

Ridiculous Modernism
Nonsense and the New in Literature Since 1900

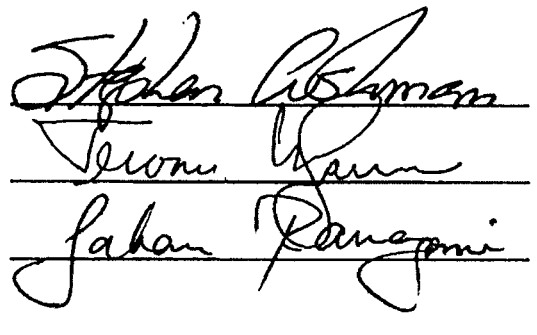
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ABSTRACT

Departing from a critical tradition that treats Arnoldian high seriousness, Eliotic difficulty, and war-induced trauma as the defining characteristics of modernist poetics, *Ridiculous Modernism* argues that countervailing strains of anti-seriousness, ridicule, ridiculousness, and nonsense also pervade the period. Even as philistines invoked the ridiculing cry of “nonsense!” to describe the new art and literature of the twentieth century, modernist artists and writers found in nonsense an experimental engine for poetic innovation and a conceptual basis for disrupting the common sense of an increasingly incomprehensible modernity. From mockery of modernism by figures including G.K. Chesterton and Mary Mills Lyall to the high modernism of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce and the avant-garde experimentation of figures including Hugo Ball, Gertrude Stein, and Robert Carleton “Bob” Brown, nonsense connects anti-modernists’ ridicule with modernists’ self-consciously ridiculous aesthetics. Critical framing of modernist experimentation as monolithically difficult has obscured the alternative ways of reading that many modernists imagined, who often wrote as much for un-ideal readers—skeptical, laughing, even mocking—as for the ideal reader mythologized by critical practice. By writing the role of mocking anti-modernists back into the story of the rise of modernism, the project tells a story of the avant-garde more attentive to the public’s actual experiences of novel modernism. The prevalence of ridiculous aesthetics in literary experiment continues to the present, as discussion of the contemporary poetic movements of Flarf and conceptualism demonstrates. The ridiculous, it becomes clear, plays a significant and infrequently acknowledged role in energizing art and literature in

the twentieth century and beyond. At its heart, the project puzzles over a paradox with significant implications for literary studies beyond the twentieth century: how can academic discourse take the ridiculous seriously without deflating its ridiculousness?

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INTRODUCTION

G.K. Chesterton and the "Literature of the Future"

G.K. Chesterton begins his "Defence of Nonsense" (1902) with a sweeping vision of time, history, and possibility that contrasts sharply with the seeming triviality of his subject:

There are two equal and eternal ways of looking at this twilight world of ours: we may see it as the twilight of evening or the twilight of morning; we may think of anything, down to a fallen acorn, as a descendant or as an ancestor. There are times when we are almost crushed, not so much with the load of the evil as with the load of the goodness of humanity, when we feel that we are nothing but the inheritors of a humiliating splendour. But there are other times when everything seems primitive, when the ancient stars are only sparks blown from a boy's bonfire, when the whole earth seems so young and experimental that even the white hair of the aged, in the fine biblical phrase, is like almond-trees that blossom, like the white hawthorn grown in May. That it is good for a man to realize that he is 'the heir of all the ages' is pretty commonly admitted; it is a less popular but equally important point that it is good for him sometimes to realize that he is not only an ancestor, but an ancestor of primal antiquity; it is good for him to wonder whether he is not a hero, and to experience ennobling doubts as to whether he is not a solar myth. (42-3)

In beginning his essay on nonsense with this vision of a world sparkingly new, of a culture of endless possibilities, Chesterton breaks with the “twilight of evening” that dominated the decadent 1890s. As the prime exemplar of the radically new nonsense that he calls “the literature of the future” (48), Chesterton looks backward in time, skipping over the regrettable 1890s to the work of the famed Victorian nonsense poet Edward Lear, who died in 1888.

For Chesterton, Lear’s nonsense represented an origin point for a truly new form of literature, “fresh, abrupt and inventive” that would revel in “the abiding childhood of the world” (43). Bleak decadence could only bring cultural despair and aesthetic paralysis. Nonsense presented a starkly appealing alternative: originality, innovation, and novelty were built into its very structure, and joy, rather than despair, was its presumed effect. By abandoning the strictures of reality, Lear guaranteed that his readers would never have encountered the topics of his poems before. “‘The Dong with the Luminous Nose,’ at least, is original,” Chesterton writes, “as the first ship and the first plough were original” (43). Even as he jokingly contrasts the undeniable usefulness of ships and ploughs with the avowed triviality of nonsense, Chesterton makes sincere claims that nonsense, far from useless, offers a model spiritual approach.

In contrast to those who might view nonsense as an expression of artistic self-enclosure, Chesterton writes that “Nothing sublimely artistic has ever arisen out of mere art, any more than anything essentially reasonable has ever arisen out of pure reason” (47). Rather, nonsense teaches a particular way of looking at the world, one that inclines toward faith and wonder: “So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and

reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason that we take off our hats, to the astonishment of the park-keeper” (49).¹ It is not design that leads Chesterton so forcefully to faith, but the erratic nonsense, the unfailing strangeness, of the world.² “It is significant,” Chesterton writes, “that in the greatest religious poem existent, the Book of Job, the argument which convinces the infidel is not (as has been represented by the merely rational religionism of the eighteenth century) a picture of the ordered beneficence of the Creation; but, on the contrary, a picture of the huge and undecipherable unreason of it” (49). In the essay, nonsense both finds itself bravely pushing into the vanguard of culture and defensively protecting religious traditionalism and orthodoxy against a dangerous and decadent secularism.

It may be no surprise, then, that Chesterton’s version of what it means to write a “literature of the future” did not gain significant traction. It is not the conservative Chesterton that critics treat as an important figure in early twentieth-century culture, but rather those writers associated with modernism and its avant-gardes: Joseph Conrad, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and so on. The work of such authors, it has generally been thought, hews more closely to the energetic apocalypticism of Friedrich Nietzsche than to the Christian optimism of G.K. Chesterton. Nietzsche begins a famous essay with a “solar myth” of his own, one that memorably depicts the “twilight of evening” that Chesterton found so distasteful:

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals

invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of “world history”—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. (“On Truth and Lies” 42)

In Chesterton’s essay, the seeming triviality of nonsense blossoms into the most significant aspects of human experience. For Nietzsche, however, the temporariness and vulnerability of human existence means that significance itself is impossible. All human knowledge, in a sense, is nonsense: “truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are” (47). If for Chesterton nonsense offers a brightly cheerful path forward, this Nietzschean skepticism toward truth asserts nonsense as a terrifying vision of final meaninglessness.

This overwhelming sense of impending finitude and terrifying meaninglessness has occupied a central position in received narratives of modernism and in accounts of its poetics. In modernism, for many critics, the crisis of faith and death of God that Nietzsche’s work brazenly announces pair with the horrific cataclysm of World War I to generate a deeply serious poetics, at once difficult, ponderous, and bleak. In *Mimesis* (1946), Erich Auerbach attributes changes in novelistic style at the beginning of the twentieth century to the historical context of World War I:

At the time of the first World War and after—in a Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster—certain writers distinguished by instinct and insight find a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness. That this method should have been developed at this time is not hard to understand.

(551)

The wanton, previously unseen violence of World War I seemed to cement in reality the sense of cultural doom that had earlier emerged, and the calamity of the war spawned many of the defining poems and moments of modernism. Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) all but declares the ignominious end of Western civilization:

There died a myriad
And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
For a botched civilization. (357)

Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922) followed closely on Pound's heels, imagining a desolate cultural landscape whose only flowers bloom from planted corpses. In the most famous passage from "The Hollow Men" (1925), Eliot offers an iconic vision of the world's pathetic end:

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper. (59)

In the midst of these malaise-ridden postwar circumstances, Gertrude Stein melancholically turned to Ernest Hemingway to offer her own cultural lament: “You are all a lost generation.”³ Destruction and despair, according to many critics, was at the heart of even the most radical avant-garde movements, which purported to look forward to the aesthetic and political future, yet ultimately obsessed over destroying the past. In the avant-gardes, “novelty was attained, more often than not, in the sheer process of the destruction of tradition” (Calinescu 117). The avant-gardist, “hypnotized by his enemy... ends up forgetting about the future” (Calinescu 96).

