

MODERNISM AND THE MATERIALITY OF TEXTS

Modernism and the Materiality of Texts argues that elements of modernist texts that are meaningless in themselves are motivated by their authors' psychic crises. Physical features of texts that interest modernist writers, such as sound patterns and anagrams, cannot be dissociated from abstraction or made a refuge from social crisis; instead, they reflect colonial and racial anxieties of the period. Rudyard Kipling's fear that he is indistinguishable from empire subjects, J.M. Barrie's object-relations theater of infantile separation, and Virginia Woolf's dismembered anagram self are performed by the physical text and produce a new understanding of textuality. In chapters that also consider diverse works by Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, P.G. Wodehouse and Conan Doyle, George Herriman, and Sigmund Freud, this study produces a new reading of modernism's psychological text and of literary constructions of materiality in the period.

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For Rei Terada

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Preamble

The work I consider in this project registers the ambivalence that modernism, as an avant-gardist project to revise culture, feels toward the center of power of which it is a part, a center defined, as Lindon Barrett argues, through normative constructions of the body. Modernists often have an antinomial relation to modernity, being of it and also being critical of it.¹ In its own mind, modernism moves on in the vanguard of history, yet formalism and aesthetics in the period also reject the increasingly instrumental and “(re)racialized circumstances of the early twentieth century” (Barrett 160). As assumptions about the enlightenment subject – a self-willing, centered, and rational universal – wobble under the pressures of economic, psychoanalytic, and materialist revaluations of the human, they become the target of this literature. The modernists I study critique the center of power, the transcendental subject, from within, interrogating their place in the world to do so.² If the body, particularly the marked or racialized body, is understood to stand in conceptual opposition to the abstract subject (Barrett 138–9), then, recognizing themselves to have such bodies, the modernists in this study struggle with themselves. The result is a civil war, enacted in the body of the text.

I read nonsense as a feature of writing that reflects cultural ideologies, rather than a convention or genre called nonsense. To imagine aesthetics as independent features of literature is to duplicate the defense of autonomy and universalism that aesthetics often perform.³ I consider Western modernism a cultural project to register the transition from universalism to contingency, historical and material, a project of the period between the waning age of Western self-congratulation at the turn of the twentieth century and the fall of modernity as an intellectual triumph at some point during the war. In this I agree with Fredric Jameson’s broader cultural reading of the period in his “Postmodernism” essay. Some of the texts I study are canonically high-culture modernist, and others are more popular. All perform the experimental cultural revisionism associated with

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modernism; more importantly, canonical distinction does not count in this study because I read texts that reflect and perform the cultural logics and the ideological conflicts of their time. These conflicts determine the period, and so the scope of my study. Empire-based ideologies of the body, for example, underwrite the idea of text in all of the works in the study.⁴

The readings of physical elements of the text I offer here engage questions of race and sex that have sometimes been left out of generic accounts of nonsense in literature. In this study, psychological readings are personal and sociopolitical arguments that are textually constructed. That is, when texts perform sociopolitical arguments, they are psychological. I assume that psychology is right not about the brain but about culture: for the moderns, at least, it is a reading of the way Western culture thinks.⁵ While there have been critical readings of nonsense as a genre that center on its semantic intelligibility, to borrow from Daniel Tiffany's discussion of lyric obscurity (2–5), these do not argue for the psychological and ideological point of modern literary nonsense.⁶ The ordinary language philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin avoids the trap of genre but sees nonsense as language that sounds intelligent when in fact it means nothing, whereas this distinction falls apart for me. The most notable exception, for this study, is Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*. For Deleuze, nonsense signifies the breakdown in the social division between propositions and things, and in particular between language and food, which, in the cultural as well as the infantile imaginary, connect interior and exterior bodies through the mouth. These uses of the object can be seen in an interesting range of Western texts, from Edward Lear's despairing limericks to Wittgenstein's returns to faciality and pain in his late linguistic scenarios. Deleuze's point, however, is not about features of the materiality of language, those features familiar since Plato's *Cratylus*, but about symbolic constructions, as his readings of Lewis Carroll show.

It is left to the symptomatic text to explore open secrets, uncanny sexual and racial identifications that writers confess, stage whispers that their works perform and rediscover.⁷ These open secrets include Rudyard Kipling's idea that he is a person of color, which leads him to dissolve the distinction between proper and improper language; J. M. Barrie's anxiety about the loss of infantile narcissism; Virginia Woolf's fear of contamination threatened by marriage, especially to a Jewish man, which points her toward a general theory of language; Gertrude Stein's erasures and denials, which, like her violence to Alice Toklas, are a kind of suicide that confesses sickness; and George Herriman's invisibility in color-mad America. These concerns are not meant to be reductive or comprehensive;

they emerge as part of a tapestry of motivations, of interests, anxieties, and triumphs, and are often structured by the writers' relationships. These writers' concerns are not the centered enterprises of transcendental subjects, although some are less transcendental than others; they are complexes of relation that are expressed materially, paratactically, catachrestically, and parapraxically.⁸ Each body of work produces an implicit material theory, or a sustained and conceptually developed practice, that performs the abjections it displaces. Although for many modernists, including Sigmund Freud and Marcel Duchamp, private or encrypted language is, like a chess move, already public language and can hold no secrets of its own, everything hides in the open.⁹ The modernist I is always, as Herriman says, "writing a sickrit to myself."

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Abbreviations

<i>ASR</i>	<i>Gertrude Stein Reader</i>
<i>CE</i>	<i>Cambridge Edition of the Poems of Rudyard Kipling</i>
<i>KI</i>	George Herriman, <i>Krazy and Ignatz</i>
<i>SE</i>	Sigmund Freud, <i>The Standard Edition</i>