

## CHAPTER I

*Nonsense and Motivation*

Modernists imagine materiality as a necessary, nonsignifying quality of language. Reaching a pure musicality of language or the physical substance of letters is an ideal for writers from Stéphane Mallarmé to Samuel Beckett.<sup>1</sup> Yet a pure materiality of the letter never materializes. Materiality is an idea that physical qualities of text cannot substantiate.<sup>2</sup> As I show in this study, the modernist investment in a nonsignifying materiality produces instead a psychoanalytic proto-theory of text. It is worked out as a set of concepts and practices that connect to form a serious, if necessarily incomplete, understanding of text. For the writers I study, the material text focuses and serves as the locus for disavowed features of identity and of psychic failure associated in the period with physicality and the body. By looking at places in literature where nonsensical elements become visible, this project constructs modernism's implicit theories of textual motivation. But that is not modernism's avowed goal. It believes in materiality without motivation. In this chapter, I explore this commitment, which the rest of my study hopes to undo.

By reading modernism's materialism as psychological structures, this project leaves to the side several intellectual developments that inform experiments with materiality in the period. One of these is rooted in brain science, such as Josef Breuer and Freud's early study of aphasia, which locates speech-related illness in lesions on the surface of the brain. Medical and biological discussions emerge in the nineteenth century to help shape modern ideas of language. Georges Gilles de la Tourette, who preceded Freud at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, investigated hereditary involuntary speech and body movements. For example, in Winsor McCay's comic "Little Sammy Sneeze," Sammy cannot help but sneeze in an invariable sequence of sounds or word fragments that shatter the world around him. Closer to modernist experiments with materiality is Henri Bergson's recognition of the importance of bodily automatism to perception and habit in *Matter and Memory*. The long parade of mechanical

bodies, including Ottorino Respighi's first recorded orchestra bird in *Pini di Roma*, the emperor's bird in W. B. Yeats's "Byzantium," and Hans Bellmer's sadomasochistic dolls, but also Wyndham Lewis's dancing figures in *Tarr*, derives both from ideas of the body and from discussions of the mind, of habit and obsession, such as E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman." Freud's masterful reading of Hoffmann in "The Uncanny" argues for the psychological investment of these doll visions.<sup>3</sup> The psychological understanding of material language does not arise at the end of the century in response to Freud, even if we consider "Freud" to stand in for a range of work reaching beyond the turn of the century to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Friedrich Nietzsche, the psychologist of the age. Rather, modernism (Freud included) is the product of the psychological turn, making nonsense central to its struggle with motivation.

In his study of Ernst Lanzer, the Rat Man, Freud writes that obsessional ideas and dreams "have an appearance of being either without motive or without meaning," and that making them comprehensible is the task of interpretation (*SEX* 186). Motives, he says in the Dora case, are the cause of psychological illness: if only analysts were "given a sight" of these interests, they could help patients make their symptoms disappear.<sup>4</sup> Motivation, or the appearance of being motivated, distinguishes what is called nonsense – what is perceivable to us as nonsense – from other nonlexical features that can necessarily be found in any text, such as random alignments of letters produced by fonts and pagination. Motivation is not a hidden plot element but an explanatory mechanism that makes sense of action.<sup>5</sup> Given the focus on legibility, vision and hearing retain primacy among the senses in relation to most forms of writing. What is or can be legible is thus itself a problem that nonsense makes perceptible. At the same time, it is a given that even margins or accidental alignments of print must be part of the significance of the page.<sup>6</sup> Those features, however, are not nonsense, but mere accidents: nonlexical features become meaningful in literature when readers find in them psychological motivation – personal, ideological, or social. For the same reason, intentional codes, calligrammatic poems, minimalist material texts presented as objects, acrostics (like Beckett's "Home Olga"), and signatures hidden in the text belong with other lexical functions of the text. They are the very opposite of nonsense, which must border on the merely unmotivated.