In the midst of all this seriousness, Chesterton's hopeful vision of a poetics of nonsense as the “literature of the future” begins to seem hopelessly wrongheaded, projecting a future that emphatically did not come to pass. Chesterton himself might well agree that his youthful interest in nonsense as a “literature of the future” was finally wrong, or at the very least, that nonsense became unrecognizable in the hands of the too-serious modernists. As modernism and its avant-gardes rose to prominence in the first twenty-five years of the century, Chesterton often mocked the new literature as so much nonsense whose authors seemed oblivious to the fact that it was nonsense. Chesterton had hoped that nonsense could turn literature to spiritual ends, but the aesthetics that developed in years after his essay suggested a nonsense that referred only to itself, a resurgence of the decadent frippery of art-for-art’s-sake that promoted final meaninglessness, not hopeful possibility.

In Chesterton’s view, the “literature of the future” had indeed come to resemble nonsense, but it was a nonsense contrary to his ideals. He had hoped that nonsense might

point toward a path of aesthetic and spiritual newness, but instead he came to believe that literature under the banner of modernism was so much forgettable nonsense in the deceptive guise of newness. Increasingly, he approached skeptically the idea of newness itself, claims to which Chesterton tended to view as a form of sinister naiveté. His response to F.T. Marinetti's first futurist manifesto in a 1909 essay anticipates his responses to various later modernisms, which he continued throughout his career to group together as a monolithic "futurism." What purported to be new about futurism, Chesterton argues, was equally prevalent in the past, whether proponents of futurism knew it or not. After declaring that "even the Futurists themselves seem a little doubtful" about "what Futurism is," because "perhaps they are waiting for the future to find out" (119), Chesterton turns his mockery toward individual moments in the manifesto. Responding to one of Marinetti's proposals for futurist literature, for example, "Literature having up to now glorified thoughtful immobility, ecstasy, and slumber, we wish to exalt the aggressive movement, the feverish insomnia, running, the perilous leap, the cuff and the blow" (120), Chesterton offers a list of bygone literature that exalts the same:

While I am quite willing to exalt the cuff within reason, it scarcely seems such an entirely new subject for literature as the Futurists imagine. It seems to me that even through the slumber which fills the *Siege of Troy*, the *Song of Roland*, and the *Orlando Furioso*, and in spite of the thoughtful immobility which marks "Pantagruel," "Henry V," and the *Ballad of Chevy Chase*, there are occasional gleams of an admiration for courage, a readiness to glorify the love of danger, and

even the “strengt of daring,” I seem to remember, slightly differently spelt,⁴
 somewhere in literature. (120)

Marinetti and his futurist companions are depicted as so many naive, privileged children who promote the very kinds of bourgeois affectation that they purport to reject: “It is quite clear... that you cannot be a Futurist at all unless you are frightfully rich” (121).

After suggesting throughout the essay that the futurist manifesto is utter nonsense, Chesterton finally produces a piece of nonsense of his own to echo the perceived nonsense of the manifesto by recasting it as a cheerful folk song. Imagining “the Futurists round the fire in a tavern trolling out some chorus with that incomparable refrain,” a refrain taken from the manifesto itself, Chesterton writes:

A notion came into my head as new as it was bright
 That poems might be written on the subject of a fight;
 No praise was given to Lancelot, Achilles, Nap or Corbett,
 But we will sing the praises of man holding the flywheel of which the ideal
 steering-post traverses the earth impelled itself around the circuit of its own
 orbit.

...My fathers scaled the mountains in their pilgrimages far,
 But I feel full of energy while sitting in a car;
 And petrol is the perfect wine, I lick it and absorb it,

So we will sing the praises of man holding the flywheel of which the ideal
steering-post traverses the earth impelled itself around the circuit of its own
orbit. (101-102)

Chesterton's futurist drinking song transforms the earnest iconoclasm of Marinetti's manifesto into so much spouting of irrational nonsense from the mouths of drunken fools. The futurist refrain of the last line of each stanza clatters discordantly as it departs from the ballad rhythm of the first three lines, inappropriately overstaying its rhythmic welcome, stolidly pronouncing its own absurdity, and reinforcing the sense of willful ignorance established throughout the essay.

Chesterton would lodge similar complaints against figures closer to the mainstream of modernism. In a 1928 essay, "On the New Poetry," Chesterton considers the novelty proclaimed by such figures as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, concluding that "all this faith in novelty is the very reverse of novel" (44). Relentless modernist promotion of the new seems to Chesterton a throwback to the enthusiasms of childhood:

When I read all this confident exposition about new methods that must now
supersede old methods, of how Yeats and Swinburne must yield to Mr. Eliot and
Mr. Pound, just as Tennyson and Browning had to yield to Yeats and Swinburne,
I heave a sigh that is full of old and tender memories. I do not feel as if I were
reading some revolutionary proclamation of new anarchic hopes or ideal; I feel as
if I were reading Macaulay's Essays. (44-5)

In Macaulay, Chesterton recalls a "theory of the succession of things more and more
'advanced' which the artistic schools still repeat, still scornfully hurl against each other,

and still meekly inherit from each other" (45). The theory of poetic progress that Chesterton sees at work in Pound and Eliot recalls Macaulay's dictum that "What was its goal yesterday will be its starting-point tomorrow" (45). Because Pound and Eliot seem to subscribe to this idea, Chesterton argues that their mindset belongs in childhood, not adulthood: "I believed that simple theory when I was a boy. But I am rather surprised, by this time, that the boys have not found a new one" (45).

In the three decades after his "Defence of Nonsense," Chesterton's attitude toward a "literature of the future" shifts from praise of the novelty of nonsense to skepticism about the possibility of genuine novelty at all. This trajectory of nonsense and novelty comes full circle in 1931, in the essay "On Victorian Literary Fashions—and Our Own," when he discusses James Joyce and Gertrude Stein in the same breath as Lewis Carroll, only to find the modernists lacking in comparison to the Victorian nonsense master:

...what is hailed as a new style or a new school of literature often consists of doing as a novelty what a Victorian did long ago as a joke. Thus we have, in Mr. James Joyce or Miss Gertrude Stein, the coining of new words by the confusion of old words; the running of words together so as to suggest some muddle in the subconsciousness. (589)

In Chesterton's view, Carroll "did identically the same thing" as Stein and Joyce, "only he happened to know that it was funny, and therefore he did it for fun" (589). To criticize Chesterton's partial misreading of the poetics of Stein and Joyce would almost be beside the point. He conflates the differences between the two authors' styles, ignoring, among other key aspects of their poetics, the fact that Stein rarely coined new words in the

fashion of Joyce. Chesterton is unfair here both to Joyce and to Stein, who were more playful, more funny, and more fun than he acknowledges, and to Carroll, whose work may well have been a joke but is also imbued with pathbreaking literary innovation. These minor quibbles with Chesterton's argument should not, however, overshadow the more significant insight expressed in the essay: here, he tacitly acknowledges that his prediction for a nonsense-laden "literature of the future" *did* come true in the poetics of many modernist authors, even if the character and spirit of their aesthetics were radically different from the nonsense-inspired literature he had imagined.⁵

The allegation of modernist nonsense that bubbles through so much of Chesterton's writing finds its inverse in the widespread use of nonsense by modernists throughout the modernist period and into the present day. Nonsense was not merely an unfair charge to which modernists found themselves unduly subjected, but a set of concepts and methods the modernists embraced as ways to create new art and to manipulate their public personae. At various points in the history of modernism and its avant-gardes, nonsense became an engine for poetic innovation, a literary genre from which to draw inspiration, and a way to take modernist rejection of common sense to its furthest extreme. In emphasizing the nonsense of modernism, this dissertation does not claim that seriousness, difficulty, and trauma are not important aspects of modernist poetics. The widespread use of nonsense in modernism, however, does shine a light on seemingly unserious aspects of poetics less frequently explored, including triviality, playfulness, and willful ridiculousness, aspects that critics from Chesterton on have ignored at the expense of modernist seriousness. That the use of nonsense in modernism proved more compatible

with the continuing rise of secular culture than with a Chestertonian resurgence of faith, of course, does not make Chesterton's notion of nonsense as a "literature of the future" any less prescient.

The closest allegiances of this project, to be clear, lie with experimental modernists like Gertrude Stein more than conservative anti-modernists like G.K. Chesterton. In pursuing nonsense in modernism as an object of study, however, my project does, to some degree, attempt to understand modernism from the perspective of those who saw modernism as so much nonsense, not just sophisticated conservative men of letters like Chesterton, but also amateurs who responded to modernism with simultaneous bafflement and amusement, amateurs whose legacy today descends to those who would enter a modern art gallery and poke fun at paintings with the oft-uttered dismissal "my kid could paint that!"⁶

As a scholar of modernism, I certainly believe that its experiments proved worthwhile and important and that they ought to be taken seriously. The epithet *ridiculous* that I attach to *modernism* in the title of my dissertation should be understood at once ironically and earnestly. That is, I hope at once to take nonsense and its attendant ridiculousness seriously and to assert the importance—independent of "seriousness"—of what is ridiculous about them. By identifying purposely ridiculous qualities of modernist works that often manifest in nonsense play, I aim neither to vindicate fully those who ridiculed the modernists nor to mark the modernists as merely ridiculous. I nevertheless expect that looking at modernism through the lenses of nonsense and ridiculousness can reshape frequent critical understandings of modernism as purely adversarial to public

culture and of public culture as purely contemptuous of modernism. Instead, the play of nonsense, ridicule, and the ridiculous in modernism reveals a mutual give and take, a “dialogics of modernism,” to invoke Ann L. Ardis’s phrase, in which modernism was shaped by its dissenters, its dissenters changed by modernism. As frequently as bourgeois philistines shouted “nonsense!” at the modernists, the modernists shouted “nonsense!” back, but both sides’ charges were more frequently imbued with the spirit of playfulness that accompanies nonsense than with the dour humorlessness sometimes attributed to them.

