyond crosswords: In *Ushant: An Essay* (1952), Conrad Aiken satirised Eliot as a 'Tsetse', perhaps taking its cue from the cruciverbal contortion now commonplace.[201] Eliot's opus may have struck Lucas as as a 'toad', but Eliot actively embraced animal personae throughout his career, not only as the Old Possum behind a *Book of Practical Cats* (1939), but also as a March Hare, an apteryx, and an elephant among his coworkers at Faber. He addressed letters to Ezra Pound with 'Dear Rabbit', and while preparing to publish Marianne Moore's 'The Jerboa', wondered if Pound was 'maybe not a Rabit at all but a Gerboa a

[197] Peter du Sautoy, 'T. S. Eliot: Personal Reminiscences', *Southern Review*, 21.4, 1 October 1985, p. 947. Robert Sencourt, *T. S. Eliot: A Memoir* (Garnstone, 1971), p. 163.
[198] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 95; Eliot, letter to Sydney Castle Roberts (November 1958).
[199] Eliot's copy of *The Times Crossword Puzzles, No. 7* (1963), C/6/1/21, p. 5.
[200] F. L. Lucas, 'Review' [*The Waste Land*], *New Statesman*, 3 November 1923, p. 116.
[201] Conrad Aiken, *Ushant: An Essay* (W. H. Allen, 1952), p. 96.

Little Animil wich I understan does illustrate the Quantum Theory by being in two Places at once even if he don't understand it.'[202]

Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939) is riddled with precisely this riddle: with the treachery and relativity of nomenclature, and with the slipperiness of any definite taxonomies. 'The Naming of Cats' that opens the collection of verse begins declaratively: 'The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter, / It isn't just one of your holiday games; / You may think at first I'm as mad as a hatter / When I tell you, a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES.'[203] The first is the 'sensible everyday' name; the second is the 'particular' name; the third and final name is the 'ineffable effable / Effanineffable / Deep and inscrutable singular Name.' The influence of Carrolian and Learian nonsense literature on Eliot has been documented at length, and indeed, Eliot nods at *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in his sustained reference to the Mad Hatter; what has remained unaccounted for, is the affinity between these strategies of redefinition and the world of the crossword. In 1933, while staying at the Morley's and shortly before drafting the chorus parts of *The Rock*, Eliot wrote to Hale to report: 'I look at *The Times*, but feel at the moment careless of politics, and interested chiefly in the composition of nonsense verses. In the evening we solve the *Times* crossword puzzles.'[204] The following month, Eliot wrote on his birthday to describe his two chief enthusiasms as 'light reading' and 'crossword puzzles' in contrast to the wearying pull of constructing poetry.[205] Eliot's 'Munkustrap, Quaxo, or Coricocat' read like a parody of the crosswordese he was immersing himself in, alphabetically mandated names affixed to an unknowable other, an effanineffable other, like the sea anemone, subject to sustained imaginative pressure.

Eliot was, indeed, personally aware of the prevalence of obscure animals in the crossword, and made the joke himself. In 1968, Stephen Sondheim quipped that American

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[202] Quoted in Hugh Haughton, 'The Possum and the Salamander: T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore,' *Poetry Society* 110.2 (Summer 2020), p. 79–91.
[203] Eliot, 'The Naming of Cats', l. 18, in *TSEP*, II, p. 24.
[204] Eliot, letter to Emily Hale (11 August 1933), in *EHC*.
[205] Eliot, letter to Hale (26 September 1933), in *EHC*.

crosswords — lacking the gamified doubt of his preferred British cryptic — relied merely on the rote memorisation of obscure 'Bantu hartebeest' and their ilk.[206] Eliot beat him to the punchline: in an anonymous address on the occasion of the blessing of the New Font, Narthex and Organ of an American parish in 1931, Eliot quipped that 'I am one of those — I suspect fairly numerous — who until a year or so ago would have thought that a Narthex was one of those African antelopes which are so useful to makers of crossword puzzles.'[207] Curiously, another such antelope, the eland, appears in Eliot's introduction to *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes in 1937, nodded to by Eliot in support of a valorisation of puzzlement: 'Robin Vote (the most puzzling of all, because we find her quite real without quite understanding the means by which the author has made her so) is *the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear*' [sic].[208]

In an 1915 poem from *Inventions of the March Hare* entitled 'Portrait of a Lady', Eliot daydreamed of being footloose from animal taxonomy:

> And I must borrow every changing shape
> To find expression… dance, dance,
> Like a dancing bear,
> Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.[209]

Freewheeling through taxonomies, Eliot's shapeshifting sensibility recalls his fascination with 'The Mad Gardener's Song' from Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno*, rewritten in nine distinct versions in *Fireside*. The premise of the poem is that one thing is mistaken for another in seemingly absurd ways. In Carroll's original poem, a matrimonial letter is mistaken for 'an Elephant / That practised on a fife'; a vegetable-pill is mistaken for 'a Kangaroo / That worked a coffee-mill.' The young Eliot reworked Carroll's verses with different referents in various editions of his 'Poet's Corner' section:

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[206] Stephen Sondheim, 'How to do a Real Crossword Puzzle', *New York Magazine*, 8 April 1969), p. 11.
[207] Eliot, 'The Blessing of the New Font, Narthex, and Organ' (October, 1931), in *TSECP*, IV, *1930–33*, p. 850.
[208] Eliot, 'Introduction to *Nightwood*' (1937), in *TSECP*, V, *1934–39*, p. 459.
[209] Eliot, 'Portrait of a Lady', III, 26–9, in *TSEP*, I p. 13.

I thought I saw a elephant
A-riding on a 'bus
I looked again, and found
Alas! 'Twas only us.

I thought I saw a kangaroo,
A-jumping on the ground,
I looked again and lo!
It was an earthen mound![210]

Eliot's speaker, perpetually engaged in the task of looking again, of revision, finds his object renewed in the act of seeing. The familiar thing returns in an unfamiliar form. For Eleanor Cook, whose study of the figure of the enigma stops at the end of the 17th century, surprising congruency is the essence of the trope: 'Rhetorically, the trope of dark similitude highlights strange joinings, odd borders, disrupted boundaries. Familiar border lines are reconfigured in funny or uncomfortable ways. Things change their look.'[211] The poet, Rowan Williams concurs, is definitionally invested in this act of re-looking, 'under the discipline of routinely trying to see one thing through another,' and hence 'puzzling' is a human response to a world of things in which categories keep splintering into one another.[212] Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* attempts to map out these false equivalences at length, drawing on alphabetisation to algebrise contingent relationships. 'A and B are identical', but, he points out, by virtue of linguistic non-identity, are never truly the same. This, as Bradley terms it, is 'the old puzzle as to the connection of diversity with unity.'[213]

Bradley's paradigmatic example, a lump of sugar, begins to crumble even as the perceiver begins to aggregate information about it, leaving only an idea of sugar. In his postgraduate dissertation on the philosophy of Bradley, Eliot enlisted Bradley's sugar to characterise the inevitably indirect nature of experience. Eliot quotes Bradley's contention that 'Sugar is obviously not mere whiteness, mere hardness, and mere sweetness: for its reality lies somehow in its unity. But if, on the other hand, we inquire what there can be in the

[210] Eliot, 'Poet's Corner', I; VI, in *TSEP*, *II*, p. 217.
[211] Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles*, p. 244.
[212] Williams, *The Edge of Words*, p. 131.
[213] Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 110.

thing beside its several qualities, we are baffled once more [...] Sugar is, of course, not the mere plurality of its different adjectives.'[214] Suggestively, Eliot would use the same criteria to praise Wensleydale as 'the most interesting of all cheeses' in a letter to Stephen Spender in 1939: 'its peculiarity is that no two mouthfuls taste exactly alike. The result is that no two spoonfuls of Wensleydale are identical, and even the same spoonful would be different if eaten in a different order of mouthfuls.'[215] The contortions of thought convert their object into a puzzle: even something as mundane and quotidian as a mouthful of cheese is unknowable, ever reconfigured in a web of relativity. Like George Perec's prescription for crossword writing, one solution must be cluable in 100 ways; Perec devised 28 for IO before giving up, though Charlie Methven (alias Methuselah) has more recently penned 50 cryptic clues for the short word.[216] Descriptive strategies capture only ideas of things, never the thing itself. As Eliot would put it in *Four Quartets*:

> And so each venture
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate,
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating
> In the general mess of imprecision of feeling[217]

If modernist poetics are paradigmatically concerned with the recalcitrance of the world, with inadequate language shabbily raiding the inarticulate, then it is little wonder that its proponents were so often drawn to the metaphor of the word puzzle. Puzzles structuralise the predicament, on the one hand redeeming the challenge of unknowability by parcelling up the world with deductive logic, and on the other hand eluding resolution, only elucidating insofar as they expose more metaphors, more fictions.

The metaphor of puzzling — both as a byword for philosophical difficulty, and as a verb for philosophical clarification — recurs throughout Bradley's treatise. Bradley asks the reader 'What is the exit from this puzzle?' while simultaneously prizing the affordances of

[214] Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 40.
[215] Eliot, letter to Stephen Spender (21 November 1939), in *TSEL*, IX, *1939–41*, p. 435.
[216] Methven, '50 Clues for IO', <https://charliemethven.com/otherstuff#io> (accessed 17 March 2025).
[217] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, II, v, 7–10, in *TSEP*, I, p. 191.

puzzlement in terms of exposing paradoxical truth.[218] Bradley, for instance, feels closer to the Absolute when 'all the puzzles as to adjectives and relations and terms' combine than when the world is neatly bundled up into analytical units.[219] Matthew Hollis's description of Eliot's syntax at the start of *The Waste Land* as 'a sequence of nouns with guardian adjectives' is striking in this regard, as if the spirit of diagrammatic counter language was homologous in Eliot's poetic project *ab initio*.[220]

Eliot, while enjoying needling some of the contradictions in Bradley's logic, nonetheless finds a similar imaginative energy in the possibilities disclosed by puzzlement. As he understood it, the philosophical drive persistently rewrites everyday experiences as puzzles to enjoy and never quite solve; in this regard, experience is no more pure 'in the animal or the infant mind than in the mind of the mathematician engaged upon a problem.'[221] The gap between appearance and reality is bridged with metaphors, with nomenclature, that 'may give a very imperfect cue as to their nature' but are 'nevertheless of the greatest importance.' As Eliot would assert in his essay 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens' in 1927, the 'greatest mysteries rely less on the beauty of the mathematical problem and much more on that intangible human element' that offers itself to curiosity, to the logic of imagination.[222] It is not despite, but because 'Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break', that poetry is energetic, and constitutionally engaged in the task of estrangement, of making things unfamiliar, so that it becomes available to the energy of guessing.[223]

Eliot often had to guess. In 1936, he wrote to John Hayward about a pleasurable lunch with 'an old buffer whose name I never knew but whom I met once at lunch at Mrs Brocklebank's and with whom I frequently discuss *The Times* X-word puzzle (we got together over SPOKESHAVE).'[224] The old buffer, it transpires, was coincidentally the uncle of

[218] Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 169.
[219] ibid, p. 99.
[220] Hollis, *Biography of a Poem*, p. 230.
[221] Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, p. 16.
[222] Eliot, 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens' (1927), in *TSECP*, III, *1927–29*, p. 167.
[223] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, I, v, 13–4, in *TSEP*, I, p. 183–4.
[224] Eliot, letter to Hayward (13 October 1936), in *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–38*, p. 974.

Christopher Isherwood, whose translation of Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals* Eliot had introduced in 1930. The crossword clue in question appeared in *The Times* Puzzle No. 2,078 at 3a: 'This tool would provide a nickname for a talkative barber (10)'.[225] The answer, SPOKESHAVE, is derived punningly, as is the self-referential '[12a. A longer name for these clues? (14)]' (CROSSQUESTIONS). Other clues in the grid pored over by Eliot and Isherwood, however, require nuts-and-bolts reassembly of words and allusions. Some were topical: '[24a. Delay is confusing for an actress (7)]' anagrammatically conjures [Alice] Delysia, a star of interwar English musical theatre. Others were literary: '[20d. Succeed as a magician with nothing (7)]' yields PROSPER, with O ('nothing') subtracted from the Shakespearean sorcerer. When Eliot encountered Prospero in his own copy of *The Sunday Times Crossword Puzzle Book* two decades later, he failed to solve the clue in the other direction — '[For him it is nothing to succeed (8)]' — scolding himself with a marginal 'X' for his impasse.[226]

The following year, Eliot would award 'a small parcel of wine, very sovereign against influenza' to 'the first person to solve the puzzle successfully' while raising money for the North Kensington Community Centre.[227] At the time, he was solving cryptic crosswords composed by Geoffrey Faber, and grumbling about the clues he could not decipher:

> Well I looked at your X-word puzzle and it is indeed a teaser; I think too difficult for me — I got two words. Why do the Welsh chemists keep whiskey? does that mean that they do Not keep whisky? There is a bottle of the latter, imported from Glasgow, in your cupboard.[228]

Eliot's frustration with Welsh intrusions into crosswords would recur only a few months later, lamenting in a letter to Enid Faber that Welsh 'waiters have the same irritating habit of taking away one's own *Times* with the x-word unfinished while one is asleep that our waiters have.'[229] The *Times* crossword of the day (Puzzle No. 2339) was indeed tricky, with one clue deploying

[225] 'Puzzle 2,078', *The Times*, 12 October 1936, p. 5.
[226] Eliot's copy of *The Sunday Times Crossword Puzzle Book* (c. 1960), p. 86, in 'Ephemera: Crossword Puzzle Books', 3 Kensington Court Gardens, C/6/1/13.
[227] Eliot, *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–38*, p. 1266. Eliot's copy of *The Sunday Times* C/6/1/13
[228] Eliot, letter to Geoffrey Faber (20 April 1937), in *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–38*, p. 2099.
[229] Eliot, letter to Enid Faber (16 August 1937), in *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–38*, p. 1726.

Squire's 'monstrous syntax' to ask: '9a. A number get rather warm about a liar (8)'.[230] The solution is MILLIARD, a now-obsolete word for billion, enclosing LIAR instead MILD. 19d, by contrast, wielded the kind of 'dishonest tricks' Squire had asked for: '19d. A nominal beginning (7)'. The solution is CAPITAL, as in a capital letter.

A year later, Eliot would again write to Enid Faber to moan that he could not solve a riddle she had sent him 'any more than I can solve today's cross-word puzzle.'[231] The impasse was unusual for Eliot, who was 'renowned for finishing *The Times* daily puzzle in record time' according to his friend E. W. F. Tomlin, who theorised that it 'reflected his sense of the inherent fragmentary nature of life.'[232] Eliot, indeed, once defended his subscription to *The Times* on the basis of its crossword puzzles and company reports, rather than its perceived appeasement of dictators and 'rather disturbing politics.'[233] Eliot's difficulty perhaps stemmed from the ratio of wordplay to redefinition of that morning's *Times* Puzzle No. 2,495, which skewed towards a greater density than usual of misleading clues.[234] The grid contained unindicated anagrams such as '[13a. Our pet lot of artists (6)]' (TROUPE), as well as non-sequitur homophones such as '[6d. Where to find a cedilla? (8)]' (UNDERSEA). Certain clues, if Eliot twigged them, might have appealed to his sense of the kinds of allusion at work in crosswords. '[14a. Poetic publicity? (7)]' (ADVERSE) forms a charade of 'verse' and 'ad' to define the uphill struggle of promoting literature. '[11a. Summon again for entertainment (6)]' (RECITE) points at the double possibility of reference, being at once a form of summoning and one of outward display.

Far from being an impoverished version of a 'learned' puzzle, Eliot continued to share the things he learned from crosswords in his correspondence. In a letter to John Hayward in 1941, Eliot reported: 'I have never been so berhymed since Pythagoras his time, as we were

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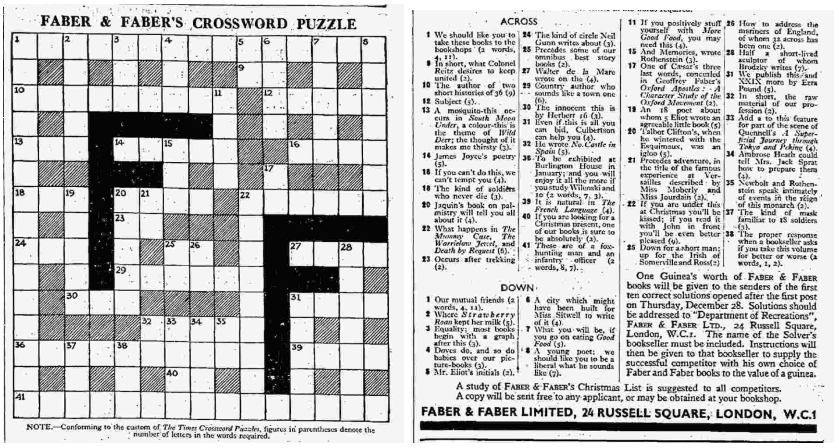
[230] 'Puzzle No. 2,339', *The Times*, 16 August 1937, p. 5.
[231] Eliot, letter to Enid Faber (16 February 1938), in *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–38*, p. 2101.
[232] Eric Walter, Frederick Tomlin, *T. S. Eliot: A Friendship* (Routledge, 1988), p. 87.
[233] ibid, p. 69.
[234] 'Puzzle No. 2,495', *The Times*, 16 February 1938, p. 5.

recently reminded by the X word.'[235] Eliot was referring to the previous day's *Times* Puzzle No. 3,424, in which the following clue was included: '[4d. Said she had never been so berhymed since Pythagoras' time (8)]'.[236] Eliot misquoted from *As You Like It*, recalling the apostrophe as a pronoun, in his recollection of the clue to Hayward. This particular *Times* puzzle was dense with literary references. '[24d. Byronic hero unmanned (4)]' solves for FRED, a bathetic un-man-ing of Byron's *Manfred* (1816–17). '[5d. Jonson's gift to Celia (6)]' more straightforwardly solves for WREATH, alluding to 'To Celia' by Ben Jonson. The constructor of this puzzle nods at this irreverent treatment of literary antecedent in the solution to '[27a. Change here for Reading (7,7)]', borrowing the appearance of a train announcement to yield LENDING LIBRARY. The surface demands a misreading of the word 'reading', thrown off the scent by a gratuitous capital letter. The puzzle seems to chide the solver throughout with this kind of poking, commanding '[9a. Reverse it to make it obscure (5)]' (TIMID, a reversal of 'dim it'), along with the slyly encouraging '[21a. Only a minor set-back (4)]' (DRAW, the word 'ward' set back).

One of the earliest extant references to Eliot in a crossword occurs in a Faber & Faber competition held on December 15, 1933.[237] The puzzle is themed around books available for purchase, and the rubric recommends that 'A study of Faber & Faber's Christmas List is suggested to all competitors.' The ten first winners were each to be awarded one guinea's worth of Faber & Faber books.

[235] Eliot, letter to Hayward (14 February 1941), in *TSEL*, IX, *1939–41*, p. 351.
[236] 'Puzzle No. 3,424', *The Times*, 13 February 1941, p. 5.
[237] 'Faber & Faber's Crossword Puzzle', *The Times*, 15 December 1933, p. 20.



FABER & FABER'S CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

1 We should like you to take these books to the bookshops (2 words, 4, 11).
8 In short, what Colonel Blimp desires to keep united (3).
10 The author of two short histories of 36 (9).
12 Subject (3).
13 A mosquito-this occurs in *South Moon Under*, a colour-this is the theme of *Wild Deer*; the thought of it makes me thirsty (3).
14 James Joyce's poetry (3).
16 If you can't do this, we can't tempt you (4).
18 The kind of soldiers who never die (3).
20 Jaquin's book on palmistry will tell you all about it (4).
22 What happens in *The Mooney Case*, *The Warrilow Secret*, and *Death by Request* (6).
23 Occurs after trekking (2).
24 The kind of circle Neil Gunn writes about (3).
25 Precedes some of our omnibus best story books (2).
27 Walter de la Mare wrote on this (4).
29 Country author who sounds like a town one (6).
30 The innocent this is by Herbert 16 (3).
31 Even if this is all you can bid, Culbertson can help you (4).
35 He wrote *No Castle in Spain* (3).
36 To be exhibited at Burlington House in January; and you will enjoy it all the more if you study Wilinski and so (2 words, 7, 3).
39 It is natural in *The French Language* (4).
40 If you are looking for a Christmas present, one of our books is sure to be absolutely (2).
41 These are of a fox-hunting man and an infantry officer (2 words, 8, 7).

DOWN

1 Our mutual friends (2 words, 4, 11).
2 Where *Strawberry Roan* kept her milk (3).
3 Equality: most books begin with a graph after this (3).
4 Dawes do, and so do babies over our picture-books (3).
5 Mr. Eliot's initials (2).
6 A city which might have been built for Miss Sitwell to write of it (4).
7 What you will be, if you go on eating *Good Food* (3).
8 A young poet: we should like you to be a liberal what he sounds like (7).
11 If you positively stuff yourself with *More Good Food*, you may need this (4).
15 And Memories, wrote Rothenstein (3).
17 One of Cæsar's three last words, cancelled in Geoffrey Faber's *Oxford Apostles: A Character Study of the Oxford Movement* (2).
18 An 18 poet about whom T. Eliot wrote an agreeable little book (5).
20 Talbot Clifton's, when he wintered with the Esquimaux, was an igloo (4).
21 Precedes adventure, in the title of the famous experience at Versailles described by Miss Moberly and Miss Jourdain (2).
22 If you are under this at Christmas you'll be kissed; if you read it with John in front you'll be even better blessed (6).
25 Down for a short man; up for the Irish of Somerville and Ross (2).
26 How to address the mariners of England, of whom 32 across has been one (2).
28 Half a short-lived sculptor of whom Brodsky writes (2).
31 We publish this and XXIX more by Ezra Pound (5).
32 In short, the raw material of our profession (2).
33 Add a to this feature for part of the scene of Quennell's *A Superficial Journey through Tokyo and Peking* (4).
34 Ambrose Heath could tell Mrs. Jack Sprat how to prepare them (6).
35 Newbolt and Rothenstein speak intimately of events in the reign of this monarch (2).
37 The kind of mask familiar to 18 soldiers (3).
38 The proper response when a bookseller asks if you take this volume for better or worse (2 words, 1, 2).

NOTE.—Conforming to the custom of *The Times Crossword Puzzle*, figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required.

One Guinea's worth of FABER & FABER books will be given to the senders of the first ten correct solutions opened after the first post on Thursday, December 28. Solutions should be addressed to "Department of Recreations", FABER & FABER LTD., 24 Russell Square, London, W.C.1. The name of the Solver's bookseller must be included. Instructions will then be given to that bookseller to supply the successful competitor with his own choice of Faber and Faber books to the value of a guinea.

A study of FABER & FABER'S Christmas List is suggested to all competitors. A copy will be sent free to any applicant, or may be obtained at your bookshop.