A well-known example of motivated nonsense appears in Freud's analysis of Sergei Pankejeff, the Wolf-Man. For Freud, the physical symptom expressed in letters is an especially convincing or clinching evidence of psychological significance. In 1918 he published an account of his treatment

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of Pankejeff, which confirmed for him through a chance association the connection between the patient's fixation on Grusha, his nursery-maid, and his fear of castration:

"I had a dream," he said, "of a man tearing off the wings of an *Espe*." – "*Espe?*" I asked; "what do you mean by that?" – "You know; that insect with yellow stripes on its body, that stings." – I could now put him right: "So what you mean is a *Wespe* [wasp]." – "Is it called a *Wespe*? I really thought it was called an *Espe*." . . . "But *Espe*, why, that's myself: S. P." (which were his initials). The *Espe* was of course a mutilated *Wespe*.<sup>7</sup>

Pankejeff could get well – "I could now put him right," as Freud says – because he found his own name connected with Grusha, who used to wear such yellow stripes, and who (Freud suggests) threatened castration when he peed on the floor (*SE* XVII 92). Pankejeff can only recognize his name in the mutilated word "wasp" because he "really thought" the name of the animal was "Espe." Pankejeff avenges himself on the nursery-maid by mutilating her wasp proxy. In the process, however, he re-enacts her threat.

This interpretation is made possible by a theory of meaning that focuses on letters as objects and sounds. It is because there is such a nonnarrative and nonlexical aspect to the text that the Wolf-Man's meaning can emerge. In their reading of the text, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok see in the Wolf-Man a network of linguistic transpositions and displacements underscored by, but not fundamentally dependent on, paranoid relations between different languages he is said to have known, more or less.<sup>8</sup> The Rat Man's story is similarly disorganized – Freud calls it "nonsensical," "hopelessly confused," and "senseless" (*SE* X 167, 169, 173) – and here too sound associations, such as *Ratten-Raten-heiraten* (rats-installments-to marry), reveal the meaning of the patient's symptoms (213–14). Only because nonsense is not designed can it reveal something about the conditions that produce it.

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The attention that makes impersonal elements like alliterations, phonetic repetitions, and anagrams notable is psychological. Toklas chides readers who would try to discover the private Stein in her work, and Kipling in 1939 warns readers away from the private: "Seek not to question other than / The books I leave behind."<sup>9</sup> There are overtly confessional writers in modernism – Antonin Artaud, Djuna Barnes, Jane Bowles, and Leonora

Carrington among them<sup>10</sup> – but more often modernist literature expresses personal and social difficulties indirectly. The text becomes a place to work out psychological topics, to encounter the pressures generated by the intersectionality of the self.

European modernism produced texts that are meant to be received as literally material: Guillaume Apollinaire's calligrammes, Duchamp's box of letters and the physical puns of his readymades, F. T. Marinetti's tin books, Ezra Pound's pictograms, and "concrete poetry" more generally, among many others; there are also works that foreground opaque qualities of language, like Artaud's cackles (both in print and in the radio recording), Edith Sitwell's *Façade*, Paul Gauguin's *Noa Noa* sketchbooks, Mallarmé's poems, Lewis's two issues of *Blast*, Dada cut-up poetry, and *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>11</sup> These works index an interest in the material and, as Friedrich Kittler notes, are made both possible and visible by the machine age,<sup>12</sup> but they do not tell us more about materiality than do more conventional texts. They are material, but are not about the material in ways that texts in more conventional printed formats are not. Rather, their allegory of materiality is more visible. One cannot "have" the object, or the material of the text;<sup>13</sup> so what does it mean to see, read, have, or produce the material in art? Is it to touch or to see it? The literary object becomes a space in which the question of the relation to the object is worked out. There is never anything closer to "having," rather a testing of what it means to want to have.<sup>14</sup> But for an uneasy moment – modernism – the effort to look at the paint and not at the subject of the painting seems like a promise of the real, both psychological and social, in the guise of the aesthetic. This search, its logical difficulties, and their unworkable solutions are my topic in this section.

In a 1937 letter to editor and translator Axel Kaun, Beckett the avant-gardist advocates "an assault against words in the name of beauty." The grammar and style of "official English" are false mannerisms that must be torn apart if writing is to be meaningful. "Is there any reason why that terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the word surface should not be dissolved, as for example the sound surface of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is devoured by huge black pauses?" he asks. The best aim of literature is to "bore one hole after another" in the body of language until whatever is behind it appears:

Perhaps the logographs of Gertrude Stein are nearer to what I have in mind. At least the texture of language has become porous, if only, alas, quite by chance, and as a consequence of a technique similar to that of Feininger.

