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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

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

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

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

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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.[1] Yet a pure materiality of the letter never materializes. Materiality is an idea that physical qualities of text cannot substantiate.[2] 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.[3] 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 (*SE* X 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.[4] 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.[5] 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.[6] 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

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*.[7]

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.[8] 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.

Body of Thought

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."[9] There are overtly confessional writers in modernism – Antonin Artaud, Djuna Barnes, Jane Bowles, and Leonora

Carrington among them[10] – 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*.[11] These works index an interest in the material and, as Friedrich Kittler notes, are made both possible and visible by the machine age,[12] 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;[13] 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.[14] 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.