FABER & FABER LIMITED, 24 RUSSELL SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.1

Figure 35: Faber & Faber's Crossword Puzzle, *The Times*, 15 December 1933, p. 20

The puzzle fronts up to its own commercial agenda, structured around two cavities in the shape of capital Fs, and reminding the solver of books available for purchase at every opportunity. The first clue, '[1a. We should like you to take these books to the bookshops (2 words, 4, 11)]' solves for YOUR POCKETBOOKS. Prospective customers are invited in — '[The proper response when a bookseller asks if you take this volume for better or worse (2 words, 1, 2)]' (I DO) — while fun is made at the expense of those who are not — '[If you can't do this, we can't tempt you (4)]' (READ). There is an implied kinship between the setter and the solver, and by extension between the publisher and the reader: '[Our mutual friends (2 words, 4, 11)]' solves for YOUR BOOKSELLERS, retooling Charles Dickens' novel as an imagined community. Names associated with literary pedigree are misappropriated for monetary ends, with the unifying tone of the puzzle being one of autosatirical money-grubbing. Stephen Spender, who would six years later recommend the prize for another iteration of the competition, here guest stars as '[8d. A young poet: we should like you to be a liberal what he sounds like (7)]', or a liberal spender.

The crossword speaks like an amalgam of traits associated with the archetype of the publisher. The faceless Faber editor is overworked ('[We publish this and XXIX more by Ezra Pound (5)]' for CANTO); they are an industrial machine ('[In short, the raw material of our profession (2)]' for MS; they are opportunistic ('[If you are looking for a Christmas present,

one of our books is sure to be absolutely (2)]' for IT). They are distracted from their lofty editorial responsibilities by alcoholism: '[A mosquito-this occurs in *South Moon Under*, a colour-this is the theme of *Wild Deer*; the thought of it makes me thirsty (3)]' (BAR). Words forced by the symmetry of the grid, rather than by their relevance to the Christmas list, are twisted back on topic by cleverly worded clues. The word NAIF, for instance, is clued as '[It is natural in *The French Language* (4)]', with the italicisation falsely suggesting Alfred Ewert's study of French linguistic history published in 1933 by Faber & Faber. T. S. Eliot presumably authorised his own appearance in the crossword grid, with two clues referring to him. The first simply asks for '[5d. Mr. Eliot's initials (2)]', while the second ropes in other clues: '[An 18 poet about whom 5 Eliot wrote an agreeable little book (5)]' (Eliot's *Dante* had been published by Faber & Faber in 1929).

In a lecture on the work of Edgar Allen Poe given in 1948, Eliot took a notionally dismissive position on Poe's apparently immature intellect: 'The forms which his lively curiosity takes are those in which a pre-adolescent mentality delights: wonders of nature and of mechanics and of the supernatural, cryptograms and ciphers, puzzles and labyrinths, mechanical chess-players and wild flights of speculation.'[238] His stance has reasonably been interpreted as denigrating Poe by critics like David N. Stamos, who read Eliot's comments as an endorsement of maturity as 'a form of resigned reasonableness', as Albert Schweitzer had put it.[239] The Eliot-Hale letters, however, cast a knowing irony over his pronouncements. Eliot was interested in each of these things throughout his life; his curiosity for the world of puzzles first instantiated in *Fireside* long survived puberty. The previous section discussed Eliot's interest in cryptograms in manuscript material for *The Waste Land*. On the matter of mechanical chess players, for instance, Eliot wrote to Hale in 1932 to ask if her uncle Philip Hale who had written notes about Beethoven's 7th Symphony with recourse to 'a man named

[238] Eliot, 'Edgar Poe et La France', in *TSECP*, VII, *A European Society*, *1947–53*, ed. by Iman Javadi and Ronald Schuchard, p. 130.
[239] David N. Stamos, *Edgar Allen Poe, Eureka, and Scientific Imagination* (State University of New York Press, 2017), p. 12.

Maelzel in 1836 who had a panharmonicon and an automatic chess player.'[240] In 1934, Eliot would repeat himself with a mistake, praising Philip Hale's 'masterly' programme for 'Beethoven's IIId Symphony which was all about some Viennese who toured America with a mechanical chess-player in 1843.'[241] This time, Eliot ventures that Philip Hale was 'pulling the legs of the solemn Boston audience' with his tale, valorising the 'lively curiosity' that he elsewhere appeared to sniff at in Poe's work. The word 'appear' is used advisedly: Poe had indeed discussed Maelzel in an article in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1836 entitled 'Maelzel's Chess Player' in an orthography Eliot would maintain (in German, he was Mälzel).[242]

Indeed, in a report on Kantian Categories for a class at Harvard — Philosophy 15: The Kantian Philosophy — Eliot surmised of metaphysical knowledge that it 'does not arrive at one [reality] from the other but comprehends both at once [...] in either case it is not quite describable as a logical process. It is in these two processes that logic is generated (and life is a continual alteration of the processes) but formal deduction cannot anticipate; the form of logic is clearly articulated in the process, but the movement from one state of reality to another remains to the last a mystery.'[243] Formal logic fails, and in its stead is transformation: one thing turning into another, and the mind responding imaginatively at the metamorphosis to which it bears witness. When Eliot wrote to John Hayward in 1938 to fret that 'I am allowed out for an hour tomorrow to replenish my tobacco and buy a crossword puzzle [...] I have not written any Poetry lately, because I have felt too stupid for anything but Patience,' Eliot is perhaps not implying redirection in his pastimes, but rather subordinate relation: the crossword and the card game miniaturise the stakes and opportunities of the poetry eluding him.[244]

The Times Puzzle No. 2,505 (published on the day Eliot wrote to Hayward) illustrates the entangled worlds of the poem puzzle for Eliot, containing an anagram of 'Roman ode' for

[240] Eliot, letter to Hale (18 November 1932), in *EHC*.
[241] Eliot, letter to Hale (28 December 1934), in *EHC*.
[242] Philip Hale, *Great Concert Music: Philip Hale's Boston Symphony Programme Notes*, ed. by John N. Burk (Garden City Publishing, 1939), p. 32.
[243] Eliot, 'Report on the Kantian Categories', in *TSECP*, I, *1905–18*, p. 31.
[244] Eliot, letter to John Hayward (27 February 1938), in *TSEL*, VIII, *1936–38*, p. 312.

MAROONED, and the clue '[A sort of play upon words (8)]' for CHARADES.[245] 'Sort of' crystallises the productive imprecision at work in both puzzles and poems, being at once generically hybrid and, in another sense of 'sort', an arrangement of old words in new ways. Secular puzzles, and the purely deductive reasoning they rely on, act as rehearsals for a poetics of transfiguration through the logic of imagination; borrowing from the domain of the puzzle, they harness the differential energy of puzzlement to cast contingent and provisional patterns, redeeming the inadequacy of language by making it do surprising and unfamiliar things. Puzzles license and reward the specific aim, as Eliot had it, of sublimating the poetic self through participation in a shared commons of imagination, not with fixity in mind, but rather with radically transformative guesswork, plumbing transcendent depth into the immanent everyday.

[245] 'Puzzle No. 2,505', *The Times*, 27 February 1938, p. 5.

4. Alphabet Soup: Empson's 'Puzzle Interest'

Introduction

The last words William Empson spoke to John Haffenden, as a nurse urged him to leave his bedside, were: 'Aren't you going to help with the crossword?' In the acknowledgements to his edition of *The Complete Poems of William Empson* (2000), Haffenden offers a posthumous answer: 'In truth, I feel that I have been helping with the crossword — or perhaps the jigsaw — ever since.'[1] Haffenden's textual scholarship in producing the *Complete Poems*, as well as editing *The Royal Beasts* (1987), *Argufying* (1987), *Selected Letters* (2006) and his two-volume biography (2005–6), is peerless. As evidence of a broader reluctance among critics to engage with the terms of Empson's interest in the crossword, however, the claim is rather representative. Moderating Empson's terms to substitute one type of puzzle for another, Haffenden's response is characteristic of how often Empson's 'puzzle interest' has been abstracted, homogenised, and thus inadvertently sidelined in accounts of Empson's literary production.

This chapter will consider how Empson's self-avowed 'puzzle interest' constituted, and was constituted by, his relationship with reading and writing poetry. Section 1 surveys the abundant archival evidence for Empson's interest in cryptic crosswords, and uses a selection of these puzzles to illustrate their generative capacity to stimulate reflection on the nature of wording and allusion. Empson's recreational interest in the crossword bears conspicuous affinities with his approach to textual scholarship, particularly when it came to collaborative acts of interpretation and composition in his later life. Section 2 continues by considering how quasi-mathematical schemes for literature, such as those he ventured in *Seven Types of*

[1] John Haffenden (ed.), *William Empson: The Complete Poems* (Penguin, 2000), p. lxvi. Hereafter *WEP*.

Ambiguity and *The Structure of Complex Words*, were informed by his preoccupation with algebra. A lifelong fascination (and allegedly distracting frustration to his colleagues), this section argues that Empson's understanding of 'the machinations of ambiguity' was centrally shaped by the 'little bits of machinery' offered by turning language into counters, drawing in particular from recent archival additions to his library at Sheffield University.

Section 3 turns to Empson's controversial comparison between poetry and crosswords in *The Gathering Storm* (1940), and the charge that he merely 'cultivated ambiguity' by indulging the terms of this simile.[2] The reciprocal but fraught relationship between a poem and its notes, adjudicated by Empson against the model of the crossword and its answers, offered a capacious framework for contesting polemical ideas about the nature of poetic difficulty itself. Section 4 explores how these ideas were inflected in Empson's own poetry, considering the many different ways in which puzzlement offered an attractive stimulus for both reading and writing verse across his career.

i. 'Help with the Crossword': Empson's Recreations

Empson, as Haffenden notes, adored crossword puzzles. Specifically, he favoured cryptic crosswords: an important nuance that is tellingly absent from many biographical accounts of Empson's hobby, and, as this chapter will argue, an impediment to considering why Empson raised a parallel between crosswords and poetry in his 'Notes on Notes' to *The Gathering Storm* (1940). Far from approving of plain word puzzles, Empson lamented the *New York Times* crossword (which, as previously discussed, required general knowledge in synonymous terms, rather than a disguise encrypting it), and thanked his wife for sending him British cryptic puzzles when he was abroad in Pennsylvania in 1974.[3]

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[2] 'Puzzles in Verse: The Cult of Ambiguity', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 October 1940.
[3] Empson to Hetta Empson (November 1974), in Haffenden (ed.), *Selected Letters of William Empson* (Oxford University Press 2006), p. xliv.

Comparisons had been made between Empson's writing and cryptic crosswords since at least 1935 (and with 'puzzles' generally as early as 1930), as this chapter will come to discuss. The earliest extant account of Empson's own 'puzzle interest', however, occurred in 1945, when W. W. Robson was introduced to Empson at Finch's Bar in London; Robson was embarrassed to interrupt Empson's concentration on the day's *Times* puzzle.[4] Dylan Thomas, who wrote poems to distract himself from cryptic crosswords, was present too; in an interview with Christopher Norris and David B. Wilson in 1970, Empson would aptly describe Thomas as 'elliptic' though 'not irrational', perhaps simultaneously providing a kind of sales pitch for the cryptic syntax of these puzzles.[5] In an account by L. C. Knight, Empson apparently scribbled down a quotation from Eliot in the margin of a *Times* crossword, overhearing and setting it down while solving a puzzle following a lecture at the London Institute of Education in 1955.[6]

Setting aside the question of Empson's general interest in puzzles, his specific patronage of *The Times* crossword spanned a minimum of 39 years between 1945–84; covering, then, both the experimental convention-building of early cryptics and the post-Ximenean standardisation of cryptic clues. Though doubtless not consistent throughout this period, by the 1960s he would make a daily ritual of solving *The Times* crossword before lunch.[7] In 1969, indeed, John Horder met Empson pouring wine while poring over a crossword (inebriated cruciverbalism is a repeated feature of many anecdotes about meeting Empson for the first time); Empson told him that he solved 'at least four or five crosswords a day'. If we generously imagine that Empson could solve puzzles at record speed (though his remaining archival puzzles suggest otherwise), this feat would take at least an hour a day. Less generously, and factoring in some exaggeration in Empson's claim, we might still suppose that

[4] W. W. Robson, quoted in Haffenden, *William Empson: Against the Christians* (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 680.
[5] Empson, in Christopher Norris & David B. Wilson, 'An Interview with William Empson', in *Some Versions of Empson*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 289–319 (p. 311).
[6] Haffenden, *William Empson: Against the Christians*, p. 720.
[7] Jacobus Empson, email to the author, 13 October 2023.

he spent double that time each day 'talking away lucidly [over the crossword], relishing his choice of words as he obviously relished the challenge the clues presented him.'[8]

Such was Empson's familiarity with cryptic crosswords that he could determine generic shifts associated with different publications: 'the chaps at *The Times* seem to be Roman Catholics these days, and there are a whole lot of estate agents at *The Telegraph*. Rather curious, that.'[9] His family and friends would give him cryptic crossword collections as Christmas presents. Even more committedly, he named his firstborn son (William Hendrick) Mogador in 1942, a post-baptismal addition that, according to a letter he wrote to I. A. Richards in 1943, was 'the Yiddish word for a muddle.'[10] Intriguingly, there is no evidence for this claim, and seemingly no precedent for thinking so: Mogador is in fact supposed to derive from the Phoenician word *migdol* (small fortress). Perhaps it was invented to tickle Richards, who regularly used the word 'muddle' to evoke interpretative confusion in *Practical Criticism* (1929).[11] Perhaps, riffing on Forster's binary between 'muddles' and 'mysteries' in *A Passage to India*, he was planting a mystery to tickle Richards.

In my correspondence with William Empson's son Jacobus, he has confirmed that these apocryphal-sounding claims about Empson's love of cryptics are in fact accurate. He recalls in particular how John Henry Jones (Empson's friend and collaborator on the posthumously published *Faustus and the Censor*) would assist him in completing puzzles. In a 'Diary' entry for the *London Review of Books* in 1989, Jones indeed describes how Empson would 'thrust a jammy *Times* at me with "I do wish you would finish off the crossword" (this was something he felt it was necessary to get done with before more serious matters could be broached).'[12] The crossword was jammy because it accompanied breakfast, though as with his request to

[8] John Horder, 'William Empson, Straight', *Guardian*, 12 August 1969, p. 9.
[9] John Horder, 'William Empson, Straight', *Guardian*, 12 August 1969, p. 9.
[10] Empson, letter to I. A. Richards (January 12 1943), in *Selected Letters*, p. 134.
[11] *Description de l'Afrique septentrionale par el-Bekri*, trans. Mac Guckin de Slane (Imprimerie Impériale, 1859), p. 202. See Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (Kagan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, 1930), p. 50; p. 168; p. 187; p. 282.
[12] John Henry Jones, 'At Home with the Empsons', *London Review of Books*. 11.15, 17 August 1989.

Haffenden, Empson believed in the hermeneutic capacity of working collaboratively to 'unjam' difficult textual problems.

Once dispensed with, however, even the 'serious matters' of writing could bear the marks of Empson's breakfast crossword. *Faustus and the Censor* (1987) deploys puzzlement as a recurrent motif to wonder at Marlowe's compositional process, noting 'a puzzling detail' here, 'a puzzling character' there, 'a puzzling question' at large.[13] The nomenclature of Mephistopheles 'has puzzled many commentators', being a lexical hodgepodge from '"Me-photo-philes" ('No friend to light') and "Me-Fausto-philes" ('No friend to Faust')'.[14] Thinking through the 'puzzle' of the name, Empson hazards 'a theory which fits in with the other side of the puzzle'. The reference to a 'side' implies that Empson was visualising, and therefore spatialising, the metaphorical textual puzzle in the form of a crossword.[15]

The sustained puzzle metaphor in *Faustus and the Censor* is, after all, appropriate to its subject matter. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592), Faustus performs a hazardously inventive parody of cabbalistic analysis:

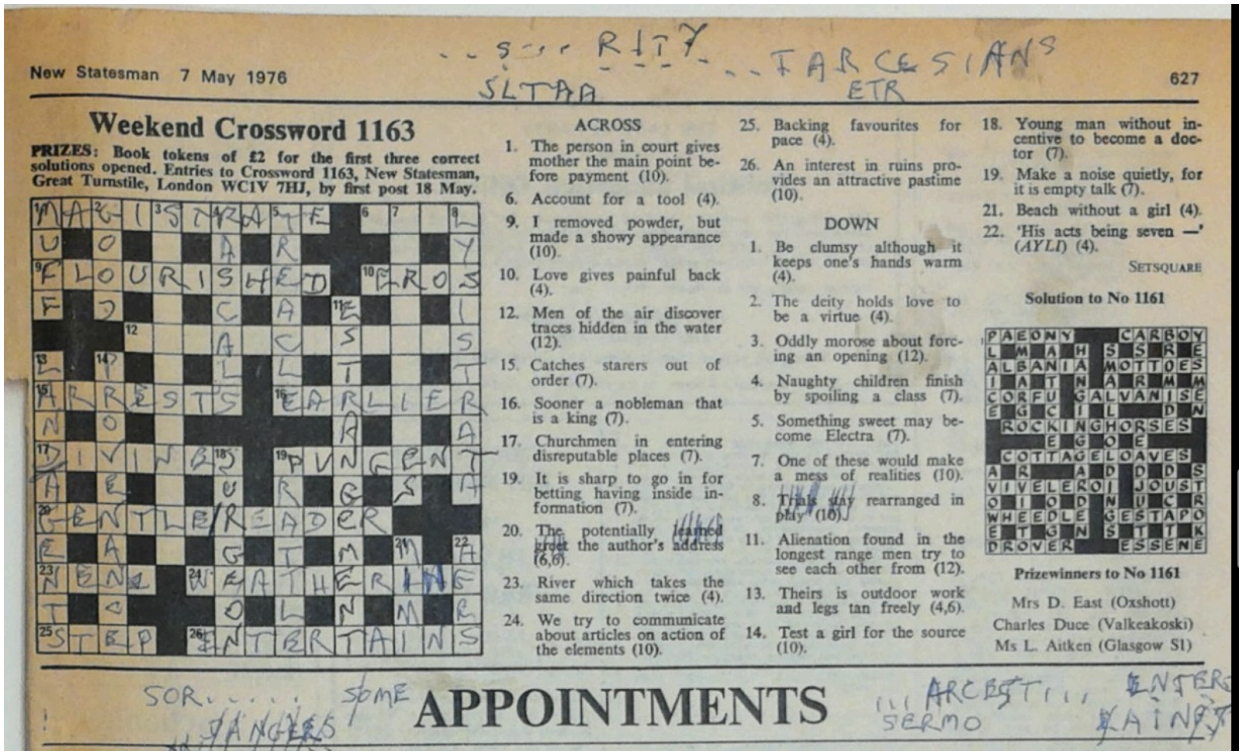
> Within this circle is Jehovah's name,
> Forward and backward anagrammatiz'd
> Th'abbreviated names of holy saints,
> Figures of every adjunct to the heavens,
> And characters of signs and erring stars,
> By which the spirits are enforc'd to rise[16]

Though 'danger is in words,' as Faustus warns the audience, so too lies possibility: 'the metaphysics of magicians' that can manipulate 'letters and characters' into novel forms. A. N. Okerlund is right to argue that within *Doctor Faustus*, experiments in wordplay 'turn language into babel, system into chaos,' but Empson and Jones's beloved cryptics could enlist these same verbal felicities to achieve revelation.[17] In the immediate aftermath of a 'serious gastric

[13] Empson, *Faustus and the Censor: The English Faust-Book and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus*, ed. by John Henry Jones (Blackwell, 1987), p. 79; p. 86; p. 177.
[14] ibid, p. 203.
[15] ibid, p. 99; p. 192.
[16] Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, ed. by Harold Osborne (University Tutorial Press, 1963), III, 8–13, p. 8.
[17] A. N. Okerlund, 'The Intellectual Folly of Dr. Faustus', *Studies in Philology*, 74.3 (July 1977), pp. 258–78.

operation,' Jones relates how Empson returned to crosswords with a mixture of 'pride in his discovery' and fear that the devilish setters 'might have put in a difficult one to fool me.'

Fool him they often did. Only six of Empson's attempts at cryptic crosswords are held (out of, extrapolating conservatively from Horder's estimate, what must be tens of thousands of attempted puzzles) in his papers at Harvard University.[18] They are exclusively cryptics published in 1976. Though a tantalisingly limited range, these clippings give a detailed insight into how Empson went about solving a cryptic crossword; that is, his compositional process for fulfilling the composition of another mind in the form of an interactive text.



New Statesman 7 May 1976 627

Weekend Crossword 1163

PRIZES: Book tokens of £2 for the first three correct solutions opened. Entries to Crossword 1163, New Statesman, Great Turnstile, London WC1V 7HJ, by first post 18 May.

ACROSS

1. The person in court gives mother the main point before payment (10).
6. Account for a tool (4).
9. I removed powder, but made a showy appearance (10).
10. Love gives painful back (4).
12. Men of the air discover traces hidden in the water (12).
15. Catches starers out of order (7).
16. Sooner a nobleman that is a king (7).
17. Churchmen in entering disreputable places (7).
19. It is sharp to go in for betting having inside information (7).
20. The potentially famed greet the author's address (6,6).
23. River which takes the same direction twice (4).
24. We try to communicate about articles on action of the elements (10).
25. Backing favourites for pace (4).
26. An interest in ruins provides an attractive pastime (10).

DOWN

1. Be clumsy although it keeps one's hands warm (4).
2. The deity holds love to be a virtue (4).
3. Oddly morose about forcing an opening (12).
4. Naughty children finish by spoiling a class (7).
5. Something sweet may become Electra (7).
7. One of these would make a mess of realities (10).
8. Trials may rearranged in play (10).
11. Alienation found in the longest range men try to see each other from (12).
13. Theirs is outdoor work and legs tan freely (4,6).
14. Test a girl for the source (10).
18. Young man without incentive to become a doctor (7).
19. Make a noise quietly, for it is empty talk (7).
21. Beach without a girl (4).
22. 'His acts being seven —' (*AYLI*) (4).