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The unfortunate lady (is she still alive?) is doubtlessly still in love with her vehicle, albeit only in the way in which a mathematician is in love with his figures . . . To bring this method into relation with that of Joyce, as is the fashion, strikes me as senseless.<sup>15</sup>

The comparison to Lyonel Feininger aside (the German-American painter and cartoonist), Beckett seems to endorse Stein's materiality over James Joyce's. Lewis had tagged both with the same time-brush in *Time and Western Man*, but *Work in Progress* does not promote the dissonance between the meanings of words and their uses that Beckett claims to be after. It is, he writes, "an apotheosis of the word," logocentrism rampant. While Stein rejects the logocentric system, she shares with Joyce the desire for language as thing.<sup>16</sup>

Beckett dismissed his 1937 letter later on – it is not possible to get to the materiality of the word with words – but the idea returns throughout his fiction. It is sometimes expressed as the desire for physical violence to the letter, as when Molloy says it is better "to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery" (*Molloy* 13). One would do as well to obliterate the language that has failed as to write language about language, to take notes and blacken margins. Language about language is no better than the language it is about. Beckett cannot resist the word, but the persistent modern effort to imagine what such resistance would be like fetishizes individual words, sounds, and letters. The sound of the word "pot" does not help Beckett's Watt feel better: "It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted" (*Watt* 81): Watt's mental state, and not the state of language, is at stake in the passage. Stein, similarly, is interested not in automatic writing but in getting at the "second personality," a mechanical register of the mind, "definite motor reactions unaccompanied by consciousness" (*Wineapple* 80). Stein wants a mechanical or bodily aspect of the mind to liberate the mind from itself. The body would liberate the mind, but that body ("reactions") is already mental.

The mind's body, motor reactions, is something the modern period often locates in art and in language. Charles Baudelaire imagines hieroglyphic dreams that come from outside the dreamer as a flip side to natural dreams that represent the day's events.<sup>17</sup> Roman Jakobson says that "Elements of language usually remain beneath the threshold of our conscious deliberation."<sup>18</sup> I put the stress in this phrase on the word "remain" (though

the pun on his name is only in English): in a preconscious or unconscious state, as a feature of the mind, there “remain” linguistic elements. Melanie Klein argues that letters have character produced by operations of the unconscious similar to those that produce dreams – condensation, displacement – and that letters serve as emblems in mental operations much as dream images do.<sup>19</sup> Klein reports that her child patient Fritz had numerous fantasies about written letters: he thought of the letters *i* and *e* as riding on a motor-bicycle, and said that *i*’s are clever, whereas *l*’s are “stupid, clumsy, lazy and dirty” and live in caves.<sup>20</sup> This is a version of Cratylus’s association of qualities with letters recounted in Gérard Genette’s magisterial *Mimologies*. It is implicit in Freud’s idea, in *The Ego and the Id*, that thought processes are made into perceptions through the interposition of words.<sup>21</sup> Words are first of all heard, and residues are mostly of sound, he says (*SE* XIX 21). The startling conclusion is that the self is material because it is linguistic. “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface” (26). Even experiences of the super-ego are deposited in the mind. The super-ego is formed from “things heard,” or “word-presentations” such as concepts.<sup>22</sup> Freud’s ego is made up in part of the accumulated substitutions of ideals for lost objects, hence “the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices” (29). The pathos of this construction should not be lost. The ego is material, but it makes present other objects whose relations remain even though, or because, they were discarded.<sup>23</sup>

The difficulty that the mind requires its own body to be independent of the body attends modernist efforts to imagine a physical body for thought or art. One way to imagine such a body is to posit synesthetic qualities of language and art. “Did one see sound,” asks Stein, “and what was the relation between color and sound, did it make itself by description by a word that meant it or did it make itself by a word in itself.”<sup>24</sup> It’s a question that also states a relation. The material meaning of language requires that the sound language makes also evokes color, recalling Wassily Kandinsky’s view in “On the Spiritual in Art” that thought is synesthetic. The mind is physical because language is synesthetic. This idea of language comes from the ancients, according to Socrates:

just, as in painting, the painter who wants to depict anything sometimes uses purple only, or any other colour, and sometimes mixes up several colours, as his method is when he has to paint flesh colour or anything of that kind – he uses his colours as his figures appear to require them; and so, too, we shall apply letters to the expression of objects, either single letters when required,

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or several letters; and so we shall for syllables, as they are called, and from syllables make nouns and verbs; and thus, at last, from the combinations of nouns and verbs arrive at language, large and fair and whole . . . Not that I am speaking literally of ourselves, but I was carried away.<sup>25</sup>

Socrates uses the so-called color of flesh (popularized by Crayola crayon sets) as his particular example to show how language composes a body. His being “carried away” by these ideas demonstrates the power of language to constitute him.