The dynamic of nonsense, ridicule, and the ridiculous that I point toward here will be elaborated more fully in chapter one. For the time being, however, I will suggest several of the ways in which Chesterton’s unlikely prediction came true, in which nonsense manifested as a “literature of the future” in modernism. Much prior work on nonsense has tended to adopt a rather restrictive attitude toward the term, defining precisely its features as a genre of literature, a form of language, or a borderline of philosophical logic. In the spirit of Carroll’s Wonderland, however, where exactly precise rules and categories finally give way to nonsense, I adopt a purposely messy approach to the term, attempting to grapple with it as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon whose various senses quickly seep into each other, in which definitions that attempt to be purely formal, logical, or neutral are quickly overtaken by the resounding echo of the pejorative sense: “nonsense!”

Nonsense, Ridicule, and the Ridiculous

The term *nonsense* is laden with pejorative connotations. When a person declares something nonsense in ordinary discourse, she implies that it is self-evidently absurd and exiles it to a realm of the silly, the childish, the trivial, the ridiculous. The skeptical, dismissive cry of “nonsense!” lurks behind any formulation of nonsense as a type of language, as a deviation from philosophical sense, or as a literary genre. When someone declares a speaker’s language nonsense, he marks the speaker as deceptive, mad, or stupid. If a person takes logical fallacies to such an extreme that they defy the limits of philosophical sense and cross over into nonsense, that person will be similarly marked as idiotic. Literary nonsense has often been viewed favorably, even loved. Figures as divergent as T.S. Eliot and G.K. Chesterton adored Edward Lear. Nonsense literature achieves its prestige, however, by embracing what is ridiculous about language and literature itself. Lear and Carroll avoid the effects of ridicule, then, by being knowingly ridiculous.

Ridicule and ridiculousness are written into the most prominent meanings of nonsense in the *OED*. The various senses of the term listed in the *OED*’s entry emphasize an interplay between seemingly neutral concepts of meaninglessness and implicitly risible versions of absurdity. Sense 1a, for example, describes nonsense as “That which is not sense; absurd or meaningless words or ideas.” The list of definitions quickly turns from absurdity to outright silliness: sense 1b refers to “Foolish or extravagant conduct; silliness, misbehaviour.” Sense 1c, the examples accompanying which tend to be followed by an exclamation point—“nonsense!”—explains that nonsense can be “Used as

an exclamation to express disbelief or surprise at a statement.” Even sense 1a, however, offers hints of the blunt judgment that characterizes nonsense as an exclamatory dismissal. A note after the first of these definitions describes an alternate spelling: “Esp. in recent linguistic use often spelt *non-sense* to avoid connotations of absurdity.” Yet the list of definitions that follows suggests that meaninglessness and absurdity are conjoined in the concept of nonsense in ways that the interjection of a hyphen cannot prevent. Since meaninglessness—in language, in literature, in logic—can be determined only by a listener or a reader, the probable responses of imagined readers and listeners shape the concept. The devaluing judgments that characterize responses to putative nonsense are implied by the term “nonsense” itself. Nonsense, ridicule, and the ridiculous go hand in hand.

Nevertheless, critics and theorists of nonsense have been reluctant to consider the implications of the pejorative senses of nonsense. In the context of modernism, critics have been apt to make sense of seeming nonsense. The title of Alison Rieke’s *The Senses of Nonsense* (1992) reveals a typical critical strategy. In the seeming nonsense of works like *Tender Buttons* and *Finnegans Wake*, the critic makes sense of a submerged order and effaces the nonsensical attributes of such texts. Stephen Burt titles a recent collection of essays on contemporary poetry *Close Calls with Nonsense* (2009). Burt thereby suggests that readers might be right to think that contemporary poetry often verges on nonsense. If such poetry were ever to cross the dangerous line into nonsense, however, it could hardly be considered worthy as poetry, for nonsense, unlike poetry, is trivial by nature.

Other scholars have tried to consider nonsense as a neutral formal structure or praise-worthy literary genre separate from the negative connotations that accompany the term in everyday use. On the very first page of his *Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (1988), for example, Wim Tigges attempts to validate nonsense as a serious object of academic study by dispelling the reader's potential misconception that nonsense may be unserious:

The epithet "literary" has been appended here in the first place to make it clear that this book is not about nonsense in the colloquial senses of meaningless gibberish or messages of whose contents one is supposed to disapprove. ...In the second place, the term "literary" is to indicate that nonsense can be and has been used for aesthetic purposes, and is by no means to be inherently equated with trivial writing or mere "kids' stuff." (1)

Tigges's disclaimer serves the laudable goal of asserting the intellectual value of nonsense and its potential for "aesthetic purposes." In attempting to make nonsense safe for literary study, though, Tigges also preemptively strips nonsense of many of the key characteristics through which it achieves its intellectual value and aesthetic purposes. The negative connotations of nonsense (its ridiculousness) and its potential to elicit the dismissive cry of "nonsense!" are central aspects of the concept itself.

In either making overmuch sense of it or denying its negative connotations, scholars have tended to underestimate the potential of nonsense to disrupt common sense, to stimulate the intellect, and to contribute to experimental aesthetics and poetics. This dissertation argues that nonsense—and modernism—derive much of their aesthetic

potential and capacity for innovation from their situation in the seemingly debasing and debased realms of ridicule and the ridiculous.

In prior studies that link modernism and nonsense, critics have adopted a similar resistance to accounting for the academically uncomfortable implications of the term, opting instead for assertions of formal affinity between Victorian nonsense and modernist experiment, independent of the pejorative baggage of nonsense. In *Alice to the Lighthouse* (1987), for example, Juliet Dusinberre argues that Victorian nonsense literature bears such formal similarity to modernist narrative that nonsense anticipates experimental literature: “Radical experiment in the arts in the early modern period began in the books which Lewis Carroll and his successors wrote for children” (5). Dusinberre claims in particular that Carroll’s work anticipates Virginia Woolf’s, which shares with the nonsense writer’s a challenge to authority, the “repudiation of moral purpose,” and the “repudiation of plot form” (77), among other qualities. After citing nonsense in its title, Rieke’s book largely ignores the term and explains how much sense several seemingly nonsensical experiments of modernism actually make. In *Touch Monkeys* (1994), Marnie Parsons offers a thoroughgoing theoretical elaboration of nonsense strategies that link nonsense and modernism. Even Parsons, however, resists the pejorative link that too close an association might make, stating explicitly that her goal is not “to make Nonsense writers out of authors clearly not working within the genre” (xvii).⁷

Such criticism has valuably demonstrated shared features that link nonsense literature to modernism, among others: an emphasis on language as a material presence

rather than a window to meaning, a curiosity in the ways that language produces reality as much as it reflects it, and the treatment of subconscious and unconscious mental states as crucial to identity. In these books, the language of nonsense literature becomes a useful model for explaining modernist literary experiment, a more explicitly playful predecessor through which these critics understand the complexity of linguistic play in modernism. In so emphasizing the formal qualities of nonsense, however, such work assumes that readers responded to modernist works respectfully and demurely. Early responders to modernism, however, rarely had such calm, collected reactions. The subtext of many responses to modernism, in fact, can be summed up in one word: “nonsense!” Respondents to modernism regularly associated the new art with the same low cultural status that many would assign to nonsense literature, seeing both as trivial, childish, funny, and ridiculous.

In contrast to critics who divorce nonsense from its derogatory qualities, modernists themselves confronted and repurposed those derogatory qualities. Acknowledging the debased status of nonsense and claiming it for aesthetically innovative purposes, modernists embraced nonsense, warts and all. Understanding the strange role of nonsense in modernism requires approaching it both from the perspective of intention and from the perspective of reception. In modernism, nonsense was sometimes imposed on works by respondents and sometimes adopted for works by authors. The unflattering aspects of nonsense prove crucial to understanding how even the most seemingly obscure, experimental brands of modernism emerged as public phenomena.