SETSQUARE

Solution to No 1161

PAEONY CARBOY
LMAH SSRE
ALBANIA MOTTOES
IATN ARMM
CORFU GALVANISE
EGCIL DN
ROCKINGHORSES
EGOE
COTTAGELOAVES
AR AD DDS
VIVELEROI JOUST
OIODN UCR
WHEEDLE GESTAPO
ETGN STTK
DROVER ESSENE

Prizewinners to No 1161

Mrs D. East (Oxshott)
Charles Duce (Valkeakoski)
Ms L. Aitken (Glasgow S1)

APPOINTMENTS

Figure 36: Empson's attempt at 'Weekend Crossword 1163', *New Statesman*, 7 May 1976

On 7 May 1976, Empson completed approximately three quarters of the *New Statesman*'s 'Weekend Crossword' before surrendering. Like Faustus, he was an assiduous anagrammist, using the marginal space in his copy of the newspaper as a palimpsestic holding

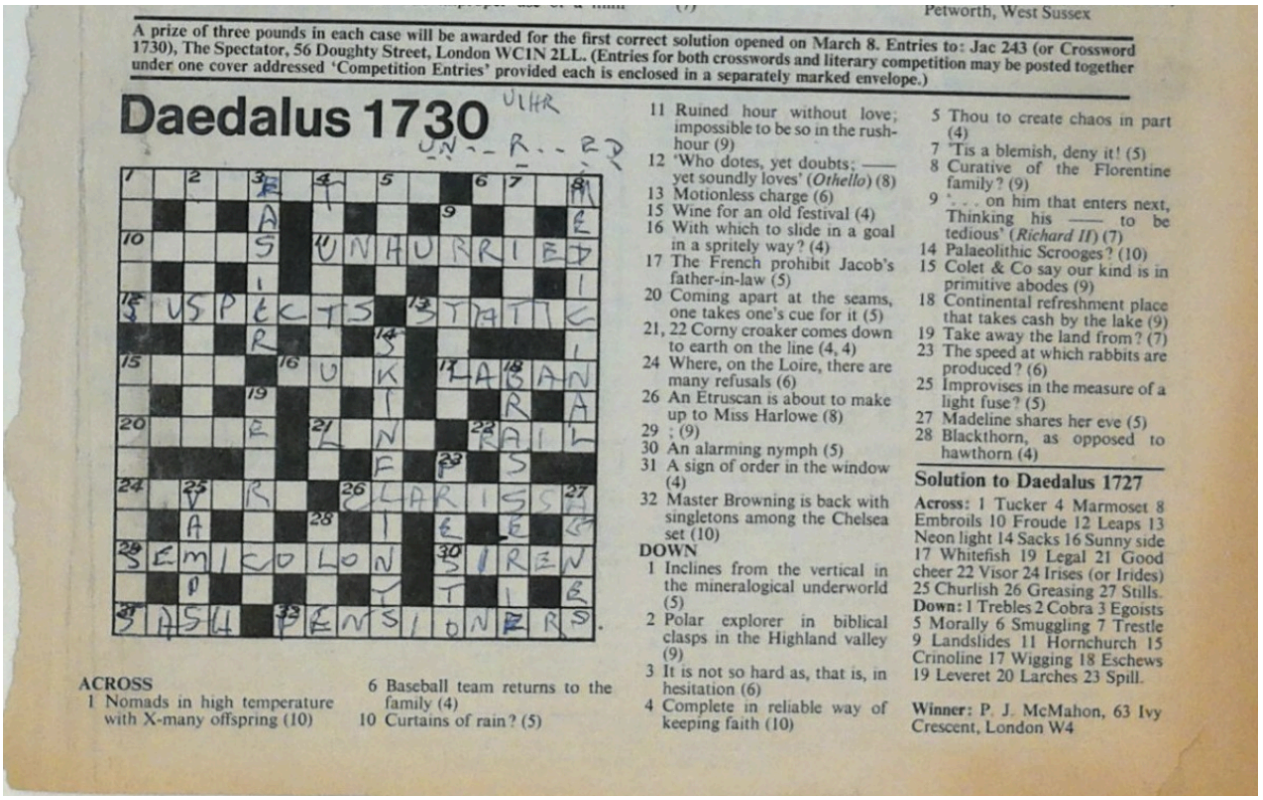
[18] Crosswords tackled by Empson are from William Empson Papers, 1811–1996, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Eng 1401.

pen for loose letters. This time jotting down jumbled characters instead of Eliot quotations, Empson struck through correspondent letters in the clues to confirm his hunches. By this mechanism, he validated [20. The potentially learned greet the author's address (6,6)] for GENTLE READER, [8. Trials stay arranged in play (10)] for LYSISTRATA, and the self-descriptive [26. An interest in ruins provides an attractive pastime (10)] for ENTERTAINS. Shorter, less chewy anagrams, by contrast, could be verified mentally without recourse to scribbling: [5. Something sweet may become Electra (7)] for TREACLE, or [15. Catches starers out of order (7)] for ARRESTS.

On occasion, however, these marginal anagrams were liable to fault, as if actuating his notion of a 'critical technique for misunderstanding' in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951). Empson searched in vain for an anagram appropriate to [12. Men of the air discover traces hidden in the water (12)], trying to contort 'traces' into ▢▢▢🅃🄰🅁🄲🄴🅂🄸🄰🄽🅂 and ▢▢▢🄰🅁🄲🄴🅂🅃▢▢▢▢ in futile combinations with ETR and SERMO. The solution, BROADCASTERS ('men of the air') in fact charades an anagram of TRACES after BROAD (a body of 'water'). Empson again ran aground trying to extract SURPRISINGLY from [3. Oddly morose about forcing an opening (12)], incorrectly venturing SORE ('morose') as the envelope for PRISING ('forcing an opening') instead of the required SURLY. He might have saved time by heeding the convention that single words rarely appear twice within a single crossword: he had already used 'sore' to solve [10. Love gives painful back (4)], a reversal yielding EROS.

The convention of non-duplication, for practical reasons, does not straitjacket the repetition of words between crosswords, setters, and publications. Akin to Rosamond Mathers' astonishment at Torquemada's ability to 'vary the clue [...] using words in a sense remote from the intention of their author', Empson's beloved crosswords offered one way of animating 'the unexpected tricks a word might play' in literature, as he put it in *The Structure of Complex Words*: a work in which puzzles and algebraic literature are preeminent, and discussion centres on how words might be hijacked by posterity in interestingly unpredictable

ways.[19] Put otherwise, Empson saw in crosswords how a complex word like *Ambiguity* might have *Seven Types*.[20]



Petworth, West Sussex

A prize of three pounds in each case will be awarded for the first correct solution opened on March 8. Entries to: Jac 243 (or Crossword 1730), The Spectator, 56 Doughty Street, London WC1N 2LL. (Entries for both crosswords and literary competition may be posted together under one cover addressed 'Competition Entries' provided each is enclosed in a separately marked envelope.)

Daedalus 1730

ACROSS
1 Nomads in high temperature with X-many offspring (10)
6 Baseball team returns to the family (4)
10 Curtains of rain? (5)
11 Ruined hour without love; impossible to be so in the rush-hour (9)
12 'Who dotes, yet doubts; —— yet soundly loves' (*Othello*) (8)
13 Motionless charge (6)
15 Wine for an old festival (4)
16 With which to slide in a goal in a spritely way? (4)
17 The French prohibit Jacob's father-in-law (5)
20 Coming apart at the seams, one takes one's cue for it (5)
21, 22 Corny croaker comes down to earth on the line (4, 4)
24 Where, on the Loire, there are many refusals (6)
26 An Etruscan is about to make up to Miss Harlowe (8)
29 ; (9)
30 An alarming nymph (5)
31 A sign of order in the window (4)
32 Master Browning is back with singletons among the Chelsea set (10)

DOWN
1 Inclines from the vertical in the mineralogical underworld (5)
2 Polar explorer in biblical clasps in the Highland valley (9)
3 It is not so hard as, that is, in hesitation (6)
4 Complete in reliable way of keeping faith (10)
5 Thou to create chaos in part (4)
7 'Tis a blemish, deny it! (5)
8 Curative of the Florentine family? (9)
9 '. . . on him that enters next, Thinking his —— to be tedious' (*Richard II*) (7)
14 Palaeolithic Scrooges? (10)
15 Colet & Co say our kind is in primitive abodes (9)
18 Continental refreshment place that takes cash by the lake (9)
19 Take away the land from? (7)
23 The speed at which rabbits are produced? (6)
25 Improvises in the measure of a light fuse? (5)
27 Madeline shares her eve (5)
28 Blackthorn, as opposed to hawthorn (4)

Solution to Daedalus 1727

Across: 1 Tucker 4 Marmoset 8 Embroils 10 Froude 12 Leaps 13 Neon light 14 Sacks 16 Sunny side 17 Whitefish 19 Legal 21 Good cheer 22 Visor 24 Irises (or Irides) 25 Churlish 26 Greasing 27 Stills. **Down:** 1 Trebles 2 Cobra 3 Egoists 5 Morally 6 Smuggling 7 Trestle 9 Landslides 11 Hornchurch 15 Crinoline 17 Wigging 18 Eschews 19 Leveret 20 Larches 23 Spill.

Winner: P. J. McMahon, 63 Ivy Crescent, London W4

Figure 37: 'Daedalus 1730', *Spectator*, 21 February 1976

In the *New Statesman* puzzle, for instance, Empson correctly solved [19. Make a noise quietly, for it is empty talk (7)] for PRATTLE ('empty talk') by stacking P ('quietly', in musical notation) with RATTLE ('make a noise'). Three months earlier, when faced with a clue phrased as an incomplete quotation rather than in cryptic syntax, the same word had stumped him.[21]

[19] Empson, *SCW*, p. 354.
[20] Perhaps: 1. Doublespeak in accord protecting large union (9); 2. Editing out lines, Lamb guilty over current vagueness (9); 3. Imprecision by a doctor, one responsible for cutting trainee (9); 4. Uncertainty after my BA and TUI flights essentially exploded (9); 5. Occasionally calm, B. B. King quaintly produces doubtful tone (9); 6. In the morning, chap who goes both ways welcomes sex with mysterious character (9); 7. Postgraduate rebuffed extensive university computing with variable confusion (9). These 'types' of 'ambiguity' are of my own devising. 1. AMBIGUITY ("doublespeak") = AMITY ("accord") around BIG U ("large union") 2. AMBIGUITY ("vagueness") = [l]AMB GUI[l]TY ("editing out lines"), over I ("current") 3. AMBIGUITY ("imprecision") = A MB ("a doctor") I ("one") GUITY ("responsible for cutting trainee", "guilty" minus "l[earner]") 4. AMBIGUITY ("uncertainty") = anagram ("collapsed") of MY BA TUI [fli]G[hts] ("flights essentially") 5. AMBIGUITY ("doubtful tone") = the occasional letters of [c]A[l]M [b] B [k]I[n]G [q]U[a]I[n]T[l]Y 6. AMBIGUITY ("'mysterious character") = AM ("in the morning") BI GUY ("chap who goes both ways") welcoming IT ("sex") 7. AMBIGUITY ("confusion") = AM ("postgraduate rebuffed", MA backwards) BIG ("extensive") U ("university") IT ("computer support") Y ("variable").
[21] 'Daedalus 1730', *Spectator*, 21 February 1976, in Houghton MS Eng 1401.

Despite already having ▫🅁▢🅃▢🄻▢ in place, Empson was unsure about [9. '...on him that enters next, Thinking his ———— to be tedious' (*Richard II*) (7)], a quotation from Shakespeare missing PRATTLE.

It is felicitous that within the six extant Empson crosswords, one word should appear twice in different guises, illustrating the opportunities licensed by cryptic syntax. It is more felicitous still that the word PRATTLE was of significance to Empson: it was the word he had used to describe unimaginatively poised poetry, to deprecate *Tom Jones* ('chapters of literary prattle') and George Orwell ('too gloomy for prattle'), and one ultimately weaponised against him in reviews of *The Gathering Storm*. W. H. Mellers had argued that the volume was arranged from 'precision to prattle [...] when the crossword interest was revealed as inadequate, he prattled instead.'[22]

The *Spectator*'s 'Daedalus' puzzles took their name from the mythological creator of the Cretan labyrinth. The eponymous adjective 'daedal' had, since Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590), been synonymous with both poetic virtuosity ('his daedale hand') and with the beautiful intricacy of the natural world ('the daedale earth').[23] A. E. Stalling's 'Daedal' (2020) tropes the adjective to title a villanelle about the 'puzzled art' of poetry:

> To build a labyrinth it takes
> A twisted mind, a puzzled art,
> A fractal branching of mistakes.[24]

Section 3 will consider the 'fractal branching of mistakes' in Empson's poems; here, it is clear that Empson made more of his own when solving the 'Daedalus' puzzle than the *New Statesman*'s alternative. Ironically, Empson solving *Spectator* puzzles fulfils another charge against him made in 1930 by Julian Bell (the nephew of Virginia Woolf): 'Another use for obscurity, Mr. Empson's, is setting ingenious puzzles for old maids to solve in the *Spectator*.'[25]

---

[22] Empson, '*Tom Jones*', in *Kenyon Review*, 20.2 (Spring 1958), pp. 217–49 (p. 233). Empson, quoted in *Selected Letters*, p. xxxii. W. H. Mellers, 'Cats in Air-Pumps (Or Poets in 1940)', in *Scrutiny*, 9.3 (December 1940), p. 289.
[23] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ii, 3, rev edn (Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1903), p. 196; IV, xlv, 1, p. 357.
[24] A. E. Stallings, 'Daedal', ll. 1–3, *Poetry* (May 2020), p. 1.
[25] Julian Bell, 'The Progress of Poetry: A Letter to a Contemporary', *Cambridge Review*, 7 March 1930.

Though Philip and Averil Gardner label Bell's snipe as the first recorded instance of Empson being described as 'puzzling,' Empson had himself been using the epithet to describe other works even earlier: he described a production of *The Rainmaker* in Cambridge as 'puzzling' for *Granta Magazine* in 1927.[26]

The *Spectator*'s constructions are indeed more complex than those of the *New Statesman*, with clues like [32. Master Browning is back with singletons among the Chelsea sea (10)] putting Empson's literary and linguistic muscles to work: PEN ('Master Browning', as in Robert Browning's nickname) joins SI ('is back', cryptically), and ONERS ('singletons') to generate PENSIONERS ('the Chelsea sea', as in residents of the Royal Hospital Chelsea). Further clues required multilingual recall: [17. The French prohibit Jacob's father-in-law (5)] for LABAN (begetting a Biblical figure from a French definite article), and [3. It is not so hard as, that is, in hesitation (6)] for EASIER (requiring IE, 'that is' in Latin). In 1930, Empson had justified his comparison between poetry and crosswords by asserting: 'There is now no normal field of general knowledge, no hierarchy even of pieces of knowledge.' By 1976, the cryptic crossword was one possible way of redeeming dehierarchised pieces of knowledge — literary nomenclature, French, Latin, the Bible — into a new form.

Empson's voracious consumption of cryptic crosswords, and its parallels with a mind constantly engaged in semantics, is paralleled by the archive of A. J. Ayer (1910–89), the linguistic philosopher who had published *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936).[27] Ayer's solving style is conspicuously tidier than Empson's jottings: he worked through puzzles in the strict sequence of the anthology, with very limited evidence of crossing-out or marginal annotation.

---

[26] Philip and Averil Gardner, *The God Approached: A Commentary on the Poems of William Empson* (Chatto & Windus, 1978), p. 23. Empson, 'The Tivoli' (May 6, 1927), in *Empson in Granta: The Book, Film, and Theatre Reviews of William Empson* (Foundling Press, 1994), p. 56.

[27] A. J. Ayer's copy of *The Ninth Penguin Book of the Times Crossword* (Penguin, 1988), in 'Personal and travel memorabilia; Miscellaneous, c. 1954–88; n.d.', in the Archive of Alfred Jules Ayer, Oxford, Weston Library, MS 5985/8.

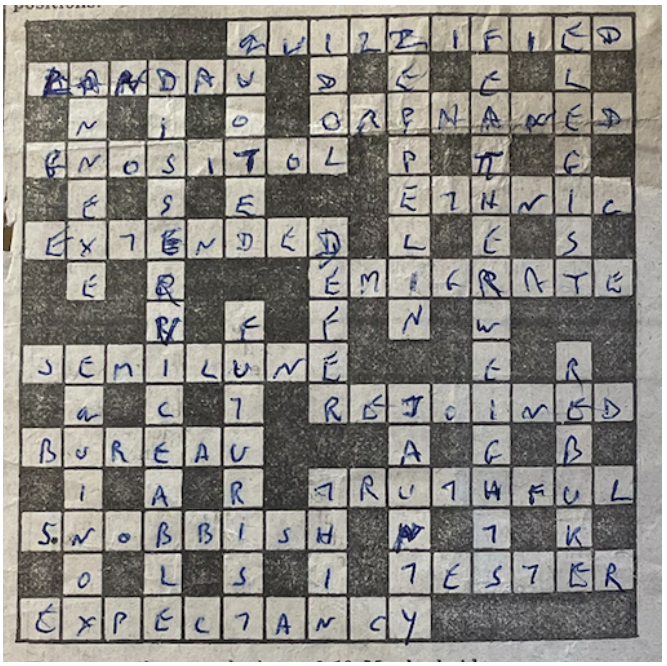


Figure 38: A. J. Ayer's attempt at Araucaria's 'Scrabble Jigsaw', *Guardian*, 13 January 1979

His copy of *The Ninth Book of the Times Crossword* (1988) is fully completed up to Puzzle 28, after which he stopped. The only mistake in those 28 puzzles, writing DARED for [14. Ventured right inside earth], Ayer quickly corrected to DURST (R into DUST). According to his notation, he solved one undated *Times* puzzle in 16 minutes and 20 seconds.[28] He made a special clipping of Araucaria's 'Scrabble Jigsaw' in the *Guardian* (January 13, 1979), a puzzle which required a crossword to be filled in as if a game between four players. Ayer did not submit his completed grid for the prize; advisedly, since he mistook GNOSITOL for INOSITOL, and EXTENDED for EXPENDED.

Like Eliot, Ayer might have been flattered by his afterlife in the crossword; as the bearer of a short surname filled with common letters, he appears often: [25. Philosopher that's always right (4)], [8. Philosopher regularly ignoring Mary Beard (4)], or [Philosopher's arguments you embrace readily at outset (4)].[29] Such clues provide a fascinating test case for Ayer's notion that, unless empirically verifiable, statements cannot be true or untrue but are

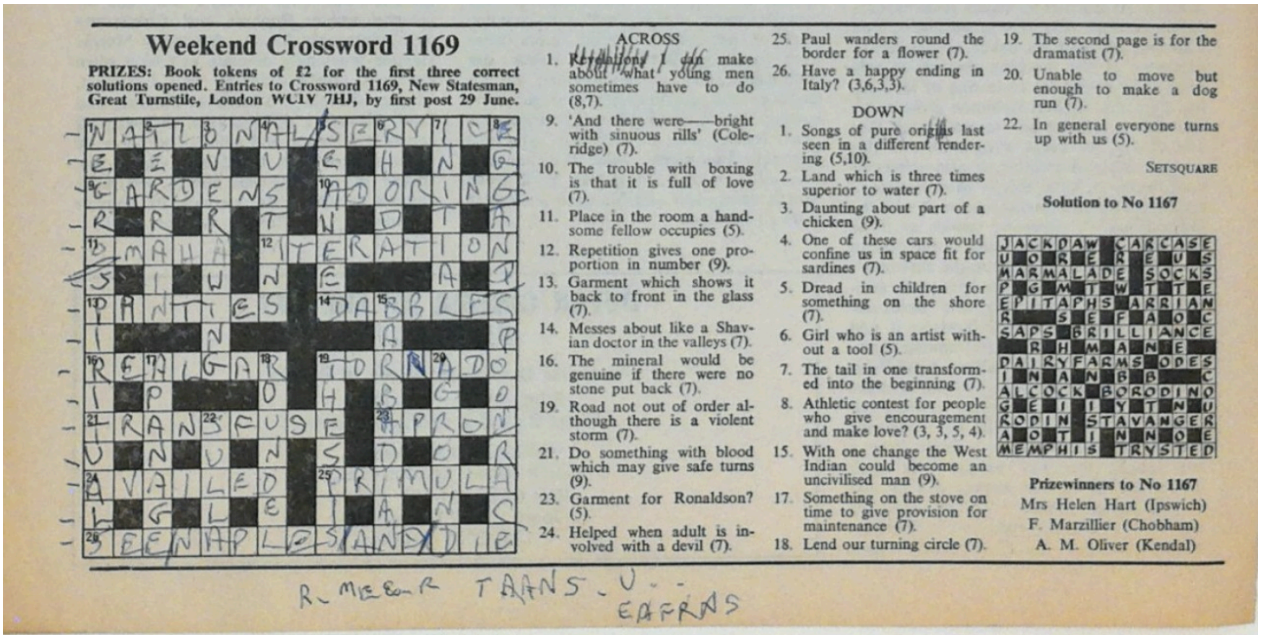
[28] Ayer's copy of 'Puzzle 14,946', *The Times*, 8 July 1978, p. 24 , Weston MS 5985/8.
[29] [25a], Hob, 'Independent 10645', *Independent*, 24 November 2020. [8d], Arachne (Sarah Hayes), 'Cryptic 27832', *Guardian*, 28 May 2019. [23d], Gurney (Niall MacSweeney), 'No. 16,250', *Financial Times*, 20 August 2019.

instead simply meaningless. Cryptic clues are strategically meaningless in order to permit verification. Like Noam Chomsky's 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously' (a sentence designed to exhibit syntax without signification), it has acquired signification through its reactivity in a reader's imagination, creatively restored into poetry by, say, John Hollander in 'Coiled Alizarine' (1971) or Sister Mary Jonathan's 'You, Noam Chomsky' (1965).[30] The introduction to Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* ends by declaring that 'the philosopher's business [...] is rather to solve puzzles than to discover truths,' a manifesto that was uniquely enabled in the cryptic clues he solved recreationally.[31]

However complex the structure of encrypted words, Empson was able to solve them correctly by intuiting the close and surprising affinities licensed by cryptic syntax. As Adrien Bell, the setter of the very first puzzle which appeared in *The Times* (February 1st, 1930) argued in 1980, 'the complexity of association is encouraged': an attractive challenge for a poet who would in 1948 fondly promote 'associational meaning' when discussing Hart Crane's 'Voyages III'.[32] The expansive, laterally generative nature of verbal recall is not stymied by the precision-tooled sequence of the clue; on the contrary, a specific outcome is achieved precisely because words are capable of wielding multiple outcomes simultaneously. Though 'quietly' had conjured P in the service of PRATTLE, the *New Statesman* would newly iterate it in a puzzle published the following month: [19. The second page is for the dramatist (7)] concatenates a scientific abbreviation (S = *second*) with a textual one (P = *page*) to yield THESPIS, the Ancient Greek poet who, according to Aristotle, was the first person ever to play a character in a play.[33] Two weeks later, P for *page* would reappear: [9d. Word from piece of writing at bottom of page (8)].[34] The solution, PARTICLE ('word'), is formed by combining two

[30] Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, 2nd edn (Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), p. 15. John Hollander, *The Night Mirror* (Atheneum, 1971). Sister Mary Jonathan, 'You, Noam Chomsky', *College English*, 26 (1965), p. 395.
[31] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd edn (Dover Publications, 1952), p. 25.
[32] Adrien Bell, quoted in Sandy Balfour, *Pretty Girl in Crimson Rose (8)* (Atlantic Books, 2003), p. 107. See 'Three Critics on One Poem' [1948], in Empson, *The Strengths of Shakespeare's Shrew: Essays, Memoirs and Reviews*, ed. by Haffenden (Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).
[33] 'Weekend Crossword 1,169', *New Statesman*, 18 June 1976, in Houghton MS Eng 1401.
[34] 'Weekend Crossword 1,171', *New Statesman*, 2 July 1976, in Houghton MS Eng 1401.

literary units, the *page* and *article* ('piece of writing') — 'article' is a charged word in cryptics, often indicating grammatical units as in the LA of LABAN — thus particulating the PARTICLE, forming one thing from two.



Weekend Crossword 1169

PRIZES: Book tokens of £2 for the first three correct solutions opened. Entries to Crossword 1169, New Statesman, Great Turnstile, London WC1V 7HJ, by first post 29 June.

ACROSS

1. Revelations I can make about what young men sometimes have to do (8,7).
9. 'And there were——bright with sinuous rills' (Coleridge) (7).
10. The trouble with boxing is that it is full of love (7).
11. Place in the room a handsome fellow occupies (5).
12. Repetition gives one proportion in number (9).
13. Garment which shows it back to front in the glass (7).
14. Messes about like a Shavian doctor in the valleys (7).
16. The mineral would be genuine if there were no stone put back (7).
19. Road not out of order although there is a violent storm (7).
21. Do something with blood which may give safe turns (9).
23. Garment for Ronaldson? (5).
24. Helped when adult is involved with a devil (7).
25. Paul wanders round the border for a flower (7).
26. Have a happy ending in Italy? (3,6,3,3).