The assumption that language has synesthetic power is foundational in modern linguistics. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, both Jakobson and Ferdinand de Saussure say language activates “something extrinsic” unconsciously.<sup>26</sup> For Jakobson, linguistic activity is usually unconscious, and phonemes signify because of mental laws.<sup>27</sup> The point is not only that language presupposes unconscious operations but that mental operations rely on the physicality of language:

The intimacy of the connection between the sounds and the meaning of a word gives rise to a desire by speakers to add an internal relation to the external relation, resemblance to contiguity, to complement the signified by a rudimentary image. Owing to the neuropsychological laws of synaesthesia, phonic oppositions can themselves evoke relations with musical, chromatic, olfactory, tactile, etc. sensations.<sup>28</sup>

Edward Sapir, Jakobson notes, called this “sound symbolism”: the “inner value” of language, even print, lies in latent sound correlations.<sup>29</sup> And yet it is not easy to imagine in what sense a sound can have color that is outside the meaning that sound has in language. Even if we think of sound and color as objective qualities or objects, to say that a sound has color (or vice versa) is to invoke their mental quality and relation. The network of signification that allows for the sound to have a color is a language again. As Jacques Derrida argues, one cannot “keep sonority on the side of the sensible and contingent signifier,” because “formal identities isolated within a sensible mass are already idealities that are not purely sensible.”<sup>30</sup>

One modernist way around this problem is to imagine language as a physical echo-chamber of mechanical repetitions. When Mallarmé says he rejects the spoken word in favor of the “unspoken,” he wants to circumvent the referential transparency of language in favor of internal echoing and materiality in which its implied meaning is differential.<sup>31</sup> Modernists sometimes imagine a self-mirroring level of the text made of pure differential potential, a system of differential meanings implicit in textuality.<sup>32</sup>



In “The” and “Rendezvous 1916,” Duchamp tries for a language that does not echo the physical world but is merely physical.<sup>33</sup> Duchamp lists on one of the slips of paper in *The Green Box* the “Conditions of a language” that include “The search for ‘*prime words*’ (divisible only by themselves and by unity).” Duchamp hopes to work out, as Thierry de Duve explains in his excellent study, “those conditions that in his eyes allow the word to remain in its zero degree, force it into the realm of nonlanguage.”<sup>34</sup> T. J. Clark uses the term when he says that in “The Bathers,” Paul Cézanne conveys his “sense of matter at ground zero” (162). The painting, on this reading, is about the concept of matter as the generative ground zero for language. Velimir Klebnikov and Russian futurists also sought a ground zero of textuality, the noninstrumental physicality of letters and words, “strings of the alphabet,” Klebnikov calls them.<sup>35</sup> Kasimir Malevich appeals to what Clark calls “textual materialism” in Suprematist paintings that only signify in relation to their supposedly internal universe.<sup>36</sup> “Nothing is more material than a Malevitch off-white,” according to Clark.<sup>37</sup> Clearly Malevich’s white paintings (or his black, or any paintings for that matter) are not more material than other paintings; rather his paintings attempt to reduce the symbolic to a minimum and point to the materiality of the surface. The material is represented as being at odds with the symbolic. That is how the material as such is defined in Malevich (although one could argue that the inseparability of the two – or “two” – is equally the subject). In G. W. F. Hegel’s formulation in the *Aesthetics*, content in painting is ultimately indifferent to the material of painting.<sup>38</sup> Indifference is not a property of material: it is a cognitive disposition, much like the desire to represent indifference.

These appeals to a non-sense condition of language (mere physicality that eschews sense, the root of meaning, the source of figuration, or the pure condition of signification) encounter difficulties spelled out by Deleuze’s treatment of materiality in *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze argues that nonsense is the schizophrenic perforation of the line that separates words from things and therefore the physical reality of words from their indexicality. The divide between word and thing is reproduced in language.<sup>39</sup> But the effect of this notion is not to establish a substratum of sense in nonsense. As Wittgenstein writes, “The *mathematical* problems of what is called foundations are no more the foundation of mathematics for us than the painted rock is the support of a painted tower.”<sup>40</sup> Instead, the would-be foundational calculus is just another calculus. Therefore, when Deleuze brings materiality into the figurative, he makes language not more concrete and Artaudian but emphasizes that it cannot avoid the figurative. When in