In part, the desire to separate nonsense from its pejorative connotations springs from a love of the concept and especially of the literary works in the nonsense genre, a group that includes works as beloved as *Alice in Wonderland* and Lear's limericks. Critics have long sought to find a deep purity at work in nonsense, a purity that ostensibly separates nonsense from the impure ridicule of satire or parody. In "A Defence of Nonsense," Chesterton presents satire as a foil for the superior nonsense of Lear and Carroll. "There is all the difference," he writes, "between the instinct of satire ... and the instinct of nonsense" (43-4). Satire has a rhetorical point, but the best nonsense, in Chesterton's eyes, exists purely for the innocent pleasure of the reader. Emile Cammaerts, like Chesterton an idealizer of the childhood imagination, postulates that a child's good will is the true test to distinguish satire from nonsense:

Whenever we find ourselves at a loss to decide whether or not a poem or a story must be considered as Nonsense, we might do worse than submit this poem or story to a child's appreciation. Almost invariably, his attention will wander when confronted with satire, witticism, or parody, while it will be instinctively attracted by the broad humour of nonsense, if modern education has not deteriorated his taste. (17)

Elizabeth Sewell likewise glorifies the "detachment" of nonsense, and Tigges proposes sheer disengagement from the real world as a key characteristic of nonsense: "...it is the prime characteristic of nonsense not to make a 'point' or draw a moral, not to satirize, to ridicule or to parody, and not even primarily to entertain" (50).

Many recent accounts of nonsense, however, recognize significantly more overlap between nonsense and satire. In a typology of light verse from 1978, Kingsley Amis explains that “a great deal of what passes for nonsense is or was generic parody, that which hits not at an individual or even a group but at a kind of poetry, however dimly visualized” (xvi). Jean-Jacques Lecercle treats parody and pastiche as defining characteristics of nonsense:

Parody is the name for this type of inscription, for this internal distance, for this abstract chronotope. That it is all-important in the genre of nonsense is obvious: parodies are very frequent in nonsense texts, which they sometimes punctuate..., and they are the privileged locus for the dialogue between the author and his child readers. (170)

The spectrum of recent critical opinions, then, runs from Tigges’ clear distinction between satire and nonsense to Lecercle’s declaration that satiric and parodic impulses are at the very heart of nonsense.

The strict taxonomists who attempt to articulate nonsense as a category independent of satire have done admirable work, but the reality of the way the term has been used, not just by critics or in everyday parlance but also by authors of nonsense themselves, indicates significant overlap between the two categories. Chesterton, for example, idealizes nonsense as an independent category. His own nonsense book *Greybeards at Play* (1900), however, though W.H. Auden once hailed it as “some of the best pure nonsense verse in English” (322), clearly satirizes art and politics, from a poem that depicts aestheticism as a refuge for the lazy to an exaggerated drawing of William

Gladstone's nose. Even "pure" nonsense language bears a parodic relationship to the language of common discourse. To be recognizable as language, it must share many features with it, but to be recognizable as nonsense, it must warp, exaggerate, and skew those features, as in parody. Susan Stewart convincingly argues, in fact, that nonsense generally gets its identity from a dialectical relationship with the common sense of the real world: she "looks at common sense as an organization of the world, as a model of order, integrity, and coherence accomplished in social life. And nonsense is considered as an activity by which the world is disorganized and reorganized" (viii). Like satire and parody, then, nonsense constantly mimics, intervenes in, affects, and is affected by the common-sense real world from which it distinguishes itself. Just as in satire and parody, a spirit of ridicule imbues nonsense, both when nonsense is intended by a writer and when it is perceived by a reader.

Many of the specific formal characteristics of nonsense that have interested literary critics in the past will get extended attention later in this dissertation, especially in the chapter on Gertrude Stein. When I approach nonsense through formal and generic lenses, however, I still do so with an eye toward the messy connotations that come along with nonsense forms and the nonsense genre. Understanding the ostensibly negative features of nonsense as central elements of its positive potential for aesthetic innovation, I generally see nonsense as a risky choice for modernist authors, but one with surprising rewards. Many modernist authors adopted nonsense strategies not in spite of the negative cultural baggage that comes with nonsense but because of it. The perception that modernist works were ridiculous nonsense ensured that works would be perceived as

new, established a common ground of laughter through which modernists and the public could engage, made public spectacles of rarefied avant-garde works, and posited a pleasure-seeking version of modernism that differs considerably from the still-dominant model of modernism as serious, difficult, and tragic.

Ridiculous Avant-Garde, Ridiculous Modernism

Critics have sometimes acknowledged the presence of unserious impulses in the modernist avant-garde. Matei Calinescu primarily defines the avant-garde by its “rejection of the past and by the cult of the new,” a cult wherein novelty was obtained by “the sheer process of the destruction of tradition; Bakunin’s anarchist maxim, ‘To destroy is to create,’ is actually applicable to most of the activities of the twentieth-century avant-garde” (117). Even in the midst of this vision of the avant-garde as inciting the grave seriousness of aesthetic and political destruction, however, Calinescu points out that the avant-garde could also be “a cult of unseriousness” invested in “disgraceful political jokes” and “deliberately stupid humor” (125) to such an extent that the avant-garde can be viewed as “a deliberate and self-conscious *parody of modernity* itself [Calinescu’s emphasis]” (141). Even critics who acknowledge that the avant-garde presents itself as unserious, however, have generally subordinated exploration of unseriousness to more easily explainable and forthrightly serious aspects of the avant-garde. Ridiculousness always becomes the means to a serious end, rather than an end in itself. This dissertation attempts to conceive of nonsense and ridiculousness as phenomena that arise in conjunction with, not subsequent to, the serious goals of experimental modernist projects.

Of course, the obvious presence of nonsense play and ridiculous aesthetics in the avant-garde, especially in Dada and surrealism, might simply reaffirm many critics' sense that the characteristics of the avant-garde are radically different from the characteristics of modernism proper. From this vantage, it might well seem easy to distinguish a ridiculous avant-garde from a more forthrightly serious modernism. Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), which focuses on avant-gardes in 1920s Germany but has been extrapolated by subsequent critics to the avant-garde more generally, claims that the avant-garde goal "to reintegrate art into the praxis of life" (22) is directly at odds with the emphasis on aesthetic autonomy embraced by many modernists: "it is to aestheticism that the historical avant-garde movements respond" (17). Calinescu likewise draws clear distinctions between modernism and the avant-garde:

As for modernism, whatever its specific meaning in different languages and for different authors, it never conveys that sense of universal and hysterical negation so characteristic of the avant-garde. The antitraditionalism of modernism is often subtly traditional. That is why it is so difficult, from a European point of view, to conceive of authors like Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Thomas Mann, T.S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound as representatives of the avant-garde. These writers have indeed very little, if anything, in common with such typically avant-garde movements as futurism, dadaism, or surrealism. So, if we want to operate consistently with the concept of modernism (and apply it to such writers as those mentioned above) it is necessary to distinguish between modernism and the avant-garde (old and new). It is true that modernity defined as a "tradition against itself" rendered possible the avant-

garde, but it is equally true that the latter's negative radicalism and systematic antiaestheticism leave no room for the artistic reconstruction of the world attempted by the great modernists. (140-1)

By the time he was writing the second edition of his book, however, it had become clear to Calinescu that “the Europeans, after the Americans, have come to see the avant-garde as an integral part of the modernist project” (278). Raymond Williams, even as he attempts to delineate the two categories, notes that “It is not easy to make simple distinctions between ‘Modernism’ and the ‘avant-garde’ (54).

As the field of modernist studies has expanded its canon and its approaches in the years since Calinescu, Bürger, and Williams were completing their books, efforts to draw such sharp distinctions have proven increasingly futile. Even the figures Calinescu names as “the great modernists” seem to have one foot in each camp. The ostensibly classicist Pound, for example, had before invented imagism and participated in Vorticism and *Blast*, and the “artistic reconstruction of the world” in Joyce’s *Ulysses* eventually gives way to the much-harder-to-call-reconstructive style of *Finnegans Wake*. Rather than two distinct streams of aesthetic and political innovation, I adopt Michael Levenson’s notion of modernism as a “heterogeneous episode in the history of culture” (8) that intertwines modernism and avant-garde. Writing on “The Avant-Garde in Modernism,” Levenson traces a diverse lineage that seamlessly combines purportedly modernist figures—Ibsen, Shaw, Verlaine, Huysmans, and Yeats, among others—with more readily acknowledged avant-gardists, including Jarry, Marinetti, Khlebnikov, Picasso, and Duchamp. Artists and writers seemingly invested in aesthetic autonomy have been revealed to be more

enmeshed in politics than was once thought, and avant-gardists more enmeshed in aesthetics. In short, an expanded canon has demanded a more capacious definition of what counts as “modernism.” Marshall Berman’s notion of modernism anticipates Levenson’s: “I define modernism as any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it” (5). In proposing a modernist studies imbued with “Planetary,” Susan Stanford Friedman likewise urges “that we treat modernism as the domain of creative expressivity *within* modernity’s dynamic of rapid change” (475). Such definitions allow for the inclusion both of less obviously radical realist works and of experimental avant-garde works in a modernist canon. Jennifer Wicke makes the point that modernism does not represent some fixed set of formal qualities, aesthetic intentions, or historical circumstances. Rather, “Modernism is a brand name” (394): “Modernism is as baggy and capacious and eclectic as those motley wares of colportage, gathered together because of historical contingency, circulated, and sold” (396-7). Baggy, capacious, and eclectic enough, surely, also to contain the avant-garde.