DOWN

1. Songs of pure origins last seen in a different rendering (5,10).
2. Land which is three times superior to water (7).
3. Daunting about part of a chicken (9).
4. One of these cars would confine us in space fit for sardines (7).
5. Dread in children for something on the shore (7).
6. Girl who is an artist without a tool (5).
7. The tail in one transformed into the beginning (7).
8. Athletic contest for people who give encouragement and make love? (3, 3, 5, 4).
15. With one change the West Indian could become an uncivilised man (9).
17. Something on the stove on time to give provision for maintenance (7).
18. Lend our turning circle (7).
19. The second page is for the dramatist (7).
20. Unable to move but enough to make a dog run (7).
22. In general everyone turns up with us (5).

SETSQUARE

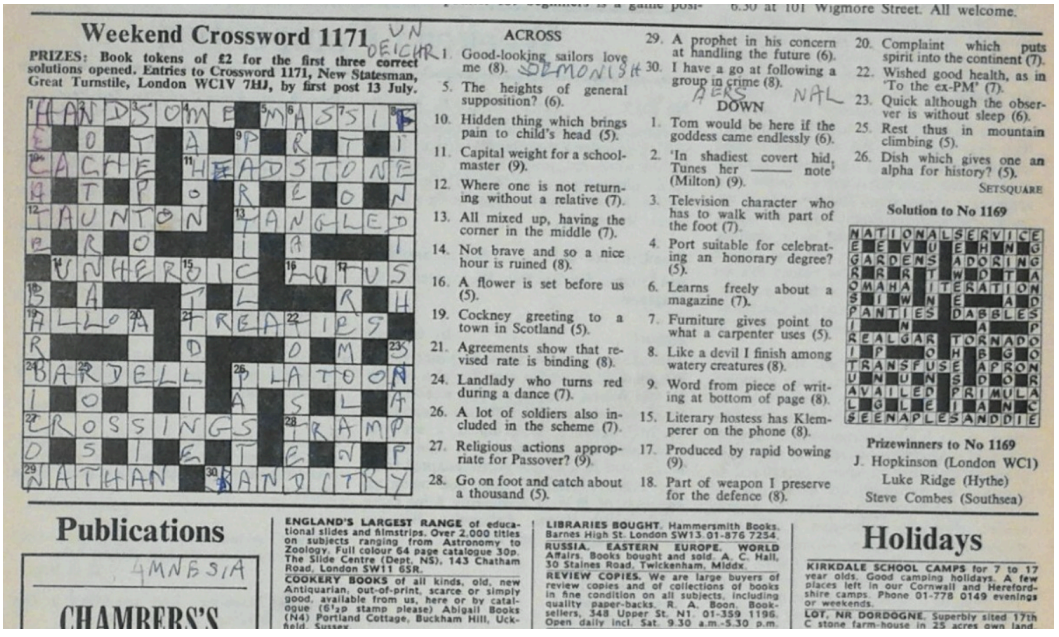
Solution to No 1167

JACKDAW CARCASE
U O R E R E U S
MARMALADE SOCKS
P G M T W T T E
EPITAPHS ARRIAN
R S E F A O C
SAPS BRILLIANCE
R H M A N E
DAIRY FARMS ODES
I N A N B A C
ALCOCK BORODINO
G E I I Y T N U
RODIN STAVANGER
A O T I N N O E
MEMPHIS TRYSTED

Prizewinners to No 1167

Mrs Helen Hart (Ipswich)
F. Marzillier (Chobham)
A. M. Oliver (Kendal)

Figure 39: 'Weekend Crossword 1169', *New Statesman*, 18 June 1976



Weekend Crossword 1171

PRIZES: Book tokens of £2 for the first three correct solutions opened. Entries to Crossword 1171, New Statesman, Great Turnstile, London WC1V 7HJ, by first post 13 July.

ACROSS

1. Good-looking sailors love me (8).
5. The heights of general supposition? (6).
10. Hidden thing which brings pain to child's head (5).
11. Capital weight for a schoolmaster (9).
12. Where one is not returning without a relative (7).
13. All mixed up, having the corner in the middle (7).
14. Not brave and so a nice hour is ruined (8).
16. A flower is set before us (5).
19. Cockney greeting to a town in Scotland (5).
21. Agreements show that revised rate is binding (8).
24. Landlady who turns red during a dance (7).
26. A lot of soldiers also included in the scheme (7).
27. Religious actions appropriate for Passover? (9).
28. Go on foot and catch about a thousand (5).
29. A prophet in his concern at handling the future (6).
30. I have a go at following a group in crime (8).

DOWN

1. Tom would be here if the goddess came endlessly (6).
2. 'In shadiest covert hid, Tunes her —— note' (Milton) (9).
3. Television character who has to walk with part of the foot (7).
4. Port suitable for celebrating an honorary degree? (5).
6. Learns freely about a magazine (7).
7. Furniture gives point to what a carpenter uses (5).
8. Like a devil I finish among watery creatures (8).
9. Word from piece of writing at bottom of page (8).
15. Literary hostess has Klemperer on the phone (8).
17. Produced by rapid bowing (9).
18. Part of weapon I preserve for the defence (8).
20. Complaint which puts spirit into the continent (7).
22. Wished good health, as in 'To the ex-PM' (7).
23. Quick although the observer is without sleep (6).
25. Rest thus in mountain climbing (5).
26. Dish which gives one an alpha for history? (5).

SETSQUARE

Solution to No 1169

NATIONALSERVICE
E E V U E H N G
GARDENS ADORING
R R R T W D T A
OMAHA ITERATION
S I W N E A D
PANTIES DABBLES
I N A P
REALGAR TORNADO
I P O H B G O
TRANSFUSE APRON
U N U N S O O R
AVAILED PRIMULA
L G L E I A N C
SEENAPLESANDDIE

Prizewinners to No 1169

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Figure 40: 'Weekend Crossword 1171', *New Statesman*, 2 July 1976

Empson left this grid incomplete. The clue [20. Complaint which puts spirit into the continent (7)] continued to elude him, the only blank spaces remaining in the grid amidst A▫E▫S I A.

Empson was correct to assume the 'I' despite it being an unchecked letter: he discerned that he would need a word for 'spirit' inside ASIA, a 'continent'. Just below the crossword, in the blank space immediately above an advertisement for the 1970 edition of *Chamber's Encyclopaedia*, Empson wrote AMNESIA. *Amnesia* fulfilled the need for a kind of complaint, medically speaking, constructed using ASIA as its outer letters, but due to the E it did not fit. The E was supplied by [24. Landlady who turns red during a dance (7)], an anagram of 'red' inside 'ball' yielding BARDELL, the landlady from *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), an advertised edition of which Empson had once clipped from *The Sunday Times*. *Amnesia* would also force MNE to be a synonym for 'spirit', which is tricky to justify. The answer was, in fact, APEPSIA, a word for 'indigestion' constructed from placing PEP ('spirit') inside ASIA. In a 1931 letter from Tokyo to I. A. Richards, Empson had called indigestion 'a most embarrassing thing in a lecture room'; in 1976, it was continuing to cause him trouble.[35]

The proleptic irony of misremembering AMNESIA was ultimately fulfilled three weeks later, when in the 'Weekend Crossword' (July 30), it appeared as [13. A name is wrong, and this may be the reason]: an anagram (the 'wrong' form) of 'A name is'.[36] In this specific puzzle, the clue was apt —names were eluding Empson, who finished the grid except for the first clues in each column:

> **1a.** Try out leaving the backward east to take it easy and criticise (8)
> **1d.** Appropriate friend for Pip (6)

At the intersection of the first letters, Empson had written H for reasons unclear; perhaps this dissuaded him from his initial hunch that 1 across was PRACTISE ('try out': a reversal of E[ast], SIT ['take it easy'], and CARP ['criticise']), which he wrote down above the crossword in the top margin. Neither the phantom H nor the provisional P were enough to jog his memory: 1 down, POCKET, combined a verbal form of *appropriate* with Pip's friend Herbert Pocket in *Great Expectations* (1861).

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[35] Empson, letter to I. A. Richards (October 13, 1931), in *Selected Letters*, p. 36.
[36] 'Weekend Crossword 1,165', *New Statesman*, 30 April 1976, in Houghton MS Eng 1401.

Other clues in the grid seemed to chide Empson for his frustrated solution. [25. A planner tore this in pieces (8)] yielded THEORIST anagrammatically, while [12. An incident exists in a poem (7)] provided EPISODE (IS into EPODE). If works of modernist poetry were instantiations of a 'polyglot dyspepsia', as Roger Kimball had put it unkindly, then a clue like [5. Quote me in return a kind of medicine] giving EMETIC ('cite me' backwards) was apt.[37] Indeed, in a parody of Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' penned by G. K. Chesterton in 1923, Chesterton termed 'the New Movement, / The Emetic Ecstasy': little more than an effluent degradation of works chewed up and converted into excrement.[38]

The purpose of pulling on this thread, following the daisychain of quietly and pages, AMNESIA and APEPSIA, is to demonstrate how concentrated 'verbal felicities' could be in only a sample of 6 word puzzles. The 'complexity of association' both intertextually and intraverbally encouraged all sorts of noticings which could then be transferred to other kinds of composition or analysis. It is striking how similar Empson's crossword workings are to his algebraic calculations, each of which he indulged in for their triple function as 'a diversion, or a kind of patience, a test of his mental fitness' as Jones put it in 1989. Notably, though there is very little published record of Empson's interest in Patience, his son Jacobus has confirmed to me that he spent 'a lot of time' invested in the game:

> As well as the crossword, William would play patience, and would somehow read a great amount in the cards — on one occasion calling me in to see how interesting a deal he had dealt, to my total bafflement [...] On the occasion that he called me into his room to look at his latest discovery, he was quite excited to show me how a regular arrangement of the cards would result in a deal which gave a swift solution [...] What struck me was how pleased he was with his discovery![39]

Crosswords and patience were alike in appealing to the twin impulses for creativity and interpretation, being, like the mathematical problems Empson enjoyed, ludic exercises in close reading. Empson might have enjoyed 'KAN-U-GO: Crossword Patience', a game set

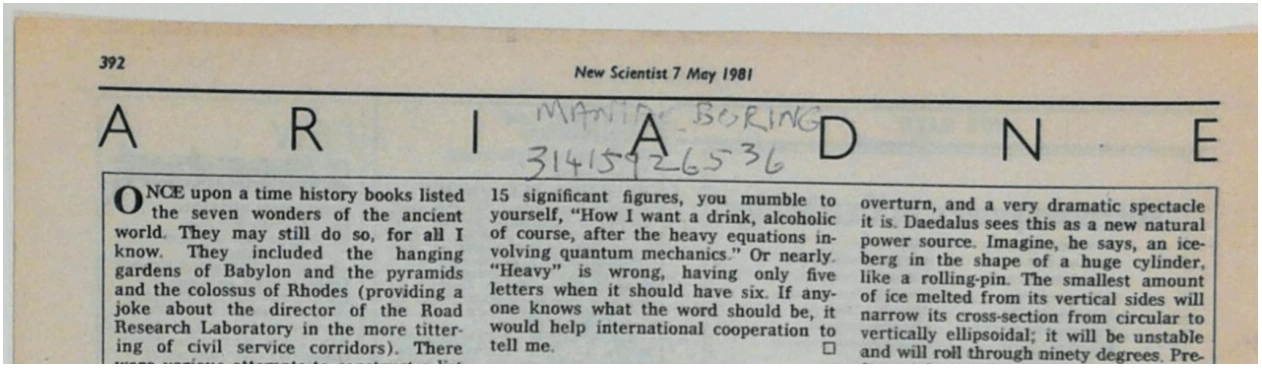
[37] Roger Kimball, 'A Craving for Reality: T. S. Eliot Today', *New Criterion*, 18.2 (October 1999), p. 18.
[38] G. K. Chesterton, 'To a Modern Poet', in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Dorothy E. Collins (Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1932), p. 42.
[39] Jacobus Empson, email to the author, 13 October 2023.

manufactured and sold in the 1930s that combined both disciplines: like a deck of cards, the random shuffle of the alphabet could yield contingent and surprising results.

ii. 'Abracadabra of algebraic signs': Reading Mathematically

Among the crosswords clipped in the Houghton archive are numerous logic puzzles with marginal calculations performed by Empson. In response to 'Tantalizer No. 404' in the *New Scientist* (set by the British rationalist philosopher Martin Hollis), Empson delineated the 'nine scions of the Numerus clan' into their respective trios, reducing Roman characters into alphabetical characters: Pompey became P, Crassus became Cr, Caesar became Ca, and so on.[40] Six years later, Empson was still poring over the *New Scientist* puzzles, embellishing Stephen Ainley's 'Enigma No. 104: Cube Balancing Odds' with trigonometric calculations.[41] In the 'Ariadne' feature of the *New Scientist* in 1981 (mythologically correspondent with the *Spectator*'s 'Daedalus' puzzles), the columnist ventured a marginal device for remembering the first 15 digits of pi: 'How I want a drink, alcoholic of course, after the heavy equations involving quantum mechanics.' In response to the invitation to replace 'heavy' with a word of their own, Empson jotted 'MANIAC' and 'BORING' as possible replacements in the top margin.

[40] Empson's copy of Martin Hollis, 'Tantalizer No. 404: Triumvirate', *New Scientist*, 19 June 1975, Houghton MS Eng 1401.
[41] Empson's copy of Stephen Ainley, 'Enigma No. 104: Cube Balancing Odds', *New Scientist*, 9 April 1981, Houghton MS Eng 1401.



392 New Scientist 7 May 1981

A R I A D N E

MATH BORING
3141592653 6

ONCE upon a time history books listed the seven wonders of the ancient world. They may still do so, for all I know. They included the hanging gardens of Babylon and the pyramids and the colossus of Rhodes (providing a joke about the director of the Road Research Laboratory in the more tittering of civil service corridors). There

15 significant figures, you mumble to yourself, "How I want a drink, alcoholic of course, after the heavy equations involving quantum mechanics." Or nearly. "Heavy" is wrong, having only five letters when it should have six. If anyone knows what the word should be, it would help international cooperation to tell me. □

overturn, and a very dramatic spectacle it is. Daedalus sees this as a new natural power source. Imagine, he says, an iceberg in the shape of a huge cylinder, like a rolling-pin. The smallest amount of ice melted from its vertical sides will narrow its cross-section from circular to vertically ellipsoidal; it will be unstable and will roll through ninety degrees. Pre-

Figure 41: Empson's copy of *New Scientist*, 7 May 1981

Seven years earlier, Empson would have benefited from the mnemonic. In the inside cover of his copy of Rex Stout's *Nero Wolfe: Please Pass the Guilt* (1974), he tried and failed to remember the digits of *pi*, inside writing '3.1428671.'[42] Approximately 200 items from Empson's personal library were in 2022 added to his archive at Sheffield University; they remain uncatalogued as new and hitherto unstudied documents. The collection is replete with similar instances of mnemonic inscription, using the margins of books either to record puzzling frameworks, or else to puzzle out particularly challenging problems.

This was a behaviour pathologised by Jones in 1988: 'If you loaned him a book it would be sure to catch the plague: he covered the end-papers, fly-leaves, all the available space, with trigonometric algebra' in response to questions from a 'degree-level' question booklet. Though Jones situated this tendency in later decades of Empson's life, he was already exhibiting it as early as the 1930s while working in Asia. In Henry Purcell's *Chinese Evergreen* (1938), Purcell recalls how Empson wrestled with 'proving that a certain circle touches a triangle at nine points' at every available moment, scrawling over 'a scrap of paper' and cigarette parchment: his 'abracadabra of algebraic signs' was only interruptible by trips in search of 'a glass of nice warm beer.'[43] When Empson once got lost overnight on a mountainside hike (he was eventually rescued by a farmer who fed him monkey-nuts), Purcell mused: 'I thought of him

[42] Empson's copy of Rex Stout, *Nero Wolfe: Please Pass the Guilt* (Bantam Books, 1974), in '[Currently uncatalogued items]', in Empson Documents, University of Sheffield, Special Collections, Empson 292.
[43] Victor Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen* (Michael Joseph, 1938), p. 77; p. 93.

now, sitting on a stone in the dark, working at his Nine Point Circle by glow-worm's light, like a modern Wu Wang.'[44]

Forty years later, circular geometry was still providing Empson with fodder for algebraic magic. Variations of Feuerbach's circle (a shape constructed out of the significant points of a triangle) appear frequently inside the leaves of his books. In particular, Empson was fond of using Gaussian elimination to calculate the determinants of matrices, often devoting entire pages in mystery novels to latticed algorithms populated with numbers and letters. Filled as they are with As, Bs, and Cs in competing ratios, they appear like rhyme schemes passed over by Pound's ferrous magnet. In one striking instance, Empson overwrites the front page of a *PMLA* volume in the pursuit of a complex determinant.[45]

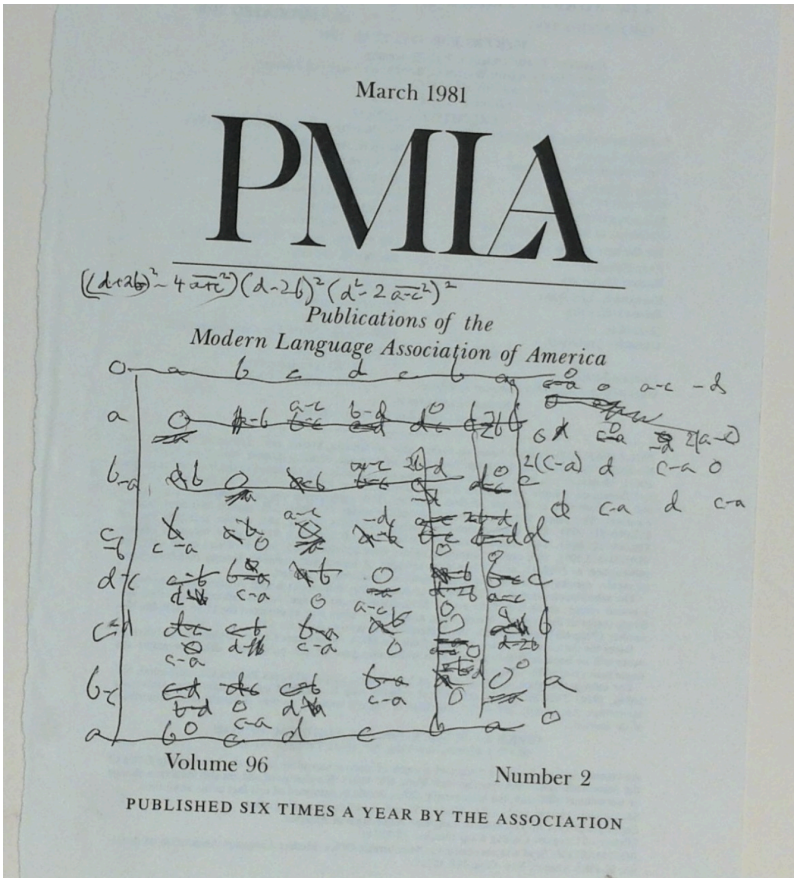


Figure 42: Empson's copy of *PMLA* (March 1981)

[44] Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, p. 133.
[45] Empson's copy of *PMLA*, 96.2 (March, 1981), in Sheffield 292.

In his copy of René Dubos's *Man, Medicine, and Environment* (1970), he performed the calculation seven times.[46] Empson's books were not purchased solely as mathematical scrap paper — as Jones tells us, he could quote Rex Stout with uncanny accuracy — but they invariably caught the 'plague' of mathematics. The inside cover of Stout's *The Silent Speaker: A Nero Wolfe Mystery* (1977), for instance, lists the hierarchy of hands in poker before an elaborate chain of Pythagorean algebra, bringing together Empson's literary, ludic, and logical interests.

Sketched using different pens in books published across a ten year period, one figure occurs repeatedly in the margins of various works: a square, inlaid with an octagon and two squares at different rotations that form an interior octagon, in which there is a squeezed hexagon combining two dots with a squiggly line. It looks a little like an abstracted smiley face. The shape is of no clear significance, and peripheral equations are unrelated to the geometry of the figure. Its repetition in Empson's hand is suggestive of a recalcitrant mathematical problem to which he returned again and again, rather than a closed solution.[47]

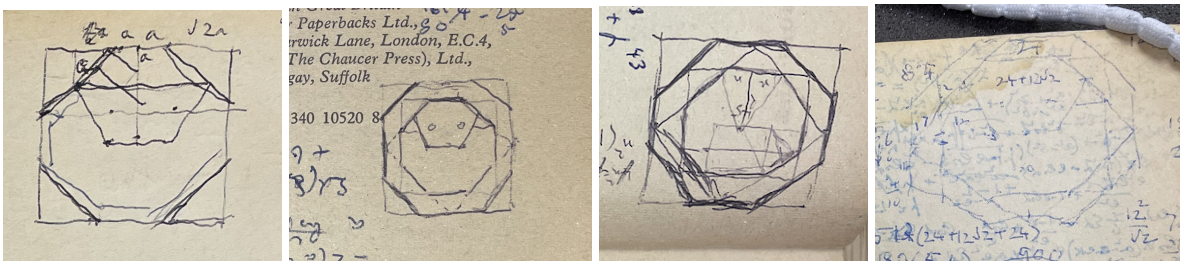


Figure 43: Empson's repeated geometric problem

Empson once wrote to Rosemund Tuve to say that, in order to achieve clarity, he would 'rewrite everything he wrote 12 times' so as to avoid the fate of getting 'muddled'.[48] Jones

[46] Empson's copy of René Dubos, *Man, Medicine, and Environment* (Penguin, 1970), in Sheffield 292.
[47] Personal correspondence (January 5, 2024) with Christopher Hollings (Research Fellow in the History of Mathematics, University of Oxford), Richard Earl (Ben Delo Fellow in Mathematics, University of Oxford), and Konstantin Ardakov (Professor of Pure Mathematics, University of Oxford).
[48] Empson, letter to Rosemond Tuve (February 25 1953), in *Selected Letters*, p. 196.

agrees, avowing that Empson would often deliberately 'make himself tipsy before sitting at the typewriter', before sleeping until sober and retyping whatever he was working on from the beginning, reiterating this alcoholic cycle of drunk writing and sober revision until he was satisfied.[49] It is suggestive that Empson's work with puzzles proceeded on the same basis: he would return to problems at intervals, in different pens and at different times, brewing up an alphabet soup on pages already strewn with handwritten and typed characters, making one 'muddle' to eliminate another.

The metaphor of alphabet soup is chosen advisedly. Jones recalls the muddle of Empson's favourite dish, 'Empson soup', which consisted of adding 'sundry left-overs of vegetables' to 'the left-overs of yesterday's soup' to create a culinary Ship of Theseus: a 'recycled gunge' for processing down a complex food into a digestible format. The pages of Empson's library, a kind of paratextual melting pot for puzzles, could concoct similar surprises out of familiar material. Holding zones for working out textual and numerical problems, Empson's margins recorded and consecrated revelations: shortly after his botched recollection of the digits of pi, Empson noted, for instance, 'Naomi Mitchison [is] JBS Haldane's sister!', exclaiming his discovery of the relation between the novelist and poet Mitchison and the polymath Haldane, the latter of whom Empson had translated into Basic English twice.[50]

Other fragments are more elusive. In the Pelican book of *Modern Cosmology* (1970), Empson wrote 'clowns' on the inside cover, and 'broken, backed, and belated' at the foot of the index in different pens.[51] In *Nero Wolfe: Champagne for One* (1975), he calculated the number of square yards in a square mile.[52] Amid penned and crayoned maths on the inside cover of Ngaio Marsh's *Dead Water* (1973), he wrote 'don't need his feet, need his face / lurk, lurk' (a line not out of place in either one of Empson's poems, or one of the crosswords he tackled).[53]

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[49] Jones, 'Empson Soup: A Personal Memory of William Empson', in *The CEA Forum*, 18.2 (1988), p. 7.
[50] Empson's copy of Rex Stout, *Nero Wolfe: Please Pass the Guilt* (Bantam, 1974), in Sheffield 292.
[51] Empson's copy of Jaglit Singh, *Modern Cosmology* (Penguin, 1970), in Sheffield 292.
[52] Empson's copy of Rex Stout, *Nero Wolfe: Some Buried Caesar* (Collins, 1979), in Sheffield 292.
[53] Empson's copy of Ngaio Marsh, *Dead Water* (Fontana, 1973), in Sheffield 292.