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“Proun” El Lissitzky paints letters as flat objects, he produces an impossible space in which the letters might be said to reside.<sup>41</sup> Clark calls the flat nowhere of the text “the non-space of textuality” – and yet the point is that the text is material at the same time, what Derrida calls “materiality without matter.”<sup>42</sup> The modernist appeal to foundational matter imagines language as physical and spatial and at the same time puts language beyond the reach of space, in an impossible space.<sup>43</sup>

Alongside the elaborate staging of consciousness in modernist literature (stream-of-consciousness fiction, surrealist poetry and art) hides the expectation that the material nonsense of experience will come into view. Where a text borders unintelligibility, its materiality is expected to become more visible. Joseph Conrad’s stated desire to render the “highest kind” of justice to the visible world defamiliarizes the word as well. The name “Wait” in his book about the “Narcissus” is an example. Defamiliarization comes from a notion of the nonsensical basis of language: “The stupidity of the phrase appalled me while I was trying to finish it,” says Marlow in *Lord Jim*, “but the power of sentences has nothing to do with their sense or the logic of their construction” (61). Irrationality lurks at the bottom of every thought, he says (94). When modernism seeks mere materialism (only suggested in Conrad’s impressionism, however), it approaches nonsense, yet each attempt to make nonsense a pure experience separate from referentiality, or the physical property of mind, or the generative ground of figural meaning – all aspects of the same fantasy of matter – exposes the desire for it as a refuge in textuality. Arguably, surrealist art takes over from Dada because it renounces the earlier desire for mere physical impact and indulges instead in the anxieties and pleasures of seeing oneself in biomorphic landscapes of the mind. Surrealists like Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, Kay Sage, and Maya Deren focus on the human, its monuments, civil wars, childhood reveries, and family struggles, set up as dream encounters. Often depicting uncharted physical objects, these works critique the desire for merely physical experience and offer psychoanalytic alternatives (they also do not focus on text per se, as Dada and cubism sometimes do in their desire to grasp physical language). Against the anthropoid figures of Tanguy and Dalí, Duchamp’s found objects appear indifferent, but disclose psychological valences in their domestic puns and romantic dramas. His “Objet dard,” for example, a door handle, once rotated looks all too phallic, and the text written on a rough layer of the base revealed, as it were, under the smooth surface, confesses art has been all along an idea and not just a thing. More radically materialist in spirit, paintings like Miró’s “Peinture” (“Painting”) of 1927 imply that there is nothing beyond the frame but more

of the same inhuman cosmic space. “Painting” is a canvas universe: a black star with two planets, and below a cloud of primer or paint, peeling away the surface of the painting to reveal, like the DNA of the world, a loopy spiral squiggle. The spring gestures to cursive, reiterative handwriting, its brushstroke flowing from left to right. In this depthless world, the cloud has a horizontal shadow bar below it, a kind of earth, and above, a moon in white marked by a hasty, drawn triangle. Like the cursive loops in the cloud, everything on this canvas is not indifferent or accidental matter but a meditation on the artist’s hand, on painting. It is sublime in the way it is not sublime.

The desire for pure materiality of language, in other words, loses its transparency, and becomes increasingly visible as desire. Eventually modernism gives it up as impossible (but by then it is over as an aesthetic episteme). Theorists of language renounce their need for standalone logic and foundations in favor of fuzzier logics. The typological constructs of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* segue, after a struggle, into the later work of the *Investigations*.<sup>44</sup> Saussure’s semiotics enables his paranoid studies of anagrams and casts linguistic structuralism in a motivated, psychological light; the paragram, the new text created by changing letters in a word, might be just a function of the combinatory nature of alphabetical writing, but the desire for paragrams is shown to be an attachment to materiality that letters can serve.<sup>45</sup> The search for ground zero yields to a lover’s discourse.

### Thought of Body

Material thinking about text in modernism begins in turn-of-the-century art with Cézanne and conceptions of a “ground zero” of language discussed in the previous section, and ends in Heideggerian textual theory. In between come the literary works I read in the following chapters. In this section I look briefly at post-Heideggerian theories that align modernism’s ideal materiality of text with a mechanical vision of language. Textual theory has kept the idea of pure materiality going, even while modernism shows materiality to be instead the site of psychological self-production. I want not to recapitulate what are very familiar arguments about this textual theory, but to point to its attachment to materiality as a modernist idea subject to the kinds of difficulties that attend the desire for nonsignifying foundations in the period. Modernism abandons pure aesthetics and performs its motivations in materiality, but the Heidegger road goes the other way, disavowing politics, psychology, and identity.