My own sense of modernism and avant-garde as overlapping and closely linked, not separate and distinct, comes partly from my view that modernism was defined as much by its dissenters as by its practitioners. The dichotomous thinking that once allowed critics to separate figures of the modernist period into tidy categories of modernist and avant-gardist largely collapses before a public that experienced them both as a conjoined aesthetic modernity. For the public that so often ridiculed it, both modernism and the

avant-garde were of a piece with the vast, confusing swirl of modernity. A limerick popular in the 1930s suggests as much:

A remarkable family is Stein,
 There's Gert and there's Ep and there's Ein.
 Gert's poetry is bunk,
 Ep's statues are junk,
 And nobody understands Ein. ("Pepper and Salt" 4)⁸

In this (vaguely anti-semitic) limerick, the literary modernism of Gertrude Stein, the artistic modernism of Jacob Epstein, and the scientific modernism of Albert Einstein are joined together into one incomprehensible modernism.

Even if ridiculous intentions could be isolated to the avant-garde (they cannot), public perceptions of ridiculousness traversed the spectrum from radical avant-gardists to artists who now define the modernist mainstream. Even the most canonical modernists faced public ridicule. As *transition* began to print sections of "Work in Progress," which would eventually become *Finnegans Wake*, in 1927, a writer in the *Saturday Review of Literature* resurrected Lewis Carroll only to have him fell both Stein and Joyce: "They have attempted new things and the wise may learn of them, but for the foolish they are illusion, delusion, and confusion. ...may Lewis Carroll be there on the ramparts, to take his vorpal sword in hand and smite the frumious Bandersnatches!" ("Gyring" 783).

Along with Joyce, T.S. Eliot, that most ostensibly serious of modernist poets, found himself an object of light mockery in the premiere issue of *Time* magazine: "There is a new type of literature abroad in the land, whose only obvious fault is that no one can

understand it. ...To the uninitiated [in *Ulysses*] it appeared that Mr. Joyce had take some half million assorted words—many such as are not ordinarily heard in reputable circles—shaken them up in a colossal hat, and laid them end to end” (“Shantih”). The scorn and ridicule directed at modernist women, of course, tended to be rather harsher than that directed at their male counterparts, but most modernists, particularly those whose work lends itself to the perception of nonsense, faced some form of it.

Much like their avant-garde counterparts, however, many modernists were capable not just of dishing out ridicule in return, but also of embracing self-mockery and employing a poetics of the ridiculous. Perhaps because the study of modernist poetics has tended to emphasize Eliotic difficulty, Arnoldian high seriousness, and the trauma of war, the ridiculous aspects of modernists’ work has tended to be ignored or pushed to the side. Though the examples of Hugo Ball, Gertrude Stein, and Bob Brown, which receive the most extended attention in this dissertation, can to varying degrees be viewed as avant-garde projects distinct from Poundian-Eliotic “serious” high modernism, it is worth observing briefly a penchant for nonsense play and ridiculous aesthetics shared by several of the modernists who tend to be treated as paragons of that serious modernism.

T.S. Eliot, for example, devoted much of his professional life to cultivating an aura of seriousness, and his most famous works are not just serious but devastating and grave. Eliot was also a lover of light verse, however, from his bawdy poetry in *Inventions of the March Hare* (1909-1917; 1997), to *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939), to the largely forgotten, casual collaboration *Noctes Binarianae* (1939). The same poet who claimed in 1921 that “poets in our civilization ...must be *difficult*” (65) answers and

undercuts notions of difficulty in the first line of *Old Possum's*: "The naming of cats is a difficult matter" (149). Eliot grouped Lear among his favorite poets: "Herbert is a great poet ...and one of a very few I can read again and again. Mallarmé is another, incidentally, and so is Edward Lear" (Stravinsky 92).

The admiration for Lear was lifelong. As a lecturer at the Sydenham County Secondary School in 1917, Eliot finished his course with a lecture on "The Laureates of Nonsense—Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, and the Makers of Light Verse" (Schuchard 293). In 1933, Eliot gave a (now lost) lecture on "Edward Lear and Modern Poetry" at Scripps College in Claremont, California, which "drew a series of comparisons between Lear and Tennyson, Swinburne, Mallarmé, Wilfred Owen and Louis [*sic*] Carroll" (Baker 566). Eliot treated Lear as a predecessor to modern poetry again in "From Poe to Valéry":

Can we point to any poet whose style appears to have been formed by a study of Poe? The only one whose name immediately suggests itself is—Edward Lear. And yet one cannot be sure that one's own writing has not been influenced by Poe. (27)

Eliot's tendency to invoke Lear as a predecessor to modern poetry might be read as dismissal of modern poets that Eliot does not take seriously, but it is clear that aligning modern poetry with Lear could not be purely derisive for Eliot. Indeed, Eliot answers Lear's famous self portrait—

'How pleasant to know Mr. Lear!'
Who has written such volumes of stuff
Some think him ill-tempered and queer,

But a few think him pleasant enough. (428)——

with a self-mocking poem of his own:

How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!

With his features of clerical cut,

And his brow so grim

And his mouth so prim

And his conversation, so nicely

Restricted to What Precisely

And If and Perhaps and But.

How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!

With a bobtail cur

In a coat of fur

And a porpentine cat

And a wopsical hat:

How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!

(Whether his mouth be open or shut). (93)

Far from merely cutting other modernists down to size because of their resemblance to Lear, Eliot invokes the nonsense poet at once as inspiration and as foil.

One might be inclined to read this repeated fixation on light verse and nonsense verse as a rare dalliance far removed from serious works like *The Waste Land*. Yet in the “From Poe to Valéry” passage, Eliot implies a kinship to Lear by way of Poe. The *Waste*

Land is a serious poem, but it also includes far-reaching absurdity. Many lines, for example, feature sweeping, incongruous non-sequiturs:

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,

Had a bad cold, nevertheless

Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe, (38).

From start to finish, Eliot invokes foreign-language lines and lines of nonsense language that he could only expect his readers to encounter as incomprehensible: “Weialala leia / Wallala leialala” (45). And while the “DA,” “DA,” “DA,” that booms throughout “What the Thunder Said” refers primarily to the “Datta, dayadhvam, damyata” of “The fable of the meaning of the Thunder” (54 n. 402) that Eliot references in his footnote, one cannot help but notice that the syllables Eliot chooses to isolate in the section are identical to the nonsense syllables that form the name Dada, the premiere ridiculous avant-garde of the 1910s and 20s. *The Waste Land* is a serious poem, of course, but it is striped with the same ridiculousness that drives Dada. Elizabeth Sewell, scholar of nonsense and of Eliot alike, argued that “Nonsense rules procure the necessary working conditions” for *The Waste Land*, that “*The Waste Land* is comparable to the *Alices* ... as Mr. Eliot’s nearest approach to pure Nonsense practice” (“Lewis Carroll” 53). Sewell’s reading goes a bit too far, perhaps, by transforming Eliot’s Waste Land into Carroll’s Wonderland, but her reading rightly observes that seriousness can quickly tip over into a parody of itself, that the far reaches of the sublime can circle back to the ridiculous, that, perhaps, Eliot’s playful Old Possum is already implicit in his dour world-wearied Prufrock.

James Joyce has generally been regarded as a more playful figure than Eliot, and unpacking the complexities of his often thoroughly comic “serious play” has been one of the prime tasks of his critics. It may be no surprise, then, that Joyce answers widespread ridicule of his work with self-mockery of his own. Joyce, for example, penned this advertising copy (which was never actually used) when the “Haveth Childers Everywhere” section of “Work in Progress” was published by Faber and Faber:

Humptydump Dublin squeaks through his norse;

Humptydump Dublin hath a horriple vorse.

But for all his kinks english plus his irismanx brogues

Humptydump Dublin’s granddada of all rogues. (Gorman 344)

Finnegans Wake, of course, is a seriously ambitious work, an epic experiment in literary form. When Joyce imagines himself as an Irish Humpty Dumpty, however, he makes clear his expectation that audiences will perceive his work as much as a preposterous large-scale nursery rhyme as a serious literary enterprise. By preemptively ridiculing the language of the *Wake*—“squeaks through his norse,” “horriple vorse”—Joyce anticipates whatever ridicule might be directed at the work in the future and asserts, rather than denies, the ridiculousness of his own project.⁹

The ridiculous takes its place alongside the serious in the poetics of Wallace Stevens, as well. Admirers of Stevens have long treated Hugh Kenner’s derisive dismissal of his poetry as “an Edward Lear poetic, pushed toward all limits” (*Pound Era* 517) as the ultimate insult, but few canonical poems in English are as intuitively nonsensical as “Bantams in Pine-Woods” (1922):

Chieftan Iffucan of Azcan in caftan

Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

Damned universal cock, as if the sun

Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.

Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.

Your world is you. I am my world.

You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!

Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines,

Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,

And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos. (75-76)

On first read, this poem is an incomprehensible hodgepodge of words. The prime impression of the poem come from its sound patterning, tightly packed assonance, and jubilant linguistic play, rather than from its represented confrontation between chickens.

The poem, of course, is not technically nonsensical: the rare words that fill it have definitions, and Eleanor Cook's *Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens* (2007) helpfully glosses possible allusions. In Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, for example, one can find both "gross, gross; fat, fat" and a reference to "Blackamoors with music" (Cook 67).

The poem has only rarely yielded to truly illuminating close reading,¹⁰ but Rachel Blau

Duplessis convincingly argues that the poem represents Stevens's reaction to witnessing a blackface performance of "The Congo" by Vachel Lindsay in April 1922. In the poem, then, Stevens puts himself in the position of the inchling speaker in a takedown of Lindsay's ten-foot poet ("Hoo" 678-681). This deep, historical reading valuably makes sense of a seemingly nonsensical poem, but it does not foreclose the ridiculousness that pervades an initial reading. Even as he channels Lindsay's reading and offers a ridiculing rebuke to the ten-foot poet, Stevens ridicules in the trappings of the ridiculous. In this poem, Stevens ridicules another poet, but he also renders poetry itself ridiculous, as the clucking of fearless chickens fighting for primacy. For Stevens, though, the ridiculous might not be so bad after all. It is the thoroughgoing ridiculousness of its wordplay, rather than its representation of a scene, allusion, or historical reference, that have made this such a memorable poem to so many readers.

Similarly conjoined seriousness and ridiculousness animate many of Stevens's other poems, but critics too often jettison the ridiculousness to demonstrate the seriousness. Helen Vendler's famous paraphrase of "The Emperor of Ice Cream" as a story about a corpse, a wake, and a reflection on death—"She is dead, and the fact cannot be hidden by any sheet" (*Words Chosen* 51)—is convincing and in many ways, no doubt, true, but it too thoroughly denies the ridiculous imagination that asserts an ice-cream monarch as the emperor of the world, that lets the poem take flight not just in Vendler's serious criticism but also in an anthology of children's poetry in the grouping "That's So Silly!"¹¹

The ridiculous abounds in modernism, to the extent that I offer Ball, Stein, and Brown as exemplary parables rather than as outliers. Alongside this tendency toward the ridiculous is a tendency toward language that if not technically nonsensical, was widely perceived as nonsense and comes closer to nonsense than almost any poetry that came before. The ridiculous drives Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896), a play that begins with the lexicographically altered profanity "merdre" (translated in prominent English editions as "Shittr") and proceeds through an incongruous, nonsensical plot. It blasts forth from the pages of *Blast* (1914), which at once "BLAST[S] HUMOUR" as a "Quack ENGLISH drug for stupidity and sleepiness. / Arch enemy of REAL" (17) and BLESSes "ENGLISH HUMOUR" as "The wild MOUNTAIN RAILWAY from IDEA to IDEA, in the ancient Fair of LIFE" (26). The ridiculous shines forth in the life, performance, and poetry of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,¹² and also, if more subtly, in the novels of Virginia Woolf, who called her own *Flush: A Biography* (1933) a "silly book" ("Diary v. 4" 153) and her own *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) "my nonsense book" (*Letters* v. 3 493). The ridiculous is a crucial mode of the prose sections of William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*, which feature out-of-order chapter headings that are sometimes printed upside-down, and it is equally crucial to the prose style of William Faulkner, as in Vardaman's famous short chapter from *As I Lay Dying*: "My mother is a fish" (84). From the extreme avant-garde to the modernist mainstream, the ridiculous constitutes an important and neglected force in modernist poetics.

Nonsense, ridicule, and the ridiculous, so easily dismissed, have crucial implications for the way we read modernist literature and the way we understand the

historical development and dissemination of modernism. Reading practices founded on the notion of pervasive modernist “difficulty” treat the initial bafflement fostered by many modernist poems as something to be gotten over and moved beyond. Close reading, of course, has much to reveal about the internal complexities and historical situation of modernist poetry. Even as they close read and historically contextualize, however, scholars should strive to recover some portion of their visceral responses to modernist poems, which for the bulk of the public were often characterized less by shock and fear than by disorientation and laughter. Poems that approach or embrace nonsense, moreover, seem to demand entirely different kinds of attention from those to which close readers are attuned, forms of attention that both demand considerations of texts as conceptual performances and amplify the importance of material text and context.

The widespread prevalence of ridicule and the ridiculous as forces in modernism also reshapes narratives of modernism and theories of the avant-garde. In place of modernist heroes pursuing aesthetic innovation in the face of a dehumanizing world as unthinking philistines attempt to block the progress of art,¹³ this narrative of ridicule and the ridiculous suggests a more complex dynamic of artists and philistines, of ridiculers and ridiculed, than the discourse on modernism has typically acknowledged. Shared strategies of ridicule and the ridiculous blur boundaries between artists and opponents, between ridiculers and the ridiculed, and between modernism and the avant-garde.

It becomes paradoxically important, then, to find the ridiculous at play in the serious, but also to acknowledge the importance (but not necessarily “seriousness”) of the ridiculous in its own right as a crucial element of what makes modernist art art, of what

makes modernist literature literature. Rather than treating ridiculousness as a subordinate means to a legitimately serious end, scholars should view the ridiculous as a phenomenon that arises in conjunction with the serious in modernism. In such a light, modernism emerges in fuller complexity as a cultural force at once serious and anti-serious, at once rational and anti-rational, at once utterly sublime and thoroughly ridiculous.

CHAPTER 1

Nonsense!

Ridicule of the Armory Show and Hugo Ball's Ridiculous Modernism

Ridicule and the Ridiculous in Public, Dialogic Modernism

On March 22, 1913, only a few short weeks after the Armory Show opened in New York and “sprang upon the American public like a flash from the blue” (Kuhn 4), the Academy of Misapplied Art opened its own show a couple miles uptown. The Academy, comprised mostly of members of the National Academy of Design, offered its own display of the new kinds of art that had caused such a scandal at the Armory. The Academy's show, which followed weeks of relentless ridicule of cubism and futurism in the American press, promised to display artworks characteristic of the “cubistic, past-impressionistic [*sic*], futuristic, neurotic, psychopathic, and paretic schools” (“Outstrip” 6). The conservative Academy-members claimed not to be openly criticizing modernist art or warping its tendencies for comic effect. Rather, they asserted, their show had followed tendencies toward the ridiculous that were already present in modernist art. With tongue planted firmly in cheek, Robert V. V. Sewell, secretary of the mock exhibition, insisted, “They are genuine examples of the ‘new art,’ rather than take-offs” (“Outstrip” 6).

Two hundred paintings were on display at the Misapplied Art show. Burgess Johnson's *A Cubist Painting, a Cubist Painting a Cubist Painting* mocked the sudden prominence of the term “cubist” as an absurdly repetitive fad. Presenting *Lady Walking in Fifth Avenue* as a painting in octagons, Frank Bicknell purported to be a step ahead of the

cubists. Francis Newton's *Food Descending a Staircase* transformed Marcel Duchamp's similarly titled *Nude*, which was the epicenter of fascination in (and ridicule of) the Armory Show, into a depiction of a waiter and his tray tumbling down the stairs. Sewell's contribution, *The Followers of Matisse*, represented the great cubist as an ape surrounded by genuflecting naifs. A series of "exquisite" Matisses by 11-year-old Nanette Turcas offered seemingly incontestable proof of the juvenility of modernism, an early confirmation of an allegation skeptics continue to voice to this day: "My kid could paint that!" The exhibition even included samples of "post-impressionist literature," which reference Gertrude Stein by style if not by name: "They were very many who were, wanting to be ones expressing something being struggling, something going to be some other thing, something going to be something some one sometime would be clearly expressing, and that would be something that would be a thing that would be greatly expressing some other thing than that thing" ("Outstrip" 6).