Trains of thought excised from their reference points are all that remain, wisps of thinking-through whose significant points have been unmoored.

In many of these copies, indeed, mathematical and verbal analyses are orthographically indistinguishable. In the back cover of an autographed copy of William Elton's *King Lear and the Gods* (1966), copious page-by-page notes run diagonally into trigonometric algebra without delineation:

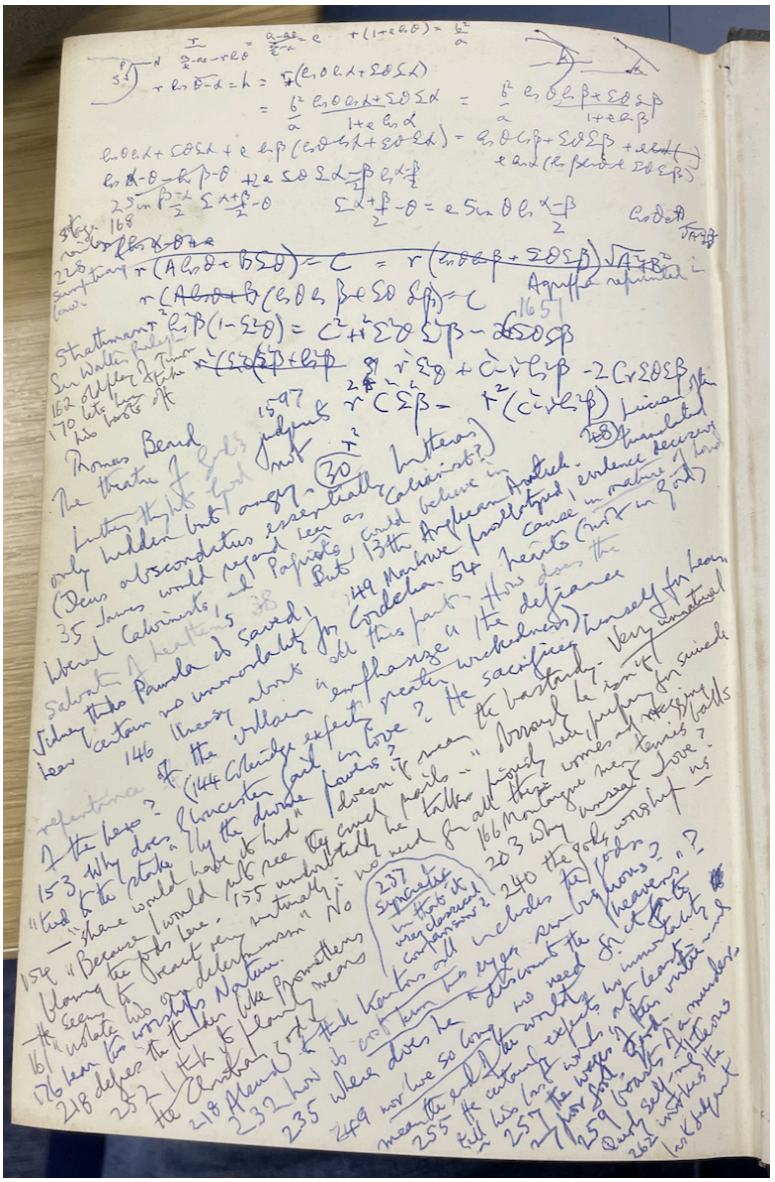

Figure 44: from Empson's copy of William Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (1966)

The back cover of Marsh's *Dead Water* is inscribed with a few lines about Bottom and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, seemingly jettisoned draft material for a review of the 1979 Arden edition published in the same year in the inaugural issue of the *London Review of Books*:

> When she is in a [*illegible*] to cause earthquake she is not really a more suitable object for Bottom to hug than when she is a wisp of half-formed ectoplasm.[54]
>
> Titania orders her fays to explode like shrapnel ('be all ways away') and hugs him saying: 'how I dote on thee.' He is still quiet and cautious, but this is the time for exploring fingers to inquire whether she is solid enough for the purpose, and also whether he is genuinely welcome.[55]

Overleaf from a page of algebra and geometry in Margery Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds*, Empson reflected on 'Nash's Preface to *Menaphon* about writers "that thrust Elisum into hell"' [sic], though never published his misspelt commentary; the note was apparently for private reference.[56] Empson's 1964 Signet edition of *The Tempest* ends with jottings of mental arithmetic, tallying up the ratio of lines in different sections of the play, and concluding that Acts I and II were longer than III, IV, and V combined.[57] In Émile Legouis' *Spenser* (1926), Empson compiled his own year-by-year biography of Spenser for reference; in Dorothy Sayers' *Have His Carcass* (1963), he approximately multiplied 352 by 420 to count '148,000 words'.[58] The margins of these works could accommodate all manners of puzzling, whether editorial, compositional, or logical.

A particularly evocative case of Empson's marginal plague saw the front cover of *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (1966) marked with vertical analysis. The book is otherwise free of annotation, except for Empson's highlighting of Pound's definition of an 'Image'. Empson's two-dimensional intersection of 'modern poetry' with run-on lines of algebra certainly resonates with Pound's call for verse to issue 'an equation' of words, painting

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[54] Empson's copy of Marsh, *Dead Water*, in Sheffield 292.
[55] Empson, 'Fairy Flight in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *London Review of Books*, 1.1, October 25 1979.
[56] Empson's copy of Margery Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds* (Penguin, 1954), in Sheffield 292.
[57] Empson's copy of William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Signet, 1964), in Sheffield 292.
[58] Empson's copy of Émile Legouis, *Spenser* (J. M. Dent, 1926), in Sheffield 292; Dorothy Sayers, *Have His Carcass* (Penguin, 1963), in Sheffield 292.

'splotches of colour' ideogrammatically. Empson used four different pens to conduct the analysis, and though skewering '*Modern*' with a rogue bracket, notably leaves his equals signs until after the title, as if equating his ludomathematical curiosity with the book itself.

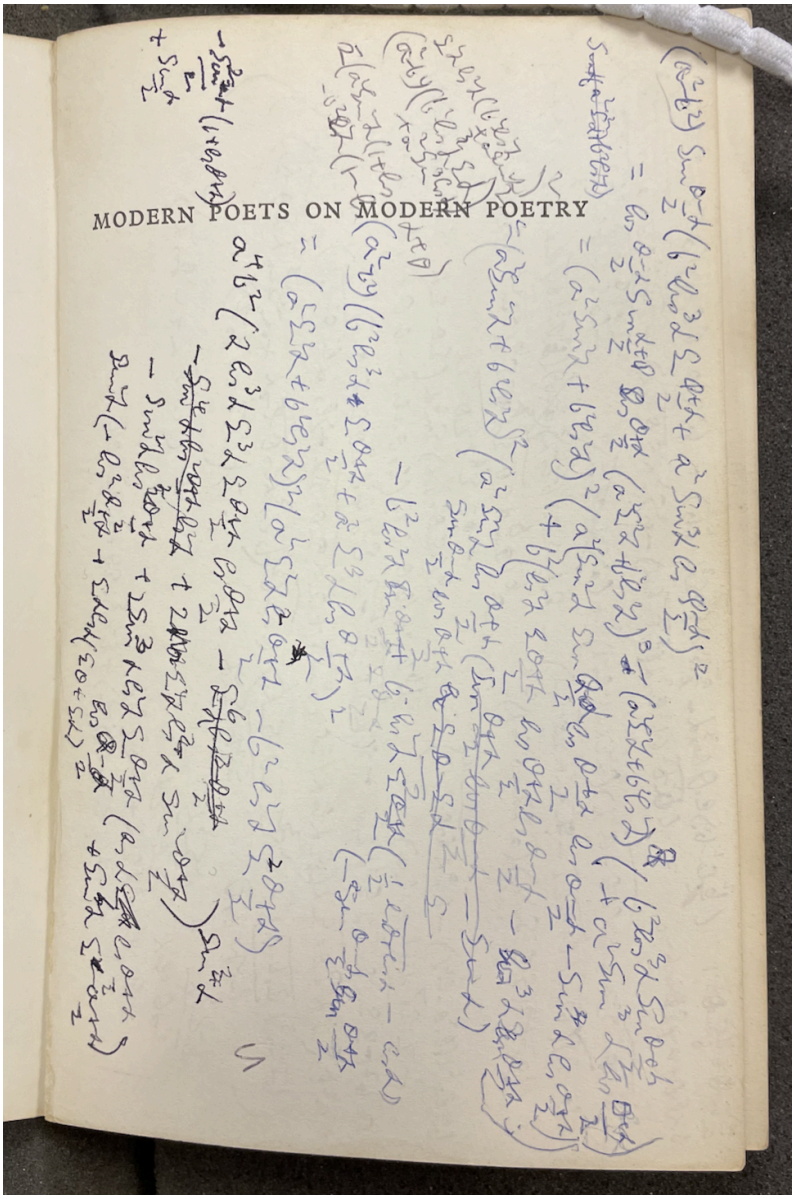

Figure 45: Empson's copy of *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. by James Scully (Fontana, 1966)

Like Empson's declaration to Tuve that he wrote and rewrote everything 12 times in order to avoid getting 'muddled', or indeed his fixation on applying singular geometric diagrams to the margins of multiple novels, Empson's mathematics operates by combining expansion and simplification. The top line iterates a trigonometric identity which is then elaborated

reductively in instalments down the page. Set against his marking of Pound's definition of an 'Image', Empson's mathematics certainly evinces one way that words might harness the combinatorial power of algebra (whether Hulme's counters, Shklovsky's acronyms, or Carroll's symbolic logic) in order to generate new poetic possibilities.

Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words* fondly terms this algebra 'little bits of machinery' designed (like his equations) to expand and simplify language itself.[59] Like the 'Luminous detail' that could accentuate Pound's nouns, Empson sought to taxonomise the multidimensionality of words as used in different modes of communication. Thaventhiran and Collini are correct to conclude that his efforts predominantly 'baffled' critics who, perhaps lulled into reading by the comparatively simple categorisations of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, then encountered 'deliberately uninviting [...] taxonomies, formulae, and symbols.'[60] Empson bolted these 'little bits of machinery' into an aviation metaphor when he described the project to Geoffrey Strickland:

> What I feel about the book, if there is any doubt, is easily told. I think it is wonderful; I think it goes up like a great aeroplane. A certain amount of noisy taxi-ing round the field at the start may be admitted, and the landing at the end is bumpy, though without causing damage; but the power of the thing and the view during its flight I consider magnificent. When after the long struggle it began to 'come out' I was astonished at its unity, at the way so many lines of effort which had felt somehow significant really did fit in [...] When it was done I felt Nunc Dimittis; I was free, I was ready to die.[61]

Empson emphasises the verb 'come out' to equate the success of the book with the expression of an equation: like Moore's use of the verb in 'The Monkey Puzzle', 'come out' refers to the solution of a problem. The symbolic scaffolding to Empson's work is extensive enough to warrant a glossary of terms at the start; he hopes, nonetheless, that in spite of 'the resistance of most readers to mechanisation', they might recognise the symbols as 'no more

[59] Empson, *SCW*, p. 2.
[60] Thaventhiran & Collini, ed. *SCW*, p. ix.
[61] Empson, quoted in *SCW*, p. x.

mathematical than road-signs.'[62] Empson himself, swerving these road-signs, 'must postpone giving my own answer to the puzzle till I have got my symbols into play.'[63]

Thaventhiran and Collini usefully identify the 'puzzle' as 'one of Empson's key words': more than fifty times in *SCW*, it recurs as a touchstone for questions of hermeneutics, ellipsis, and multivalence. As Marshall Brown has demonstrated with regard to the manuscript copy of Empson's first attempt at the topic, the titular word 'Structure' was in fact originally written as 'puzzle' before being crossed out.[64] They equate, however, this 'puzzlement' with the 'relative foolishness [...] or stupidity of readers', an equivalence that not only denigrates Empson's use of the metaphor, but also implicates himself as author in that deficiency.[65] Wrestling with a puzzle unsuccessfully still heralds a moment of quasi-religious epiphany. His astonishment at the 'unity' of the project is due not to its completion: for one thing, like Wittgenstein's conclusion to the *Tractatus*, he caveats *SCW* by admitting that he cannot 'pretend' his symbols have elucidated anything, and for another, he concludes that the ultimate strength of poems like Keats's 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' is that it 'teases us *out of thought* [...] what it tells us is a revelation, and revelations are expected to be puzzling.'[66]

Keats's 'Ode' is a suggestive example, in that it ends with a specimen of what Empson calls an 'A is B' equation: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'. Aspiring to the quality of mathematical clarity, Keats's 'gnomic use' of the equation ultimately belies 'a rather teasing puzzle': 'the form makes clear that the machinery of false identity is in play.'[67] Empson suggests that variations of 'A is B' account for almost any possible epistemological claim in language, but it is an epistemological relationship resting on a diffuse puzzle. Wallace Stevens named this 'the

[62] Empson, *SCW*, p. 14.
[63] Empson, *SCW*, p. 17.
[64] Marshall Brown, 'Reading Empson: *The Structure of Complex Words*', *ELH*, 88.3 (Fall 2021), pp. 743–64 (p. 746).
[65] Thaventhiran and Collini, *SCW*, p. 27.
[66] Empson, *SCW*, p. 41; p. 331.
[67] Empson, *SCW*, p. 316.

intricate evasions of "as"', while for Empson the word 'like' is sublimated but omnipresent in literature: it is a question of how this 'like' is brokered through language.[68]

Mathematics has a different relationship with the copula to poetry. In Empson's trigonometric annotations over 'Modern Poets on Modern Poetry' (Figure 46), variable algebra is used to distil down a complex thought into an incrementally clearer sequence of logic. In poetry, by contrast, the 'pregnancy' of each individual word means that algebraic variability gives way to quantum signification: the polymorphous play of signifiers. These signifiers may produce what I. A. Richards had called 'stock responses', in that they programme the action of their reading through convention, but they also cannot legislate for the unpredictable and contingent associations formed in the act of interpretation. Ironically, one repeated criticism of Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (that 'he has foisted his own ingenious puzzles onto the poet's self-evident meaning', according to Christopher Norris) in fact validates Empson's own belief that individual readers laminate interpretative objects with possibility.[69] It is for this reason, indeed, that Jacques Lacan recommended word puzzles as the ultimate training tool for budding psychoanalysts interested in how words and images calibrate both revealingly and randomly: '*Faites des mots croisés*.'[70]

Crossword clues and poetry are alike in mobilising these latent readerly 'mechanisms' to exploit ambiguity as an opportunity for constructive misbehaviour, rather than vagueness alone. As Empson concludes when discussing the inadequacies of English dictionaries, 'when there is a puzzle the machine breaks down'.[71] Like Empson's cantankerous aeroplane, the hermeneutic machine 'comes out' (both in the sense of resolution and of vibrant disorder) when exposed to the natural puzzlement of reading.

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[68] Wallace Stevens, 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' (1950), in *Collected Poems* (Knopf, 1954), p. 465. Empson, *SCW*, p. 319.
[69] Christopher Norris, *William Empson and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 81.
[70] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (Arrowsmith, 1977), p. 134.
[71] Empson, *SCW*, p. 357.

iii. 'Semantic Monsters': Puzzles of Note

Anatole Broyard once remarked, in a review of Stephen Spender's *W. H. Auden: A Tribute* (1975), that Auden's face 'looked like a naked brain' which 'brings to mind his passion for crossword puzzles.' As Broyard went on to explain, 'the lines of his forehead, especially, suggest the vertical transfixed by the horizontal man, the puzzling intersection of the mind and the senses.'[72] Auden was indeed popularly known as a crossword aficionado: he reportedly rose at 6am every day to tackle the crossword (often until 8am).[73] Glancing references to the puzzle wound their way into his poetry, for example in 'T the Great', a poem which conceals its object until its final couplet, 'E.g. as a crossword anagram: / 11 Down — A NUBILE TRAM.'[74] The solution is TAMBURLAINE, whose name offers less clunky anagrams rejected (or overlooked) by Auden: perhaps AMIABLE RUNT, MATERIAL NUB, or the tautological BRUTE ANIMAL. Broyard's rather mean-spirited phrenology of Auden resonates with responses to Empson's poetry which imagine him using some kind of personified puzzlement: as if Empson's conspicuously 'gnomic' tone of voice, as Jones put it, was only the outer manifestation of a preternaturally gnomic soul.

To Robert Nye, Empson was seen to strut as 'that walking talking set of crossword-puzzle answers looking for some questions.'[75] To Hugh Kenner, he was lionised as 'the cool-headed quizzer of semantic monsters', as if the posture of puzzlement were an act of knightly valour.[76] Even the *Times* obituary for Empson, written in 1984, subordinates the man

[72] Anatole Broyard, 'In praise of Auden Poet', *Spokesman-Review*, 18 May 1975, p. 56.
[73] Danny Heitman, 'The Messy Genius of W. H. Auden', in *Humanities*, 39.3 (Summer 2018). See also Webster Schott, 'Auden: The Major Poet', in *Life*, 68.3 (January 1970), p. 54: 'Eating, drinking, writing, shopping, crossword puzzles, even the mailman's arrival — all are timed to the minute and within accompanying routines'.
[74] W. H. Auden, 'T the Great', in *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson, 2 vols (Princeton University Press, 2022), I, p. 458. See also: 'The portrayed regards of Strauss and Stravinsky / doing British crossword puzzles', in Auden's 'XII. The Common Life', p. 538.
[75] Robert Nye, 'Adults Only', *Guardian*, 16 November 1972, p. 31.
[76] Hugh Kenner, quoted in Haughton, 'Alice and Ulysses's Bough: Nonsense in Empson', p. 161.

to his reputation as a puzzler: his 56 poems are recalled as 'simply exercises, ingenious, resembling staggeringly clever crossword puzzles, abstruse, riddling — in a word, over-intellectual.'[77] Again and again, critics have referred to 'the puzzle of how to read Empson' (Thaventhiran, 2015), his 'crossword-style' (Thompson, 2017), his 'verbal puzzles' (Park, 2006), his 'puzzle-element' (Gardner & Gardner, 1978), while simultaneously inserting qualifiers that minimise the capacity to investigate its consequences: he writes 'little more than a crossword puzzle clue' (Gardner & Gardner, 1978), 'no more than a crossword puzzle interest' (Bergonzi, 1974), enjoyable only 'if you enjoy hunting obscure clues' (*The Age*, 1943).[78] Here is the focal point of a contradiction surrounding Empson's poetry: it is thought of as paradigmatically puzzling, but to analyse it in terms of puzzlement is seen as a critical misstep.

This following two sections will investigate Empson's suggestion about the affinity between crosswords and poetry, and consider the attendant compositional implication of thinking of one's poetry as an exercise of 'puzzle interest', as he would put it in his 'Notes on Notes' to *The Gathering Storm* (1940). Indeed, the proliferation of the crossword as a critical byword for Empson emerged from these notes, in which he had infamously put forward this comparison. I use the word 'affinity' advisedly, since the terms of his analogy (or perhaps, homology) are characteristically baggy:

> Partly, [these notes] are meant to be like the answers to a crossword puzzle; a sort of puzzle interest is part of the pleasure that you are meant to get from the verse, and that I get myself when I go back to it. It is clear that you try to guess the puzzle before you turn to the answer; but you aren't offended with the newspaper for publishing the whole answer, even when you had guessed it. There would be no point in publishing a puzzle in a newspaper, if it were admittedly so simple that there was no need to publish the answer. And the comparison is not quite a random one; the fashion for obscure poetry, as a recent development, came in at about the same time as the fashion for crossword puzzles; and it seems to me that this revival of puzzle interest in poetry, an old and natural thing, has got a bad name merely by failing to know itself and refusing to publish the answers [...] here is no longer the field of 'general knowledge'

[77] 'Obituary: Sir William Empson', *The Times*, 16 April 1984, p. 14
[78] Helen Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 92. Mark Thompson, 'Empson's Mud & Blood', *PN Review*, 43.5 (June 2017), pp. 22–31 (p. 22). Clara Claiborne Park, 'Ambiguities, Complexities, Puzzles: A Late Encounter with William Empson', *Hudson Review*, 59.1 (Spring 2006), pp. 53–65 (p. 57). Philip Gardner, Averil Gardner, *The God Approached*, p. 78; p. 51. Bernard Bergonzi, 'Honouring Empson', *Observer*, 9 June 1974, p. 33. G. I. W., *The Age*, 5 June 1943, p. 6.

> that old Uncle Virgil used to be in, because there are now more interesting things to know than anybody (or any poet) knows. We are left with puzzle interest, and this though it has most of the virtues of the old snob interest has a distinguishing feature; it is not offended by seeing the answers in the notes [...] At the same time, of course, any decent poetry has got more than puzzle interest in it, and the motives behind making the puzzle are themselves very mixed. It is always part of the claim of the puzzle in poetry that this is the best way to say something. Clearly interest in mere puzzle can be bad for a writer (and marks of an obscure moral worry about whether there was too much puzzle interest going on are I am afraid a disfiguring feature of my small output here).[79]

Empson's declaration is rich with suggestion, but at root, the affinity he outlines has two correspondent parts: the poem-crossword, and the annotation-solution. Though these two parts are evidently entwined, I will begin by examining the theoretical implications of the comparison for poetics, before turning in the next section to how these implications acted as a generative principle in Empson's own poetry.

Though it is certainly true that 'Notes on Notes' consolidated the association between Empson's poetry and crosswords, the association had already been ventured in response to his *Poems* (1935). In a review for the *Guardian* named 'Poetry of Conceits' in 1935, the reviewer labelled Empson's poetry as 'the apotheosis of the crossword puzzle cult,' heralding Empson as the only candidate to 'out-Donne Donne' in terms of metaphysical bafflement.[80] Returning to review *The Gathering Storm* in 1940 in a piece entitled 'Cryptic Muse', the same reviewer took credit for spurring Empson's 'Notes on Notes' as if it were a response to the 1935 review.[81] It is unclear whether or not Empson had 'Poetry of Conceits' in mind when he penned his 'Notes on Notes', though, more probably, he was riffing on the widespread motif in contemporary review culture that modern poetry was akin to the crossword. Indeed, for the *Guardian* to claim that Empson epitomised the crossword puzzle cult of poetry necessitates that such a cult was already critically recognisable.

Notably, too, many of the ideas about poetry that Empson outlined in 'Notes on Notes' had already been articulated, not only in the notes to his 1935 *Poems*, but also in an unpublished and unfinished essay called 'Obscurity and Annotation', which was written in

[79] Empson, 'Notes on Notes' to *The Gathering Storm* (Faber, 1940), pp. 55–6.
[80] C. P., 'Poetry of Conceits', *Guardian*, 23 July 1935, p. 5.
[81] C. P., 'Cryptic Muse', *Guardian*, 15 October 1940, p. 7.

approximately 1930. Like 'Notes on Notes', 'Obscurity and Annotation' defends annotation as a legitimate and constructive addition to poetry. Poetry, it argues, has to reflect an exponentially diffuse field of general knowledge in the modern era. Supplemental notes, then, can clarify points of reference without dictating any particular kind of dot-to-dot. This last aspect is crucial, because it runs contrary to the intuitive notion that notes annihilate a poem by rendering it liable to total comprehension. On the contrary, Empson is at pains to show that notes are hermeneutically additive, rather than a foreclosure of a poem's imaginative potential.

A conspicuous difference between 'Obscurity and Annotation' and 'Notes on Notes', however, lies in the use of the crossword puzzle as a guiding conceit. Though the crossword runs throughout his 'Notes on Notes' (1940), there are no crosswords mentioned in 'Obscurity and Annotation'. In the earlier essay, Empson uses 'puzzle' only once to furnish an argument for 'the other side' (that is, a view of poetry that stigmatises annotation): 'The thing is not a puzzle but a process, it is not your immediate object to get to the other end; and a note may be like those charmingly courteous motorists who offer you a lift when you are only going for a walk.'[82] Empson dismisses this argument for its assumption that 'the process of understanding some lines of poetry is an essential part of their value': a note can provide 'information' but cannot substitute for 'the work of imagining.' The puzzle metaphor in 'Obscurity and Annotation', then, is more abstract and less mature than in 'Notes on Notes', even if Empson's spatial figures for the field of general knowledge — there is 'no hierarchy even of pieces of knowledge' — tentatively evoke the model of the crossword from afar. The original draft title for this essay, 'Sphinx, or the future of exegesis', points to the centrality of puzzlement to this argument, but the puzzling motif would only find its natural home in the crossword as Empson became more familiar with it in the subsequent decade.[83]

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[82] Empson, 'Obscurity and Annotation', in *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by John Haffenden (University of Iowa Press, 1987), pp. 70–88 (p. 73).
[83] Houghton MS Eng 1401, Box 44: 1010.

Haffenden argues that the use of the crossword in 'Notes on Notes' was merely 'a metaphor [...] offered as an encouragingly domestic analogy' that ultimately did Empson few favours.[84] Alfred Alvarez agrees, noting that 'Empson didn't help by claiming that the pleasure he derived from his own excellent poems was largely a "crossword puzzle interest"', an assessment consonant with several critical reviews from the period which cast doubt on Empson's argument.[85] The *Times Literary Supplement* called Empson's comparison 'doubtful' in a review of *The Gathering Storm*, and in an essay for *Penguin New Writing* in 1949, John Wain called Empson's comparison 'obviously [...] not wholly serious.'[86] Based on Empson's devoted and documented interest in crosswords, and puzzle referents in precursors to 'Notes on Notes', I contend that Empson's invocation of the crossword was not only meant seriously, but was also the natural home for a theory of poetry that was already bound up with ideas of intertext, impasse, and ludic interpretation. Its approachability as a 'domestic analogy', after all, does not preclude its relevance to a poetics born out of the democratising field of general knowledge, as Empson had argued.

Furthermore, it is misleading to imagine that Empson was referring strictly to plain crosswords when we know that he was a patron of cryptic crosswords above all else: in any case, the amalgam of clue types in grids from the period remained inchoate in the 1940s, and as such cannot be assessed using the standards of the present. The difference between plain and cryptic crosswords, when it comes to its implications for poetry, is of obvious but neglected significance. And yet, a critical camp has settled around the notion that Empson's puzzlingness is rooted solely in the mechanical transition from word to synonym, mystery to clarity, poem to note.

As early as 1950, Richard Wilbur could claim that Empson's poetry 'is usually thought of as puzzle-literature, and one doesn't hear him discussed as a thinker,' asserting an arbitrary

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[84] Haffenden, *WEP*, p. xlix.
[85] Alfred Alvarez, 'Empson's God', *New Statesman*, 62.1594, 29 September 1961, p. 442.
[86] John Wain, 'Ambiguous Gifts', in *Penguin New Writing 1949*, ed. by John Lehmann (Penguin, 1949), p. 116.

binary between *puzzlement* and *thinking* that is difficult to uphold.[87] Bernard Bergonzi likewise assents to Empson's comparison, but imagines the crossword as a flat, undynamic anchor on creativity: 'At the risk of spoiling the party, I want to remark that much of Empson's poetry has no more than a crossword puzzle interest.'[88] Even John Betjeman, who extolled Empson's poems as 'reluctantly fascinating' in 1955, enforces an odd separation between 'appealing' poems and those that are 'perhaps [...] as good in their crossword way.' Tellingly, when describing how one should read the poems he deems appealing, Betjeman unconsciously reverts to standard puzzle solving technique: 'If you are none the wiser, give it up [and] try another,' he advises, recommending that one compare one's hunches with the ancillary notes in the course of reading.[89] Thaventhiran and Collini are right, then, to point out that reviewers have been 'often baffled' by Empson's poetry, but, as I will contend, our notion of this bafflement can be informed by taking Empson's crosswordiness a little more seriously.

In a 1956 review of Empson's poetry, Charles Magde usefully exemplifies the prevailing limitations of misunderstanding the puzzle factor. With regard to 'Autumn on Nan-Yueh', a poem first published in *The Gathering Storm*, Magde argues that 'Some of its phrases, e.g. "Economists have got the bird," are reminiscent of clues in a *Times* crossword, not intended to bring the imagination into play.'[90] More recently, Simon Armitage has used the figure of the cryptic crossword to lament poetry that excludes on the basis of its referentiality, comparing Geoffrey Hill's verse to 'lines that read like clues from *The Times* cryptic crossword.'[91] In an 1986 interview, Hill had already outmanoeuvred this critical chorus, responding to the suggestion that he indulged in 'persistent games-playing with words' by pointing out that 'any writer contemplating the world of commodity and policy' sees 'games-playing with words' as the modern world's natural condition.[92] Paradoxically, Armitage spatialises his notion with

[87] Richard Wilbur, 'Seven Poets', *Sewanee Review*, 58.1 (Winter 1950), p. 130.
[88] Bergonzi, 'Honouring Empson', p. 33.
[89] John Betjeman, 'The Enjoyment of Modern Poetry', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 1955, p. 14.
[90] Charles Magde, Empson Agonistes', *Listen*, 2.1 (1956), p. 21.
[91] Simon Armitage, *A Vertical Art: On Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 90.
[92] Geoffrey Hill, interview with David Sexton, *Literary Review* (February 1986).

recourse to horizontality and verticality, labelling referential verse as 'horizontal' for threatening to replace the 'vertical art' of aesthetically orchestrated poetry. Armitage uses the figure of the two-dimensional puzzle grid to epitomise an apparently one-dimensional approach to language, lamenting obscurity as 'a betrayal of [language's] expert and exquisite functionality' while mixing his own metaphors: poetry like that is at once 'white noise', 'pepper spray', a 'Faraday cage' and a '*Times* cryptic crossword'.

Like Armitage on Hill, Magde is partly right — Empson's lines do often read like cryptic clues — but, I contend, his exclusion of 'imagination' and 'play' from this structure is similarly myopic. W. H. Meller's essay on the state of poetry in 1940 inadvertently offers a similar contradiction in terms, in regard to Empson's 'Bacchus': it is 'an example of the crossword-puzzle of ideas type of poem' that is 'academically inert' but demands 'cerebral convolutions.'[93] This oxymoron — the poem is leaden, the poem is dizzyingly dynamic — is rather typical of reviews of Empson that confess their own puzzlement while making fun of the idea that a poem could have anything to do with a puzzle.

Like Broyard's caricature of Auden, Mellers imagines Empson moping around in intellectual isolation, crossword-brained:

> It's a sad lot to be an artist without a public, but it's sadder still to be a crossword-puzzle maker with no one to fill in the blanks, for the artist has, must have, a certain self-sufficiency, whereas the puzzle is meaningless apart from its solution.[94]

Mellers' view of the 'inadequacy' of the 'crossword interest' is a natural consequence of the false notion that 'the puzzle is meaningless apart from its solution,' an argument that is almost inversely principled to Wittgenstein's pronouncement in 1922 that puzzles *only* become meaningless upon solution: 'For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. *The riddle* does not exist.'[95] Empson's 'Obscurity and Annotation' avows the same principle, asserting that the notes only act as answers insofar as they provide

[93] W. H. Mellers, 'Cats in Air-Pumps (Or Poets in 1940)', pp. 289–300.
[94] ibid, p. 294.
[95] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), 7.

information, rather than answers to any questions or abstract tensions raised in the poem: if they could even hope to answer the poem *in toto*, then the poem would not exist as a poem. Even while dismissing Empson's 'cultivation' of 'ambiguity as a fine art,' the *TLS* endorsed this notion, arguing that 'the answer in his notes' will foil the reader just as the poetic puzzle.[96]

In 1926, Empson had commented on 'the closing tautology' of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) — 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent' — and ventured that art might be one way of 'lay[ing] open' the limits of philosophy by speaking 'what philosophy cannot state.'[97] For Haffenden, Empson's poetry then 'stands for an attempt to meet the challenge of Wittgenstein's aphorism.'[98] As Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé has persuasively asserted, however, those who read Wittgenstein's aphorisms too solemnly risk ignoring the conclusion of the *Tractatus*, which asserts that everything hitherto has been '*einfact Unsinn*, simply nonsense.'[99] The *Tractatus* (which Wittgenstein said 'ought to be written as one would *write a poem*') instead functions as a 'complex ethical-aesthetical puzzle of a distinctly modernist stripe,' using the structure of a riddle (but one without answers) to cultivate puzzlement as an exercise, and in so doing, to place the onus of imaginative work onto its readers. Wittgenstein, Zumhagen-Yekplé argues, 'works strategically to perplex readers [...] while simultaneously nurturing our experience of wonder and bewilderment'; Empson's poems, I hold, aim at a similar end, hybridising poetic and puzzle traditions in order to harness mystery. Empson's poems leverage the sense and structure of puzzles, but critically sever the possibility of total solution (even while avowing aid in the notes), in order to estrange and hence enchant their objects.

Wittgenstein, too, offers one possible rebuke to Mellers' snipe that Empson would hardly find a reading public for his puzzle-poems. Wittgenstein sought out F. R. Leavis at the turn of the 1930s for help in 'filling in the blanks' of Empson's poetry. In *The Critic as*

[96] 'Puzzles in Verse: The Cult of Ambiguity', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 October 1940, p. 7.
[97] Quoted in *WEP*, p. liii.
[98] ibid, p. xv.
[99] Zumhagen-Yekplé, *A Different Order of Difficulty*, p. 3.

Anti-Philosopher (1982), Leavis recalls being asked by Wittgenstein to explain Empson's poems in *Cambridge Poetry 1929*, and being interrupted again and again: 'At the third or fourth interruption of the same kind I shut the book, and said, "I'm not playing."'[100] Leavis' refusal to 'play' interpretative back-and-forth with Wittgenstein (at the time, a keen tennis player) is suggestive of the ludic potential that reading Empson's poems as games could offer.[101] Empson was hardly 'a crossword-puzzle maker with no one to fill in the blanks' given the ludic profile his poetry had, and its ripeness for collaborative engagement.

As a child, Empson's cousin Muriel Mickelthwait recalls his penchant for inventing games, on one occasion manufacturing an obstacle course out of books for a tennis ball to traverse. By his own account, he spent long hours at Cambridge sitting 'by the fire trying to think of an interesting puzzle' (a coincidental ally for Eliot's *Fireside* puzzles, then) and wondering how he could 'write beautiful things like the poet Donne.'[102] The reception of his poems at Cambridge satisfied both aspirations. When faced with ludicrously difficult Torquemada puzzles in the 1930s, solvers (including C. S. Lewis) would often collectivise in order to catalyse the rate of discovery. Empson's poems, according to the recollections of his contemporary at Cambridge, Richard Eberhart, held a similar status:

> In Cambridge everybody talked about Empson's poetry. His poems challenged the mind, seemed to defy the understanding; they amused and they enchanted; and even then they afforded a kind of parlour game, whiling away lively hours of puzzlement at many a dinner party.[103]

Empson's poems were thought of as 'a brain-tickler which exercises many hours of drawing-room discussion', beguiling readers into collaborative and interpersonal reading, a coterie of readers rather than writers.

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[100] F. R. Leavis, *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, ed. by G. Singh (Chatto & Windus, 1982), pp. 144–5.
[101] Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics' (1929), quoted in Stanley Stewart, 'Was Wittgenstein a Closet Literary Critic?', *New Literary History*, 34.1 (Winter 2003), pp. 43–57 (p. 46).
[102] Empson, quoted in Gardner and Gardner, *The God Approached*, p. 78.
[103] Richard Eberhart, 'Empson's Poetry', *Accent*, 4.4 (Summer 1944), reprinted in *On Poetry and Poets* (University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 117.

The declared affinity between Empson's poetry and cryptic crosswords, and their liability to be read collaboratively, are naturally kindred. Magde's claim that 'Economists have got the bird' (from 'Autumn on Nan-Yueh') resembles a *Times* clue is apt: it has both the constituent ingredients and overarching sense of 'double syntax' to sound like a clue from the period.[104] 'Economists', indeed, normally indicates LSE (London School of Economics), while there is a whole aviary of short names for birds (TIT, EMU, ROOK, COOT, KITE, LARK, and so on). The crucial difference, however, is that by cryptic crossword convention, one would expect a definitional component in the clue in order to make sense of its attendant wordplay. There is no such component in the line from 'Autumn on Nan-Yueh': it does indeed read like a cryptic clue, but one that is denied the possibility of resolution. Rather than exiling the imagination, as Magde argues, this frustrated resemblance creates a lacuna that the reader must bridge for themselves. 'The work of imagining' (as Empson had put it in 'Obscurity and Annotation') is heightened rather than stymied by the suppressed referentiality of the line.

iv. 'Trickwork': Teasing Poetry

'The Teasers', a poem in *The Gathering Storm* that had first been published (without its third stanza) in *Furioso: A Magazine of Verse* in 1940, abounds with this suppressed referentiality.[105] In an interview with Christopher Ricks first published in 1963, Empson said that he had originally written a longer poem which he ultimately 'cut [...] down to rags so that it doesn't make sense, you can't find out what it's about.'[106] The form of the published poems bears the scars of this excision, with the central line of each stanza spliced in two:

[104] Empson, 'Autumn on Nan-Yueh', l. 189, in *WEP*, pp. 91–98.
[105] Empson, 'The Teasers', in *WEP*, p. 86.
[106] 'William Empson in Conversation with Christopher Ricks', *The Review*, 6–7 (June 1973), p. 28.

The Teasers

Not but they die, the teasers and the dreams,
Not but they die,
and tell the careful flood
To give them what they clamour for and why.

You could not fancy where they rip to blood
You could not fancy
nor that mud
I have heard speak that will not cake or dry.

Our claims to act appear so small to these
Our claims to act
colder lunacies
That cheat the love, the moment, the small fact.

Make no escape because they flash and die,
Make no escape
build up your love,
Leave what you die for and be safe to die.

In 'The Calling Trumpets' (1955), Empson explained his rationale for the structural and metrical disconnect central to the poem: it 'did not last long enough to make the argument definite (so that a lot of guessing about meaning could go on).'[107] As John Wain has observed, the oscillation between decasyllabic, nonasyllabic, and octosyllabic lines raises expectations that are frustrated irregularly into 'shapeless nothings.'[108] Wain's sense of privation is at odds, though, with the laterally expansive set of meanings he earmarks in the poem, claiming that it contains a 'hub of meaning' beset by 'a riot of subsidiary meanings.'

The titular 'teaser' is particularly pregnant in this regard. In 'Not but they die', an untitled *terza rima* poem first published in *The Royal Beasts* which bears a striking resemblance to 'The Teasers', the word 'teasers' is replaced with 'terrors' in the first line: 'Not but they die, the terrors and the dreams.'[109] Haffenden posits that these lines potentially predated Empson's use of the more 'richly ambiguous term "teasers,"' which he would have arrived at at a late stage (he 'cut' and reconstituted 'The Teasers' from a longer poem).[110] This

[107] Empson, 'The Calling Trumpets' (1955), in *Argufying*, p. 141.
[108] Wain, 'Ambiguous Gifts', p. 123.
[109] Empson, 'Not but they die', in *WEP*, p. 87.
[110] Haffenden, *WEP*, p. 370.

ambiguity is derived not only from the potential variety of meanings in the word 'teaser', but reflexively, the use of 'teaser' to define a puzzle. As previously discussed, Empson remarked on 'Ode to a Grecian Urn's puzzling ability to 'tease us *out of thought*' in *SCW*, a verb perhaps flagging the puzzle's strategic readerly confoundment.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'teaser' had referred to opaque problems since the mid-eighteenth century, and had corollary applications in cricket, boxing, knots, and mathematics; by extension, in *Webster's New International Dictionary of English Language* (1934), it came to mean 'an advertisement meant to arouse curiosity, sometimes by withholding part of the material information.'[111] 'The Teasers' is structurally configured around this ellipsis, thwarting straightforward comprehension by obscuring its referents and intention. Though Haffenden has foregrounded the erotic quality of the 'teaser' (as in *striptease*), if it was explicitly designed 'to keep the guessing going', the puzzling element should not be discounted. An opaque, pared-down version of a longer, clearer poem, it has something of the effect of the Basic English that Empson would go on to promote, but achieving complex association through its concision, rather than clean intelligibility. The poem evinces what Michael Wood calls Empson's 'particular compound of puzzlement, disquiet, and vivid pleasure', cleaving to a 'cryptic tone' to show where 'A is B' pronouncements don't quite work, and in so doing, revealing 'the strangeness of the world' through poetry.[112]

In his notes to *The Poems of William Empson* (1949), Empson firmly rebuffed any question of meaning: 'I can't say what this poem means, partly because I don't remember, partly because I don't want to, and partly because it doesn't matter since the poem failed to say it.'[113] Wain's analysis of the poem figures 'teasers' and 'dreams' as denoting 'our inward afflictions and aspirations' which, though vulnerable to death, are inescapable, and of greater importance than 'colder lunacies' that overdetermine our behaviour.[114] Though the poem

[111] *teaser*, n. (senses 3a, 3c, 3d, and 5), in *OED Online* (accessed 30 March 2024) [first entry 1911].
[112] Michael Wood, *On Empson* (Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 57.
[113] Empson, in *WEP*, p. 367.
[114] Wain, 'Ambiguous Gifts', p. 124.

clenches itself into some kind of resolution in the final stanza (the only one to have an envelope rhyme, albeit repetitious: 'die [...] die'), Empson labelled this as a false peak: 'its final form is rather a cheat, with a solemn last verse giving a moral which the poem hasn't earned.' Taken at face value, the final stanza reiterates the fate of 'teasers' ('they flash and die'), advises us not to undervalue or evade them ('make no escape'), and, ambiguously, to cultivate love as either a rebuke or a means to death:

> Make no escape because they flash and die,
> Make no escape
> build up your love,
> Leave what you die for and be safe to die.

It is conspicuous that the final stanza — the one which Empson found unsatisfactorily moral, and insufficiently cryptic — is the only stanza in which the syntax coheres. Even in the forced enjambement of the caesural middle line, the imperative voice allows each component to be read simultaneously. This stands in contrast to the preceding three stanzas, in which the syntax is frustrated. In the second stanza, for instance, 'You could not fancy / nor that mud' separates a 'not' / 'nor' device with a verbal and nominal object, the latter of which holds an ambiguous position either as subject or object of the 'fancy[ing]'. Following the comma in the third stanza's first line, there is no primary verb to clarify the link between 'Our claims to act' and 'colder lunacies' which stand in paratactic opposition.

The poem, indeed, begins with 'Not but', an awkward construction that uses conjunctive parts to suggest disjunction. In 1927, Empson had written what he called 'a bit of romantic description imitating Gertrude Stein', firstly in the form of a poem called 'Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth-Century' and secondly in 'Address to a tennis-player'.[115] In both, Empson played with the kinds of syntactic misorderings characteristic of Stein, who in the 'Sugar' portion of *Tender Buttons* had written of 'a puzzle, a monster puzzle' synthesised out of

[115] Empson, 'Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth Century', in *WEP*, p. 18.

'likeness' and 'a search in between.'[116] 'Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth Century' enlists 'solitaire' in an ambiguous grammatical position, meaning either the game or the French adjective, to evoke the combinatorial poetics licensed by cultivating syntactic rupture. 'Address to a tennis-player' is a more riotous instantiation of this logic, freely associating based on homophonic and anagrammatical sequence:

> Biers, a rock of peat as, bares bears purr peering to his burrs. Bar star, starring poor staring Peter; thus far no, burthen rock-girt, further; three-crowned, weeping, a triple crowing; bitter to butter, goes out, to fair well, Simple to Simon Peter; a rock for bread, a roc's egg for a pie. I am That is it I Lord, give them Peter, they dare, he bears, scarlet, Herod's purple, not Christ, Pall's.[117]

There are early echoes of Empson's 'Not but' manoeuvre here in the form of wilfully mispositioned signposting words like 'thus far no', 'further', and '[NOUN], a [NOUN] as.' Empson's devising of 'I am That is it I Lord' makes this breach of syntax an allusive feature. Like 'Simple to Simon Peter', which combines a reference to the disciple with an advertising jingle for pies from 1764, the phrase is patchworked from *Exodus* ('I am that I am') and *Matthew* ('Then Judas, which betrayed him, answered and said, Master, is it I?') via, as Haffenden cannily suggests, the Sanskrit *tat tvam asi* ('That art thou'), which 'refers to the universal immanence of the transcendent'.[118] The permeation of Stein's poetry with her mathematical training might have appealed to the similarly qualified Empson: phrases like 'Suppose [statement]' that were a staple of problem-books would grace her poetry in imaginatively misdirected cascades of imagery, the censored likenesses between which it remained to the reader to determine. The tonal effect lies somewhere between solemnity and frivolity, leveraging Stein's syntactic mechanisms to overrealise a joke to the point of absurdity.

In 1927, Laura Riding needled this indeterminate space between the 'abstract' and the 'mathematical', surmising that Stein achieved the effect by jolting 'etymologically transparent

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[116] Stein, 'Sugar', in *Tender Buttons*, p. 45.
[117] Empson, 'Address to a tennis-player', ll. 20–26, in *WEP*, p. 19.
[118] Haffenden, *WEP*, p. 180.

and commonplace' words out of familiarity through surprising and quasi-random distribution.[119] The poem figures as its own 'monster puzzle' which, to use Empson's alternatives, may be a 'terror' or a 'teaser' in equal measure: in both cases, the combined effect of baffling ellipsis creates not so much an absence as a plurality of potential interpretations. The puzzle and the poem alike are activated by the individuated response of the reader. Graves and Riding were inspired by Carroll's puzzle games to practise these defamiliarising strategies themselves. While convalescing from influenza in 1939, Graves transformed himself into Riding and Riding into Graves:[120]

G R A V E S
V E S T I G E
G E R M A N E
M A N E A T E R
T E R R I B L E
B L E A R
A R I D
R I D I N G

R I D I N G
I N G R A T E
G R A T E D
E D E N
E N G R A V E S
G R A V E S

In a 1940 tribute to Riding written by Graves, one of the first epithets he used to describe her is that of a 'crossword-puzzle setter' capable of remarkable 'synthesis'.[121] Riding and Graves' *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1928), indeed, uses the crossword metaphor three times to describe the 'furiously dynamic' work of lexical association, magpieing an anonymous reviewer's striking prediction that 'the favourite poetic form of the future will be a sonnet arranged as a cross-word puzzle' (a form contemporaneously published by Torquemada) to ponder whether whether texts that 'cannot survive as poems [can] survive as puzzles.'[122]

[119] Laura Riding, 'The New Barbarism and Gertrude Stein', *transition*, 3 (June 1927), pp. 153–68.
[120] Robert Graves, quoted in Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura Riding, 1926–40* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990), p. 226.
[121] Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend* (Faber, 1940), p. 200.
[122] Riding and Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (Doubleday, 1928), p 80; p. 76.