Chroniclers and critics have often mythologized the Armory Show as an origin point for the public emergence of modernism in the United States.¹⁴ A triumphant narrative of American modernism that begins with the Armory Show leaves ridiculers of the new art behind as thoughtless philistines, vanquished villains who foolishly tried to place obstacles before the progress of modernist art, "mildly diverting footnotes to history" (Brown 142). Such willfully lowbrow ridicule, however, arose with such frequency and in such quantity when modernist artworks and artists entered the public arena that its instances begin to comprise not a mere footnote but an entire alternative narrative to the triumphant rise of modernism. Indeed, ridicule of modernism followed so closely on the

heels of the public emergence of modernism that the two appear almost simultaneous from the vantage of the present. The goals of the ridiculers of modernism, sometimes to present a serious alternative to perceived triviality, sometimes simply to have a little fun, were often at odds with the aesthetic goals of the modernists. Nevertheless, such ridicule proved pivotal to the rise of modernism in the public eye, contributed to a public sense of modernism as a unified movement, and influenced in crucial ways the qualities of modernist works. Ridicule and the perception of ridiculousness that ridicule expresses were not incidental, obstructive, or damaging to modernism. Rather, ridicule proved necessary for the public rise of modernism and fundamental to modernists' actualization of the imperative to "make it new."

Many critics regard 1922 as the *annus mirabilis* of modernism,¹⁵ but ridicule of modernism hit its stride earlier, in the period between 1911, when Cubism "hit the music-hall stage for the first time" (Weiss 3) and 1914, when World War I began. To be sure, modernism itself had been mocked before then, and art had been mocked long before modernism. An energetic strain of lowbrow satire, parody, and ridicule often accompanies, intersects, and influences the triumphal line of high art and literature, from the *Dunciad* (1728) and *Shamela* (1741) to *Punch* and Lewis Carroll's parodic reworking of Victorian poetry in the *Alice* books. In considering why the films of Sergei Eisenstein were sometimes greeted with laughter, Viktor Shklovsky points out that the modernists merely inherited a recurring reaction to innovation in art: "The new form that is being created is perceived as comic. That is how the Cubists were perceived and before them the Impressionists; that is how Tolstoy perceived the Decadents, how Aristophanes

perceived Euripides” (232). Even as the ridiculers of modernism could find countless precedents in history, however, the prevalence and importance of ridicule as a response to art grew in a period in which artists were particularly interested in questions of aesthetic valuation and the identity of art as a coherent category. Ridicule becomes especially important when artists and audiences become interested in the perception that modern art might be simply bad. As Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz observe in the introduction to their collection *Bad Modernisms* (2006),

the idea that there might be something good about bad artistic behavior did not originate with modernism, but no kind of art ...has been more dependent on a refractory relation between itself and dominant aesthetic values, between itself and its audience, between itself and the bourgeoisie, between itself and capitalism, between itself and mass culture, between itself and society in general. (2-3)

Viewed from one angle, modernists actively sought such ridicule as a material signal of the shock they so often claimed to seek from their audiences.

While many in the public were earnestly offended by modernist novelty, closer attention to the character of the ridicule directed at modernism reveals a public less shocked and distressed by modernism than looking for a way to have fun. By making fun of modernism, that is, ridiculers generally pursued laughter at the expense of the new art more than they sought redress for its grievous aesthetic violations. As Michael North has pointed out, “modern art was met not with disapproval or critique but rather with laughter” (*Machine-Age* 21). Some might view such laughter as evidence that audiences were seeking relief from a deeper shock, but the ridiculers of modernism tend to come

across as more in control of their responses than old narratives of the much-storied “shock of the new”¹⁶ imply. Modernism may well have unleashed some degree of shock on the public, but shock, brief by definition, was quickly superseded by ridicule as the dominant public response to modernism, if not preempted by it.

The Paris premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* on May 29, 1913 has become a favorite critical anecdote to demonstrate the capacity of novel modernist forms to shock bourgeois audiences. When the audience heard the dissonant new forms of Stravinsky’s music, the story goes, its members were so confused and outraged that the theater devolved into a madhouse of whooping and hollering, the shock and scandal so palpable that audiences were rolling, even fighting, in the aisles. The spectacle on stage—“the Young Maidens... in their squawlike costumes, toes turned inwards, knees bent, their heads tilted onto their hands, in utter contradiction of what the ordinary man understood by the term ‘ballet’” (Walsh 204)—only compounded the audience’s outrage. Much like the riots inspired by J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) before and the heckling inspired by Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) after, responsibility for the scene in Paris has been assumed to lie in audience members’ supposedly visceral reactions to novel form and content.

Audience members’ reactions, however, appear not to have been quite so genuine or visceral. The audience was primed for the outraged reaction ahead of time, and the hoopla was both expected and encouraged by the organizers of the event. “Some of the more philistine elements of the audience may well have come prepared for some fun” (203), Stephen Walsh notes. “Word had got about after the final rehearsals that the new

ballet was difficult, violent, incomprehensible; what better response to these disturbing qualities than laughter and ridicule?” (203). The fuss of the audience, then, had more to do with their expectations of outrage than with their actual experience of the same. While the event has attached itself to Stravinsky’s name, Richard Taruskin argues that responses had more to do with the visual aspects of the ballet, which was choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, than with pure musical form.¹⁷ The organizer of the event, moreover, had actively promoted the laughter, outrage, and ridicule: “the stormy response had been manipulated and to a large extent provoked by [Sergei] Diaghilev; Cocteau was right to observe that ‘the audience played the role that had been written for it’” (1007). The scandal of the event assured its notoriety: “A huge press coverage was assumed, a durable legend created” (1007). Diaghilev actively sought the laughter and ridicule of his audience not to sabotage the *Rite*, but because the scandal was thoroughly useful as a promotional tool for Stravinsky and Nijinsky that marked the ballet as genuinely new, hyped it as viscerally shocking, and manufactured a public sense of cultural rupture.¹⁸ An event that at first seemed to pit outraged philistines against earnest aesthetes actually benefited all parties involved. Stravinsky and Nijinsky found their art the subject of public fascination, Diaghilev filled the theater, and the ridiculers had a great deal of fun at the ballet’s expense. What motivated individual audience members to react the way they did, of course, cannot be determined with any certainty. No doubt, complex motivations and varied goals drove audience members’ laughter and ridicule. It seems clear, however, that Stravinsky’s music did not simply impose a monolithic experience of shock on its audience.

Recent modernist scholarship, often under the banner of the New Modernist Studies, has blurred distinctions that were once thought crucial to the project of modernism. The ostensible preference for high culture among modernists has proven to be more slippery than once imagined. The low culture of the music hall invades high culture texts such as *The Waste Land*, and much popular culture has been re-conceived as modernist in its own way. In contrast to the largely hermetic modernism once thought to be enjoyed only by a small circle of artists and readers, Karen Leick has uncovered a phenomenon of “popular modernism,” in which even the middlebrow public had access to the high-literary experiments of writers such as Gertrude Stein and James Joyce in the pages of newspapers. Rather than a monolithic cultural force that could be consolidated as “the Pound era” or “the Stevens era,” moreover, scholars have revealed a far messier modernism struggling constantly to define itself, a “dialogics of modernism,” in Ann L. Ardis’s phraseology. Extending Ardis’s notion of a dialogic modernism not just to internal participants but to putative foes, Michael Levenson argues that modernism was a “heterogeneous episode in the history of culture” that “depended as much on its enemies as on its proponents, on audiences as much as on artists” (*Modernism* 8). In light of a critical understanding of modernism as increasingly popular, public, and messily contested, it has become increasingly important to account for all the participants who helped define modernism, from the most earnest aesthete to the crassest philistine.

The Significance of Anti-Modernist Ridicule

Those putative philistines made themselves heard in the pages of newspapers, magazines, and even books in the wake of the Armory Show, and they left behind an under-explored archive of material only recently viewed as important to the history of modernism. Leonard Diepeveen, for example, has argued that the proliferation of mocking responses to modernism in popular newspapers and magazines—“a massive, unexplored archive in anthologies, reviews, publicity blurbs, parodies, advertising, letters to the editor, and newspaper articles” (“Learning” 160)—has much to tell scholars about public responses to modernism, and in turn, about modernists’ responses to the public response. The quips, complaints, and parodic light verse in this archive, Diepeveen argues, represent a general “refusal to read” modernist works that defied the normative expectations of readers: “Complacent, unadventurous, and dismissive, they just sit there and smirk. After all, these responses are not so much about engaging the text as they are about refusing to engage, about closing down inquiry” (“Learning” 161). For Diepeveen, such mockery marks an aesthetic shift in modernism from earnest sincerity to complex interpretability, from an art based in expression to an art based in theory. Even as they refused to read, Diepeveen argues, amateur mockers affected the course of modernism: when mocked, modernists consolidated their formation of a new seriousness with renewed confidence in the validity and necessity of that project. Like Diepeveen, Daniel Tracy explores a largely forgotten set of texts that seem to ridicule modernism, middlebrow parodies published in “smart magazines” such as *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*. Though such parodies mocked modernism, Tracy argues, they also served as a

gateway to modernist high culture for their middlebrow readership. Such parodies altered the form of modernist writing but also signaled it as important and disseminated it, to the extent that “Parody could also signal outright admiration.” Parodies in smart magazines “critique, tongue-in-cheek, an aesthetic discourse that they are in fact promoting” (53).¹⁹ The arguments that Diepeveen and Tracy make about seemingly silly ridicule of modernism, then, indicate not just that the ridicule itself is more interesting than many have supposed, but also that such ridicule, which seeks to declare itself outside modernism, is (perhaps unwittingly) enmeshed in the development of modernism itself.