Some of Empson's earliest poems attest to comparable combinatorial instincts in their hybridity between poems and puzzles. 'Two Centos', published for the first time in *Royal Beasts* but written when Empson was nineteen years old, combines two poems made up from quotations taken from other authors. Unlike many of Empson's other poems, the *cento* form is up front about its hybrid composition, and includes in-text footnotes labelling its sources. The first of these centos, like 'The Teasers' or 'Address to a tennis-player', wilfully juxtaposes disparate elements in order that the reader cannot help but hazard a connection between them:

> At Algezir,[1] and will in overplus,[2]
> Their herdsmen,[3] well content to think thee page,[4] divided.[3]
> Tell Isabel the queen, I looked not[5] thus
> Leander, Mr Ekenhead and I did.[6]
>
> [1] Chaucer Prologue l. 57.
> [2] Shakespeare Sonnet no. cxxxv.
> [3] Genesis, chapter 13.
> [4] Donne Elegy xvi.
> [5] Marlowe Ed II.
> [6] Don Juan, canto 2, stanza 105

'Two centos' is a useful case study for the puzzling suppression typical of Empson's poetry because it makes a virtue of its referential honesty. It reads in a manner strikingly similar to Torquemada's verse puzzles, in which the object is to discover the provenance of a quotation and then manipulate it in order to fit the grid, as a kind of gamified cento in reverse. In 'Two centos', the provenance is given immediately, transferring the puzzle to Empson's curation rather than his source work.

The initial reference to Algezir — taken from Chaucer's 'Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales* — for instance, is apparently arbitrary trisyllabic fodder for an exotic location. In any case, it is syntactically severed from 'and will in overplus' (from Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 135'), which Empson decapitalises: in the original sonnet, the italicised '*Will*' stands as a pun for William Shakespeare.[123] The stifled metatextuality of the original sonnet, unsignalled as a kind

[123] William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 135', in *Shake-Speares Sonnets: Neuer Before Imprinted* (G. Eld, 1609), p. 125.

of in-joke for the young Empson, might be characteristic of other revelations discoverable through the diligent posture of puzzlement. The second line declares more obviously the double duty these constituent parts might be performing, with its reference to a 'page,[4] divided.[5]': an apt summary of the structure of his double cento, with its propensity for internalised intertextuality, written in miniature across the division of a comma and a footnote, working to form an envelope for John Donne within *Genesis*, thus making Donne's 'content' the content itself.

The third line's swerve into direct speech from Christopher Marlowe's *Edward the Second* (1594) draws attention to its own artifice by abrupting the quotation. In the play, the line reads 'Tell Isabel the queen I looked not thus', whereas Empson foreshortens the footnote, leaving 'thus' as an ambiguously dangling piece of connective tissue (just as in 'Address to a tennis-player').[124] The line is a 'page' 'divided', artificially altered to make 'thus' — a conjunction that usually forms the basis of logical certainty — uncertain. The speaker of the cento, insofar as it comprises a hybrid voice, 'looked not thus' (didn't look that way) and 'looked not [...] thus / Leander…' (didn't look, therefore Leander…) simultaneously. Empson, at least, didn't look hard enough at his Donne, whose quotation he (perhaps deliberately) misattributed to the wrong 'Elegy'.[125] The poem's overarching combinatorial puzzle becomes conspicuous, and each insertion becomes important:

> At [CHAUCER], [SHAKESPEARE],
> [*GENESIS*], [DONNE], [*GENESIS*].
> [MARLOWE] thus
> [BYRON]

It is as if the design, with its guiding sequence, seems to gesture at an equation, or formula. The sum, or product, is Byron: the most recent poet in chronological order. Like the

[124] Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. by Peter Lukacs (ElizabethanDrama, 2020), V. v. 106.
[125] The quotation is from John Donne's 'Elegy XVII: On His Mistress', rather than 'Elegy XVI' as claimed by Empson.

simplification-by-expansion principle of his marginal mathematics, each line newly iterates a variable expression of the same canonicity, culminating in a new identity.

The act of looking, and the logic of sequence, gestures at storing a little secret so the reader may in turn look a little harder at the suppressed felicities 'divided' up on the 'page'. 'Algezir', at first glance an arbitrary choice, is now seen through the lens of the textual puzzle. Perhaps it was chosen because it is an anagram of 'glazier', a highly charged term given the poem's emphasis on frustrated acts of looking: *glazier* (n.) means a window-maker, someone blocking eyesight, or, in Renaissance slang, an eyeball.[126] Perhaps it was chosen to match the geography of Marlowe's 'Isabel' and Byron's *Don Juan*, though he might equally then have chosen 'Gernade' in Chaucer's preceding line.[127] Or perhaps the point is that the vortex of reference points, uncertainly constellated, create cavities in meaning and teleology that are then liable to reformation through the act of reading. Like the 'significant points' in Empson's beloved triangle problem, any given reader can plot their own geometry between them.

A poem that collides ludic geometry with puzzles in direct terms is 'Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs', first published in a slightly modified form under the title 'Travel Note' in a 1935 edition of *New Verse*. The amended title refers to the riddle given by an ogre-like Sphinx to Oedipus, the solution to which is 'Man' (who crawls, then walks, then requires a walking stick). It has never been critically ventured, though, that the amended title could also refer to the 'Eight-Legged Essay' once required to join the civil service in China (which was presumably familiar to Empson, as his travel associate in China, Henry Purcell, knew it well).[128] The 'Eight-Legged Essay' required candidates to respond rhetorically to stimuli in a preset formula, writing quasi-versified essays structured around a key rhyming word and

[126] *glazier*, n. (senses 1, 2b, and 5), in *OED Online* (accessed 30 March 2024) [first entry 1900].
[127] 'In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be / Of Algezir, and ridden in Belmarye.' Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Houghton Mifflin, 1987), ll. 56–7.
[128] Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, p. 33.

title.[129] The poem was inspired by a trip to Egypt on Empson's return from China and Japan, and declares a similar interest in rhetorical patterns of responding to challenging prompts.

After punning on 'line' to describe the 'trivial' (in Latin, 'of three roads', compared to the etymological roadlessness of *aporia*) circumstance of the Oedipus's killing of his father in the first stanza (Oedipus was at an intersection both geographically and genetically, each tending towards 'zero'), the second stanza swerves into what the Gardners describe as 'a collage of juxtaposed observations':

> A young man's cross-road but a shady one.
> Killing a mistaken black cat in the dark
> He had no other metaphysical trait.[130]

The collage effect creates, to the Gardners, 'a kind of do-it-yourself poem [...] in which the reader is left to spot the many interconnections, contrasts and parallels, and build up a meaning from them.'[131] Notably, in Empson's subsequent notes on the poem, 'crossroad' is never hyphenated: it only remains hyphenated in its appearances in Empson's poetry, in each of 'Travel Note', 'Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs,' and 'Rebuke for a dropped brick'. William L. Hedges's commentary on the poem suggests that Empson allows 'Christ' to 'enter the poem, at least negatively', his fate the mirror of prophetic utterances that clarified Jesus's fate, rather than redescribed it as a riddle.[132] Haffenden counters that the hyphenation 'may have no special significance', being a possible echo of James Joyce's neologistic (and unhyphenated) 'crosstree' in *Ulysses*.[133]

Empson's interest in the poetic possibilities licensed by the word 'cross', however, has a much earlier precedent in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. After defining 'ambiguity' as both 'a puzzle as to what the author meant' and 'an indecision', Empson illustrates the final (and 'most

[129] Roy E. Teele, review of Ch'ên Shou-Yi, 'Chinese Literature: A Historical Introduction', in *Books Abroad*, 36.4 (1962), p. 452.
[130] Empson, 'Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs', ll. 4–6, in *WEP*, p. 74.
[131] Gardners, *The God Approached*, p. 168.
[132] William L. Hedges, 'The Empson Treatment, *Accent*, 17 (Winter 1957), p. 328.
[133] Haffenden, *WEP*, p. 328.

ambiguous') kind of ambiguity with recourse to the figure of the cross.[134] The seventh type of ambiguity 'occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context' (again, the footnote to this contradiction evokes 'much philosophical puzzling about the reconciliation of contradictions', using the metaphor this time as an intransitive verb).[135] Empson gives the Latin *altus* (high, deep) and English *let* (allow, hinder) as his examples; one could add a suite of other so-called contronyms like *sanction* (permit, ban), *go* (succeed, fail), and *cleave* (sever, unite):

> A contradiction of this kind may be meaningless, but can never be a blank; it has at least stated the subject which is under discussion, and has given a sort of intensity to it such as one finds in a gridiron pattern in architecture because it gives prominence neither to the horizontals nor to the verticals, and in a check pattern because neither colour is the ground on which the other place; it is at once an indecision and a structure, like the symbol of the Cross.[136]

Beyond the intersectional figure of a Cross, the word 'cross' is likewise contronymic, denoting both convergence and divergence, encounters and betrayals. Empson finds a natural ally for these verbal felicities in architectural and textile latticework, patterns which make a structural conceit out of the dehierarchisation of multiple meanings. Although he wrote *Seven Types of Ambiguity* before any documented record of his interest in cryptic crosswords (though standard crosswords were culturally mainstream by 1930), it is hardly surprising that they stood out to him: concretising his argument about constructive ambiguity, the crossword's double lever of 'indecision' and 'structure' was a locus for contesting the intersection of 'meaning' with 'meaninglessness'.

The overarching metaphor running through the final stanza of 'Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs' is that of the riddle, and its corresponding 'solutions' and 'answer':

> Not one for generalizing his solutions
> Oedipus placed the riddle with a name.
> Another triumph for the commonplace.
> While too much to pretend she fell and burst

[134] Empson, *STA*, p. 17; p. 5.
[135] ibid, pp. 192–93.
[136] Empson, *STA*, p. 192.

It is a comfort that the Sphinx took such an answer.[137]

This final stanza depicts Oedipus's brief response to the Sphinx ('Man'), 'plac[ing] the riddle' as one might place a forgotten name (e.g. 'I couldn't place her'), except in this case the 'name' is ancillary to the act of placing, rather than its object. Though a general answer, it is non-generalised in a specifically mathematical sense: the solution is neither extrapolated upon nor extended, the irony being that Oedipus fails to 'place' the significance of the solution for his own destiny. As the Gardners have it, 'Oedipus did not think the riddle anything more than a crossword-puzzle clue capable of a mechanical 'solution,' whereas it described *him*.' In any case, the Sphinx's 'comfort[able]' acceptance of Oedipus's answer is reassuring and concludes, as the Gardners venture, that it is a relief that our 'sketchy answers satisfy the examiners.'

The word 'answer', I contend, is rather more charged than this in Empson's poetry. For one thing, his 'Notes on Notes', avowing the structural metaphor of the crossword and its solutions, disavows the capacity of any 'answer' to truly answer a poem. The unit of the 'answer', as he had put it in 'Obscurity and Annotation', can even make the 'work of imagining' much harder. The latter essay, indeed, he had originally entitled 'Sphinx, or the future of exegesis,' a title that it would be remiss to exclude from any analysis of 'Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs'. The Sphinx, though satisfied by Oedipus's technically correct answer, neither 'fell' nor 'burst' (to think so would be an act of 'pretence'), as had been the mythological consensus since Diodorus Siculus.[138] Instead, the sphinx remained; as Empson would note after first visiting Egypt in 1934, 'this Sphinx was clearly not destroyed by Oedipus answering the riddle.'[139] And so the totem of the riddle, its avatar, remains in spite of the solution that ought to have vanquished it. When a puzzle is solved, the puzzle remains: it is of 'comfort' that we are allowed to venture guesswork in response to a puzzle, but it would be mere pretence to

[137] Empson, 'Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs', ll. 16–20, in *WEP*, p. 74.
[138] See *Diodorus of Sicily*, III, trans. C. H. Oldfather (Harvard University Press, 1939), p. 23.
[139] Empson, *Morris Gray Poetry Reading* (Harvard, 1973), quoted in *WEP*, p. 325.

imagine that solving a riddle might eradicate the human condition of puzzlement. Cryptic crosswords have solutions, but the existence of these solutions hardly purges the English language of its unquietable propensity for ambiguity.

The Sphinx occupies a plural exegetical position, being at once the text (it issues the puzzle), the reader (of answers), and the literary critic (it must assess these answers). It performs a version of close-reading in response to Oedipus's answer, and, finding it to be relevant, allows him to live. However, the riddle, the text, and the Sphinx all remain. Empson's poems and notes aspire to an analogous condition, one in which puzzle and solution are in dialogue, but where this reciprocity is additive, rather than mutually destructive. Oedipus's mistake is that he takes an answer at face value. If Oedipus had read *The Gathering Storm*, he might have turned to the notes in the expectation that they would clarify every aspect of the poem, and would then have been understandably disappointed. It is striking how often contemporary critics made this bad faith argument, asserting the inadequacy of Empson's hermeneutic system, rather than drawing the more obvious conclusion (one that Empson himself spells out) that the notes are part of the knot of the poem, rather than the sword slicing it.

'Bacchus', a poem which begins with a comparable reference to the notion of an 'answer', has often been the locus of these critical grumbles about not finding any. The particular critical attention to 'Bacchus' as a case study for Empsonian notation has arisen from its unique condition: the poem (just shy of 100 lines) is dwarfed by the notes, which span to 6 pages. The flurry of back-handed adjectives used to describe the poem in *The God Approached* gives a flavour of its referential density: it is 'tortuous,' 'multi-layered', 'elliptical', 'taxing', the 'most complex', the 'most difficult', epistemologically 'exhausting'.[140] In a prefatory essay to 'Bacchus' in *Poet's Choice* (1962), Empson confessed that he liked 'Bacchus' best of his poems: 'It may seem to the put-upon reader who works at it (of course it is not meant to be

[140] Gardner & Gardner, *The God Approached*, p. 27; p. 153; p. 25.

just Imagist) a very intellectual box of tricks, also rather put together at random; but if that were all it couldn't have been so hard to finish.'[141] Empson's double claim — that the poem is an exercise in trickery, and yet much more than that — converges around the figure of a 'put-upon' reader who must experience their reading as labour:

> The laughing god born of a startling answer
> (Cymbal of clash in the divided glancer
> Forcing from heaven's the force of earth's desire)
> Capped a retort to sublime earth by fire
> And starred round within man its salt and glitter
> (Round goblet, but for star- or whirled- map fitter?
> Earth lost in him is still but earth fulfilled),
> Troubled the water till the spirit 'stilled
> And flower round tears-of-wine round the dimmed flask
> (The roundest ones crack least under this task;
> It is the delicate glass stands heat, better than stone.[142]

The allusive concentration of the poem's opening, underlined with a taut sequence of couplets, bears out this density. Empson's notes elaborate on the tissue of references, explaining the overarching idea that the mythological distillation of drink is typical of 'the notion [...] that life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis.'[143] These 'contradictions' abound both thematically and locally. Salt and water are entangled; the 'glancer' is said to have 'looked both ways'; 'cymbal' and 'whirled' are homophones of 'symbol' and 'world' respectively.

In her extended commentary on 'Bacchus' in 'The Crossword Mentality in Modern Literature and Culture', which assiduously tracks Empson's filigree of obscure and arcane points of reference, Raphel argues that the poem therefore epitomises his crosswordiness by exhibiting informational difficulty.[144] Crucially, however, the object of comparison is construed in plain (and predominantly American) puzzle terms, rather than cryptic terms of the kind Empson had been solving in the period. It is certainly true that Empson's 'local density' makes

[141] Empson, note to 'Bacchus' in *Poet's Choice*, ed. by Paul Engle and Joseph Langland (The Dial Press, 1962), p. 86.
[142] Empson, 'Bacchus', ll. 1–11, in *WEP*, p. 64.
[143] Empson, note to 'Bacchus' in *Collected Poems of William Empson* (Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1949), p. 100.
[144] Raphel, 'The Crossword Mentality', p. 149.

a structural intersection of different points of reference, but cryptic crosswords, as Empson knew first-hand, also compacted this multivalence into smaller units of meaning. Empson's notes counterbalance informational content (e.g. the 'retort' calls up the myth of Jupiter and Semele) with freely associative content (e.g. 'taught' is an apt homophonic descriptor of Prometheus, who both learned a lesson and is now stretched *taut* over the glaciers). The Gardners draw attention to Empson's daisychain of soundalikes, which iterate, aptly for a description of chemical distillation, the same constituent parts in new forms throughout the poem, rather like the expansive syntax of his mathematics. The *wheal* returns in *commonweal*; *taught*, or taut, reappears in *retort*. Empson's villanelle 'Missing Dates' offers a similar formal insistence on repetition with adjustment; its title raises an absence that repeated lines, in reiterated but amended configurations, aim to fill, as if rotating a jigsaw puzzle piece before placing it.[145]

'Bacchus' insists structurally on horizontal and vertical patterns that exist above and below the shimmer of references which, intoxicating the reader, belie contradictions that invite puzzlement without surrendering to it. The Gardners curiously assent to this notion of a structural puzzle without conceding its specific affinity with the cryptic crossword:

> One looks through the puzzle as it were through a pair of binoculars of which one lens is microscopic, the other telescopic: it is possible, with many readings, to grasp individual pieces of the puzzle, closely seen; it is also possible to discern some kind of overall structure [...] What one cannot do is bring the two lenses to a common focus, since there is too much to keep in mind for too great a space [...] the nearest one comes to total illumination is the random flash where two separated passages suddenly touch, suggesting yet another possibility[146]

The crossword is discursively exiled, just as in 'Plenum and Vacuum' which, 'without Empson's notes' would be 'little more than a crossword-puzzle clue'.[147] Simultaneously, the bifocal nature of the poetry is imagined by a series of descriptors which match the cryptic crossword specifically: it is an exercise in verbal juxtaposition, defamiliarisation, and the capacity of

[145] Empson, 'Missing Dates', in *WEP*, p. 79.
[146] Gardner & Gardner, *The God Approached*, p. 153.
[147] ibid, p. 51.

words to behave polymorphously when subject to different kinds of attention. The Gardners speak of this poem as a binocular puzzle, full of double vision, as if the most obvious instance of this ergodic traversal were not the poem and its relation to the notes. Their use of 'through' makes it ambiguous whether the poem is equivalent with or subject to the binoculars. Since Empson's 'glancer' looks both ways, the fact of its rhyme (a linguistic model for looking both ways) with 'answer' suggests the profitability of holding this binocularity in a certain esteem, reading as one glances.

Empson's notes, indeed, evoke the figure of the puzzle twice in aid of his annotations, in the first instance with regard to the parenthetical couplet: 'Columbus' egg sat on earth's garden wall / And held the equitation of his bar.'[148] The palpable irony of using one puzzle to 'explain' another is that nothing, in particular, is cleared up:

> Columbus, unfortunate in life, like the Spirit called 'dove', once puzzled people about how to stand an egg on its end; the answer was to crack the shell. He is Humpty Dumpty the egg and a foam omelette because wisdom via drink requires breaking eggs, giving up static control; thus making the world go round, like a drunk's head; but he is judge as well as horsetamer — *equitation* is riding and justice*, bar* is for sea horizon, drinking saloon, and law court. *Beating the bounds* could mean whipping schoolboys at places where it was important to remember boundaries of property; Humpty's wall is remembered because he fell off it.[149]

The referential field of the puzzle is refractory enough to require more than the Gardners' binoculars; a kaleidoscope like the one endorsed by Planché (see Chapter 1) would be more appropriate. If standing an egg on its end wasn't puzzling enough, then Empson sees fit to serve up an explanatory omelette. Like the incantatory recursion of the poem, the notes swerve between referents whose connectivity is confidently stated, but only tangentially motivated.

The equation of Columbus with Humpty Dumpty is broadly accounted for, but why is he also a 'foam omelette'? Why can 'wisdom via drink' be substituted for 'making an omelette' in its requirement for breaking eggs? 'Equitation' may indeed evoke the dual possibilities of

[148] Empson, 'Bacchus', ll. 24–5, in *WEP*, p. 64.
[149] Empson, 'Note to Bacchus', p. 101.

'riding and justice', but why does this stand in distinction to the spinning of the world, or a drunkard's head? The burden of 'why' accumulates, challenging a reader to chart connections between disparate elements stated as if they belong together. Like the word 'equitation', in a cryptic sense, *it* disrupts an *equation*. This occurs both on the level of the poem, the note in relation to the poem, and the note itself. It is a critical error to think that the puzzles of Empson's poetry are, or even could theoretically be, 'answered' by his notes; the notes field puzzles of their own, in supplement and in distinction to the original poetry.

Georges Perec, whose novel *La Vie: Mode D'Emploi* (1978) makes a structural condition of both chess moves and an incomplete crossword, wrote in 1986 on the compositional opportunities raised by writing under the constraint of a puzzle.[150] In the case of a crossword, he explained, one begins with specific elements in mind, and an overall structure, but cannot fill it in freely out of choice; instead, one must be reactive to elements forced by the limits of the structure: 'it is a system of primary constraints where the letter is omnipresent but language is absent.'[151] The demands of puzzle-making absent the possibility (and the attendant complications) of strict intentionality, because so many choices are made for you. 'Bacchus' was written over a seven-year period in instalments which, non-sequentially titled ('Bacchus Three' preceded 'Bacchus Four'), eventually coalesced into the complete poem.[152] The standard critical hypothesis is, as J. H. Willis first ventured, that 'Empson had planned to have a four-part structure'; the Gardners concur, noting that 'he had a clear conception of the poem's total pattern well before he was able to write the actual lines which filled in its large central hiatus.'[153] Though Empson was not tethered to constraints to quite the same extent as a

[150] Georges Perec, *La Vie: Mode D'Emploi* (1978), trans. by David Bellos (Vintage, 2008). For discussion of Perece's crossword motif (and the feat of its translation by Bellos), see Dennis Duncan, *The Oulipo and Modern Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 120–1.
[151] Perec, 'Thoughts on the Art and Technique of Crossing Words' (foreword to *Les Mots Croisés* [1986]), *Believer*, 37 (September 2006).
[152] 'Bacchus' (ll. 1–17) in *New Verse* (March, 1933); 'Bacchus Two' (ll. 18–41), in *Criterion* (July, 1935); 'Bacchus Four' (ll. 73–92), in *Poetry* (January, 1937), 'Bacchus Three' (ll. 42–57), in *Poetry* (April, 1940); 'Bacchus Four', in *Poetry* (February, 1942).
[153] J. H. Willis, *The Poetry of William Empson* (Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 281; Gardner & Gardner, *The God Approached*, p. 152.

crossword writer, who must abide by intersection and checked letters, the poem's central emphasis on sequential association (both thematic, verbal, and alphabetic) meant that similar conditions were determining factors in the composition of the poem.

Empson's notes, then, might be thought of as less explanatory than simply reactive: his own amalgam of intentional authorial choices and felicitous guesswork at a poem which, being dense with association, aspires to the condition of a puzzle that could give even its author pause for thought. Empson's 'Notes on Notes', importantly, speaks not only of readers experiencing 'puzzle interest' but also of himself when he returned to it. The strange and estranging nature of a puzzle is that it designedly keeps its solver at distance while embedding enough constituent material to entice them into venturing a solution. A poem like 'Bacchus', which is so packed with imaginative stimuli as to be confounding, valorises its essential impassibility as a valuable poetic proposition. Explaining the attraction of free verse in his 1908 'Lecture on Modern Poetry' to the future Imagists, Hulme commanded that 'the shell' — though a 'very suitable covering for the egg at a certain point' — 'must be broken'.[154] The answer to Columbus's puzzle may have been to 'crack the shell', but in a poem so wilfully overegged as 'Bacchus', there are simply too many to crack. In any case, we are told that cracking an egg yields not an answer so much as a 'foam omelette' (a mixed metaphor of a dish), hatching yet another kind of puzzle.

In a review of Empson's *Collected Poems* in 1955 for *The Listener* (a publication that would later become the preeminent cryptic crossword publisher in the UK), Hilary Corke argued that Empson's base 'unit of creation' is not 'the poem alone, but the poem *plus* the note upon it [...] What remains in the mind is not 'a poem' in the old sense (a memorable and musical sequence of language), but an intellectual structure that, something like a sculptural mobile, shifts its parts this way and that.'[155] Corke's observation is apt, in that it sees past the then already tired critical view that Empson's notes were 'no more than the solution of a

[154] Hulme, 'Lecture on Modern Poetry', in *TEHW*, p. 67.
[155] Hilary Corke, 'Riding A Hare', *Listener*, 54.1388, 6 October 1955, p. 40.

perfectly legitimate conundrum,' but, I argue, falls short in extending this logic to reckon at the notes as a supplementary part of the puzzle.

The poetry, drafted and redrafted in the full knowledge that it would come with a series of notes, is precision tooled to be maximally ambiguous, opportunitistically referential, and tonally promiscuous. The notes, in turn, elaborate on affinities and echoes both obvious and (to the point of absurdity) obscure. The reciprocity of this system of composition, akin to the cryptic puzzle and its solution, is that each is additive to the other, and neither undermines its correspondent. On the contrary, the two textual forms in turn generate a secondary hermeneutic puzzle, in that they assert an equivalence that a reader must adjudicate, puzzle through, and figure out. As an '*unexpressed* author', as Hulme put it in 1907, puzzling poetics leverage aporia to enlist the reader creatively.[156] In this sense, Stanley Fish's argument that readers of poetry do not 'construe but construct', 'mak[ing]' poems rather than 'decod[ing] them' is uniquely resonant when applied to texts like Empson's which are persistently alive to the interpretive possibilities of puzzlement.[157]

These interlocking hermeneutics are after all common to Empson's poetry, crosswords, and recreational mathematics. An annotation to a poem provides contingent information (an allusion, a pun), but seeing the 'answer' does not annihilate the function of the poem so much as create a puzzle of signification (why the allusion? why the pun?) for the reader. These are conditions native to all poetry, but they are made particularly conspicuous and self-conscious by Empson. The nature of a crossword is that, often, a word will be revealed by checking letters before a reader has read, let alone understood, a particular clue. The puzzle does not cease in this instance, but transfer from 'What is this?' to 'Why is it this?' Mathematically, too, recalcitrant problems like the 'Nine Point Circle' Empson had obsessed over, in fact begin with

[156] Hulme, 'Notes on Language and Style', in *TEHW*, p. 52.
[157] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 327.

the answer, and then proceed to finding a proof. The puzzle is not about the answer, but about the mind's imaginative calibration of it with the material at hand.

Marshall Brown has ruled out aporia as a natural quality of Empson's verse, arguing that though 'puzzles are Empson's terrain,' it is the poet's intelligence that 'unravel[s] the machines driving the poetic process.'[158] Inadvertently picking up the terms of Empson's vehicular metaphor for poetics in 'Obscurity and Annotation' — that notes could jeopardise the puzzlement of a poem by taking the reader from A to B like 'one of those charmingly courteous motorists who offer you a lift when you are only going for a walk' — Brown ironically affirms Empson's aporetic poetics.[159] Empson, after all, warned against literary cryptanalysis, calling his symbols 'no more mathematical than road-signs' that one should approach intuitively rather than dogmatically.[160] Etymologically, *aporia* is a mode of impassability (from the Greek for 'without passage') which leverages doubt redemptively to harness strangeness without succumbing to it as a roadblock; one irony of Oedipus's 'trivial' circumstances, as Empson put it in 'Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs', is that three etymological roads give way to none. Empson's poetry evinces a more playful interest in the textual affordances of aporia as a way of exaggerating the naturally confounding qualities of composition and interpretation, and in so doing, it invites the reader neither to drive (nor even to walk) from A to B, nor to tarry among algebraic expressions alone, but to wander imaginatively without passage, to 'explore the byway' of poetic free association (as one letter to Torquemada put it), reading as one puzzles.[161]

[158] Brown, 'Reading Empson', p. 750.
[159] Empson, 'Obscurity and Annotation', in *Argufying*, p. 73.
[160] Empson, *SCW*, p. 14.
[161] R. C. Mathers, 'Torquemada', in *T112*, p. 21.

Conclusion

1. With the last word a little left around (6)

In 'Puzzle No. 622' (1938), Torquemada's first down clue apologises for its predecessor, a difficult charade for CULTIVATOR: '[41. Cartographer deprived of much of his material about the fourth of last month (10)], reducing [mer]CATOR around ULT IV.[1] Performatively ruing the 'last word' in the puzzle, 1d generates LAMENT by nesting AMEN (another kind of 'last word') inside LT ('a little left'). A few months later, Torquemada was a little more optimistic. Upon solving 'So-be-it' (1 January 1939), the unclued words formed a 'hopeful quatrain' for the new year, featuring the same verb in a privative form:

> May he be fattest of the fatted kine,
> This newborn calf, this nineteen-thirty-nine,
> And make us quite forget the lean and late
> And unlamented nineteen-thirty-eight.

Perhaps doomed by the puzzle's numerology and his own reputation as a 'devilish' setter ('So-Be-It' was Torquemada's 666th *Observer* puzzle), the 'hopeful quatrain' proved proleptically ironic; Torquemada died several weeks later on 3 February of a mystery illness.[2]

In venturing a 'last word' to conclude this thesis, there inevitably remains more than 'a little left around'. This is, perhaps, an apt end for a project that has argued for puzzlement not as a foreclosure of imaginative potential, but as an ongoing and generative process in which poets and readers alike engaged constructively. In life, Torquemada was often accused of being 'not a person but a factory', though his solvers certainly exhibited the behaviour too. Like academics huddling together to decode Empson's poetry collaboratively, or Eliot overcoming

[1] [1d/41a], in Torquemada, 'Puzzle No. 622', in *T112*, p. 246.
[2] Torquemada, 'Puzzle No. 666: 'So-Be-It', in *T112*, p. 264.

interpersonal shyness through chess and crosswords, the so-called 'freemasonry between Torquemadians' enabled hermeneutics to become a participatory textual practice.[3]

This thesis has considered how puzzlement was understood and deployed by poets and readers between c. 1886–1966, ultimately seeking to rehabilitate a branch of literary production that has been largely discounted from critical discussion of the period despite its conspicuous and capacious popularity. Though valuable work has previously explored, on the one hand, the complex intersection of difficulty with literature, and, on the other hand, the sociology of recreational puzzles, this thesis has sought to join these hands together; to explore the generative qualities of poetic bafflement against the historical backdrop of the word game, taking seriously the comparison made by writers and critics who were naturally drawn to puzzlement as an elastic and eclectic model for poetry itself.

My Introduction sought to intervene in the critical consensus that word puzzles largely receded into trivial and automated textual forms in the twentieth century, instead arguing for their consideration as a vital and textually experimental form that self-consciously engaged with contemporaneous 'modernist' practices. To this end, Chapter 1 traced the unruly metaphor of words as game 'counters' as it passed from late-Victorian philology into the hands of poets at the start of the twentieth century, and the implications of considering poetic production as an expression of combinatorial ludolinguistics. As one culmination of this metaphor, spurred onwards by advances in technical and epistemological conceptions of the alphabet, the crossword's popularity naturally raised anxieties about the future of literature because it evinced comparable mechanisms *in extremis*. Chapter 2 demonstrated the complex interplay of poetics with puzzlement in the 'cryptic' grids devised by Torquemada, Afrit, and Ximenes, demonstrating that far from being peripheral to verse in the period, puzzle setters were actively and riotously interested in appropriating poetic strategies for their games, and vice versa. The emergence of the cryptic crossword out of 'plain' traditions paralleled

[3] R. C. Mathers, 'Torquemada', in *T112*, p. 23.

homologous developments in poetry, but crucially inverted the stereotypically 'high-modernist' referential economy by making lexical units the site of polyphony, rather than allusions themselves.

Chapter 3 queried the prevailing biographical consensus around Eliot's apparently casual interest in puzzles, instead suggesting that puzzlement was central to both his reading and writing of poetry, even determining, as I identify, his earliest extant poetic revision. Puzzles represented for Eliot both a way of dramatising essential poetic questions about philosophical categorisation, and a way of rehearsing theological difficulty in miniature. Chapter 4 examined William Empson's 'puzzle interest', taking seriously his comparison between poetry and crosswords in *The Gathering Storm* (1940) in order to adjudicate its implications for his poetry, reading, and theoretical works on philology. Defining 'ambiguity' as a 'puzzle', it is perhaps unsurprising that puzzlement underwrites so many of Empson's works, but it is a metaphor that has not, until now, been compared directly with the verbal and mathematical puzzles he enjoyed in his free time.

My Introduction specified a series of poets whose works provocatively explore these ideas that have either only featured briefly in this thesis. Among the so-called 'cryptic poets' (to use Jerome Lim's term) who postdate my parameters are Veronica Forrest-Thomson, James Merrill, J. H. Prynne, and Paul Muldoon, each of whom has considered the cryptic crossword as a potential candidate for contesting the capacity of poetry.[4] Forrest-Thomson's 'Cordelia, or "A Poem Should Not Mean, But Be"', for instance, uses the figure of the crossword as a structural analogue for poetry's canonised 'language-games' in a manner comparable with Torquemada's irreverent reverence for literary influence in his 'Oxford Book' puzzles.[5] James Merrill, whose *The Book of Ephraim* (1976) uses a Ouija board to defamiliarise the alphabet, wondered at the *Times* crossword for its ability to alert readers to 'the oddity of a given word':

[4] Jerome Lim, 'Approaching Cryptic Poetry', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 43.4 (Summer 2020), pp. 127–47.
[5] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems and Translations* (Allardyce, 1990), pp. 104–110.

> A London *Times* crossword gave this definition of a nine-letter word: "A kind of cakewalk? Plenty of it!" The answer was ABUNDANCE. Now this is at best the kindergarten of language; still, it has the virtue of training us, once we grow up, to keep in mind the oddity of a given word.[6]

By Merrill's framework, the cryptic crossword inculcates in readers something of a state of estrangement from the overfamiliar, echoing Konuk Blasing's contention that poetry succeeds in proportion to its ability to return readers to 'the process of language acquisition'.[7] Though Merrill ultimately considers this 'kindergarten' the 'shallows' of literature rather than its 'depths', he valorises puzzlement as a valuable resource for defamiliarisation, for harvesting abundance.

Though Muldoon has insisted that 'it's certainly not as if I'm interested in writing big crossword puzzles,' that hasn't stopped the charge being applied to his poetry.[8] Seamus Heaney, for instance, characterised Muldoon's 'hermetic tendency' as threatening to 'lead him into puzzles rather than poems.'[9] John Goodby identifies 'a deliberate strategy of readerly frustration' aped from crosswords, while Mia Gaudern considers the etymological dimensions of his and Prynne's poetry as involving 'crossword-style decodings'.[10]

Gaudern is right to resist thinking of this metaphor in 'reductive' terms, 'as if invoking a secret password could solve the poem like a puzzle,' though Gareth Farmer, in the same terms used by critics to complain about Empson's puzzle comparison, considers Forrest-Thomson's 'Cordelia' emblematic of the puzzle-poem analogy which 'implies the existence of a single definitive *answer*.'[11] John Muckle, deploring Prynne's poetry in 2004, uses a fictionalised anecdote of a crossword addict to schematise his review:

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[6] James Merrill, *Collected Prose*, ed. by J. D. McClatchly and Stephen Yenser (Knopf, 2004), p. 14.
[7] Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry*, p. 58.
[8] Paul Muldoon, 'An Interview with Paul Muldoon, conducted by Lynn Keller', *Contemporary Literature*, 35.1 (1994), p. 1.
[9] Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–78* (Faber, 1984), p. 213.
[10] Mia Gaudern, 'The Etymological Poetry of W. H. Auden, J. H. Prynne, and Paul Muldoon' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2014), p. 33; p. 48. John Goodby, 'Hermeneutic Hermeticism: Paul Muldoon and the Northern Irish Poetic', in *In Black and Gold: Contiguous Traditions in Post-War British and Irish Poetry* (Brill, 1994), pp. 137–68 (p. 160).
[11] Gareth Farmer, 'Veronica Forrest-Thomson's "Cordelia", Tradition, and the "Triumph of Artifice"', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 1.1 (2018), p. 18–31 (p. 22).

> There's a man in my basement who does the *Times* crossword every day and the giant one at weekends. Once he won the prize: several dictionaries. His job, like mine, is to collect and carry books to those better qualified to read them. He is better at both these things than me. Perhaps he could do something with 'Gainful slow-down at hand partition.' Time slows or speeds up after the midnight of millennium? Or: 'Sated to a faculty with snack extras, set on crest.' Sick of permanent tenure at high table, of being King Un? Whatever it means is sure to be not what it seems to mean.[12]

This question of what 'it means' versus 'what it seems to mean' recurs in pejorative appropriations of Empson's crossword metaphor, as if setting these two dimensions in playful antagonism towards each other were not a relatively standard poetic idea already. The anecdote, after all, suffers its own gripe: the set-up equates cruciverbalism with intertextual reading, while the examples given are puzzling because they are elliptical, not because they are referentially allusive. Clearly, these category errors remain prevalent in criticism of contemporary poets, and further research beyond my date parameters might supplement this project's aim of restoring critical sensitivity to the terms of the puzzle metaphor.

This is a misapprehension about cryptic crosswords ironically evinced by Charles Bennett in reference to the poetry of John Stammers: his 'intertextuality' appeals to 'the clutter and detritus of the modern mind' in a manner akin to a cryptic crossword, but, he argues, 'runs the risk of becoming Ben Johnson: of being more absorbed in pop-culture trees than a genuine poetic wood.'[13] The criticism is unclear: cryptic crosswords are thought on the one hand to be too referential, and on the other hand too 'intriguing'. In any case, Bennett's misspelling of 'Johnson' evidences why the notion of 'a genuine poetic wood' is itself liable to the kinds of contingency and reinvention that are so readily enabled by cryptic puzzlement.

Each of these poets, and many more, respond generatively both to the concept of puzzlement as a compositional spur, and the charge of puzzlement as a critical chorus. While this thesis has explored how puzzlement was instantiated in the works of a select group of

[12] John Muckle, 'Razor Boys: *Biting the Air* / *Eight + Six*', *PN Review*, 30.6 (August 2004), pp. 77–8 (p. 77).
[13] Charles Bennett, 'Current Literature 2004/5', *English Studies*, 87.6 (2006), pp. 679–91 (p. 684).

poets, and has not aimed at coverage, the diversity of literary responses to puzzles in the period certainly attests to the opportunities for further explorations of this sphere.

In addition, addressing the side of the puzzle rather than the poem, it is important to note that while this thesis has explored cryptic puzzles before Ximenes' *On the Art of the Crossword* (1966), there are myriad setters in the post-Ximenean era whose literary and poetic puzzles would both vindicate and complicate the arguments made here. In particular, setters such as Araucaria — and specialised cryptic crossword publications such as *1 Across*, *The Magpie*, and the *Listener* archive — abound with puzzles that appropriate poetic strategies to blend their hermeneutics with those of verse. Though this thesis has deliberately focused on the inchoate ruleset of pre-Ximenean cryptics and its synchronicity with 'modernism' in Anglophone poetry, further research could valuably consider how these textual phenomena developed as puzzle conventions evolved into the age of technology.

Chapter 1, indeed, discussed Nabokov's objection to 'medieval' approaches to literary criticism that saw academics burrowing into texts for hidden acrostics, a quasi-cabbalistic mode of readerly engagement later displayed by Saussure's hunt for subtextual anagrams in classical poetry, an approach that has only been further enabled by technological developments in corpus analysis. There is a risk of reducing critical puzzlement to mere Addisonian acrostic hunting, an approach that, though treated with scepticism when P. J. Klemp first unearthed a SATAN acrostic in *Paradise Lost* in 1977, has given methodological license to critics including Jane Partner (2007) and Miranda Phaal (2019) to venture variously persuasive acrostics found using a combination of readerly and automated software.[14]

It is important to restate the qualitative methodological distinction made in this thesis between these modes of critical treasure-hunting and a critical apparatus that is sharpened by an understanding of puzzlement. This thesis has demonstrated the value of the latter

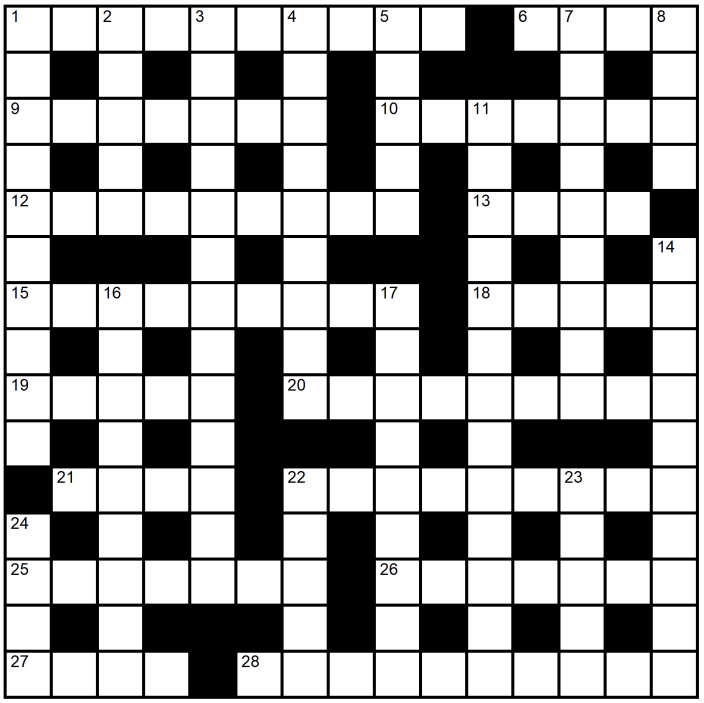
[14] P. J. Klemp, 'Now Hid, Now Seen: An Acrostic in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Quarterly*, 11.3 (October 1977), pp. 91–2. Jane Partner, 'Satanic Vision and Acrostics in *Paradise Lost*', *Essays in Criticism*, 57.2 (April 2007), pp. 129–46. Miranda Phaal, 'The Treble Fall: An Interlocking Acrostic in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Quarterly*, 53.1 (March 2019), pp. 67–8.

approach to enriching analysis of canonical and non-canonical texts alike through a sensitive and judicious awareness of the opportunities made possible in word puzzles. Contrastingly, and in agreement with Roman Jakobson's notion that the literary critic is 'not a cryptanalyst', approaches to these writers which hunt only for secrets baldly enfolded within texts, for hidden messages, for a poetics of non-disclosure, miss the vital and vibrant possibilities licensed by *cryptic* puzzlement.[15]

This thesis has argued, ultimately, that puzzlement represents neither a linear progression from confusion to clarity, nor a destructive circularity that undermines the quiddity of a text, but rather a reciprocal and interactive literary mode that was valuable to poets in this period precisely for its epistemological flexibility. Like the monkey tree with which this thesis began, the poetic potential of puzzles lay not in their static configuration, but in the living, fractal, and changeable attention demanded of those navigating their branches.

[15] Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings* (Mouton & Co., 1962), p. 475.

Epilogue



Across

1. ‘Cryptic Modernism’ finally complete, with the wrong title… (10)
6. …RDF cycled around Oxford, primarily cross (4)
9. Buy and sell revolutionary work by fellows in charge (7)
10. Playful to make right verse fashionable (7)
12. In 3/14, where to find piercing words and blows (9)
13. Grid Torquemada usually set, taking seconds, was ascendant (4)
15. Make style changes with conviction (9)
18. In correspondence with Eliot, Pound detailed scholar (5)
19. Play without one kind of suit (4-1)
20. Some scoff at me in a cryptic crossword? (5,4)
21. First couple of characters in Carroll tucked into excellent fruit (4)
22. Can UK spot difficult prizes? (5,2,2)
25. DPhil on puzzling being of intelligence (7)
26. In crosswords, Ximenes heralded this clue for ‘area’ (1,3,3)
27. Marianne Moore pens ‘The Fish’? (4)
28. Try author oddly sassy and snobbish (10)

Down

1. T. E. Hulme has drunk a lot of wine (10)
2. Eliot initially rising above help, as traditional (5)
3. **/14.** Reference Oedipus starts with, in brief (6,7,10)
4. Type of art I can’t use around Catholic (9)
5. English student battling middle of thesis gets brownies… (5)
7. …scratching head, failing to comprehend mistake that’s unnecessary (9)
8. Pound had rejected writer (4)
11. She urged interest in pieces! (8,5)
14. See 3
16. Line you quote back is boring odd grid (9)
17. Terrible delay for a tall order (4,2,4)
22. Some puzzling over words (5)
23. Empson mostly composed verse (5)
24. Prime Minister lost plot (4)

List of Abbreviations

EHC	T. S. Eliot, *Eliot-Hale Correspondence*, ed. by John Haffenden (2022), <https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters>
Fireside	T. S. Eliot, *Fireside Magazine*, in T. S. Eliot Juvenilia, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Am 1635.5
OBEV	Arthur Quiller-Couch (ed.), *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250–1900* (Clarendon Press, 1900)
STA	William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2nd edn (Chatto & Windus, 1949)
SCW	William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, ed. by Helen Thaventhiran and Stefan Collini (Oxford University Press, 2020)
TEHW	T. E. Hulme, *T. E. Hulme: Selected Writings*, ed. by Patrick McGuiness (Carcanet Press, 2003)
TCR	Torquemada (Edward Powys Mathers), *Cross-Words in Rhyme for Those of Riper Years* (Routledge, 1925)
TPB	Torquemada (Edward Powys Mathers), *The Torquemada Puzzle Book* (Victor Gollancz, 1934)
T112	Torquemada (Edward Powys Mathers), *Torquemada: 112 Bests Crosswords* (Pushkin Press, 1942)
TSECP	T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard, 8 vols (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021)
TSEL	T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Valerie Eliot, Hugh Haughton, and John Haffenden, 9 vols (Faber, 2021)
TSEP	T. S. Eliot, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Jim McCue and Christopher Ricks, 2 vols (Faber, 2015)
WEP	William Empson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Haffenden (Penguin, 2000)

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