If treating ridicule of modernism seriously at first seems a stretch, though, treating what is ridiculous about modernism seriously seems a contradiction in terms. Yet the ongoing development of modernism was marked not just by the increased valuation of seriousness that Diepeveen describes, but also by a countervailing trend in many artists’ and writers’ embrace of willful ridiculousness as an aesthetic mode. I will explore the complexities of modernists’ use of nonsense play and ridiculous aesthetics later in this chapter and in the remainder of the dissertation, but for now it is enough to say that many modernists reacted to the willfully silly ridicule directed at them by upping the ante on what was ridiculous about their work. Marcel Duchamp’s increasing use of ridiculousness in his art over the course of the 1910s offers a clear example of this feedback loop. I will also argue that each of the figures central to this dissertation kept in mind the probability that their work might be reacted to with laughter and ridicule. As they wrote, these modernists did not just imagine an “ideal reader” who would dutifully appreciate the complexities of their work. They also took into account readers who would

approach their works with skepticism, anger, bafflement, amusement, and mirth. Such responses, which bear comparison to the “ugly feelings” that Sianne Ngai describes in her 2005 book of that name, point to a version of modernist artistic and literary practice less invested in the seriousness and difficulty so often assumed to be the key characteristics of modernist poetics. I proclaim modernism ridiculous, then, not to dismiss it but rather to emphasize the extent to which authors planned for and manipulated the projected laughter and ridicule of readers. When a playful public mocked modernism, modernists invited their mockery, mocked them back, and goaded them into further mockery. For the most part, modernists were mocked after their works emerged in public. The expectation of ridicule, however, shaped modernist works even as they were being written.

By adopting the ridiculous as an aesthetic strategy and treating ridiculousness as a virtue, not a vice, modernists reshaped the power dynamics usually associated with ridicule considerably. Ridicule tends to be associated with cruelty that exceeds mere teasing. Many people tease each other, but only true bullies ridicule, their victims powerless and pitiful. In his recent book on laughter and ridicule, Michael Billig all but condemns laughter because he believes it to be associated with “the darker, less easily admired practice of ridicule,” not with humorous “moments of pure, creative enjoyment” (2). “The superior smile of ridicule,” he writes, “is a constantly loaded weapon designed to repel any challenge to common sense” (14-15). Writers’ expectations that their works would be ridiculed offer a counterexample to Billig’s claim. Such ridicule actually marked modernist works as successful challenges to common sense. In the context of modernism, discursive power was not firmly planted in the hands of ridiculing philistines

who disempowered their modernist victims. Nor, of course, did power lie exclusively in the hands of empowered modernists who manipulated, even ridiculed, the bourgeois public. Instead, ridicule flowed in all directions, from modernists to the public, from the public to modernists, from modernists to other modernists, and so on.

In everyday situations, someone who calls some person or thing ridiculous has claimed power over that person or thing. When an earnest object is proclaimed risible, a ridiculer invokes the special rhetorical and social power of laughter to disempower the object of ridicule. Susan Purdie has argued that joking, of which direct ridicule is only one type, confers a special “social potency” upon the joker, who in a rhetorical situation of successful joking both “effects immediate discursive control but also appropriates wider power,” in part because of the “additional social power established by denying other people’s behavior such [social] propriety when they form the Butt of joking” (5). A ridiculing joker consolidates her own power, then, by gaining the respect of the group whose laughter she elicits, but she does so at the expense of the object of ridicule, the butt of the joke, who finds himself marked as socially inappropriate to the norms of the laughing group.

If an artist wittingly elicits the laughter of an audience, however, even if that audience believes the laughter to be undesired, that artist has asserted a power of her own that preempts the rhetorical efficacy and cruel edge of ridicule. The audience, that is, may believe that it is laughing at something that is unintentionally funny, but if the artist intends laughter to be one of the effects produced by her work, she has exerted power over the unwitting audience by reshaping that audience’s laughter *at* the artist into

laughter *with* the artist. Furthermore, an artist who desires not just to deflect or disempower the laughter of an audience may silently laugh at the audience's ignorance, a situation in which the audience believes itself to be on the empowered side of the jokers rather than on the disempowered side of the butt of the joke. Because laughter is "deeply, even necessarily, rooted in social processes" (Billig 32), properly interpreting the laughter that the works of modernists so often elicited, and the laughter that so many mockers actively produced at the expense of modernism, involves a complex accounting of the intentions, perceptions, and responses of mockers, laughers, and putative objects of laughter and ridicule. Such intentions, perceptions, and responses are rarely so simple or straightforward as scholars have tended to imagine, in part because so many modernist works render unclear whether the artist or the audience is primarily responsible for the laughter. Rather, the situation more often resembles the "collusion of intention and response" (14) that Jure Gantar sees at play in many comic works.

The examples of ridicule that follow come from authors with varying degrees of investment in modernism and in culture more generally. The amateur authors of the satiric verse that filled American newspapers in the wake of the Armory Show sought only passing recognition and light amusement. Each of these examples of ridicule, however, proves more complex than most critics of modernism have assumed, and each has been largely ignored in conversations about modernism. Before this dissertation explores examples of ridiculous aesthetics put to productive use in modernism, it will be worthwhile to linger at length on a few of these more ephemeral examples of anti-

modernist ridicule, which prove interesting both in and of themselves and as part of the story of the emergence of the avant-garde and modernism as public phenomena.

Satiric Newspaper Coverage of the Armory Show

To most of the public that experienced it, modernism was ridiculous from the start. The “sensation” and “scandal” associated with the Armory Show were more often expressed as satire and ridicule. Even seemingly straight news coverage of the show often contained an element of satire. The *Chicago Daily Tribune*’s coverage from afar began with a four-tiered alarmist headline: “ART SHOW OPEN TO FREAKS / American Exhibition in New York Teems with the Bizarre. / ALL SCHOOLS WELCOME. / Queer Conceptions of ‘Insurgents’ Vie with Conservatives’ Works” (5). The even-keeled tone of the article itself does not match the sensationalism of the headline. Penned by Harriet Monroe, the founder of *Poetry* magazine, it exhibits the same respectful excitement for the new art that Monroe’s later *Tribune* piece did under the headline “New York Has At Last Achieved a Cosmopolitan Modern Exhibit” (B6).

The tone of alarmism, scandal, and shock in the *Tribune*’s initial headline, however, quickly dissipated as the coverage shifted to teasing ridicule. In keeping with a nationwide trend, the *Tribune* began printing satiric light verse that mocks modernism. On February 28, 1913, the *Tribune* printed a poem called “The Height of the Artistic” in which the speaker imagines himself producing a modernist painting:

I did a canvas in the Post-

Impressionistic style.

It looked like Scrambled Eggs on Toast;

I, even, had to smile.

...

I called the canvas Cow With Cud,

And hung it on the line.

Altho' to me was vague as mud

'Twas clear to Gertrude Stein. (6)

The artist strains to hold back his laughter not just as he himself paints the piece but also as he imagines Stein commenting on it: “The sinking rising lightens dark / To be, while being, bliss” (“Height of the Artistic” 6). By the end of the poem, the speaker unmasks himself as an impostor, a parodic imitator, after “a melancholy man” breaks into hysterics at the sight of the painting. The artist cannot help but laugh at his own ridiculous work, and Stein, the famous proponent of modern art, is revealed as a moronic dupe. The only wise person in the room is the one who laughs uncontrollably at the speaker’s mock-modernist art.

Once the Armory show moved to Chicago at the end of March 1913, the *Tribune* coverage mixed straight news with satire. A large photograph of a crowd packed into a gallery at the Art Institute bears a purposely repetitive headline that mocks the name of the new Cubist avant-garde: “‘Cubist’ Photograph of Cubist Crowd at Cubist Exhibit” (3) (there is nothing particularly cubist about the photograph itself). Below this photograph of crowds packed into a gallery, another photograph shows a crowd leaving the front entrance of the museum, with the staid caption “Crowds Leaving Art Institute” (3). The

mock enthusiasm of the repetition of “Cubist” in the first headline and the photograph of room-filling crowds echoes the hype surrounding the Armory Show, but the second image deflates it. The sequence of pictures suggests that the exhibit has been much ado about nothing. Crowds come to see the putatively revolutionary art exhibit, then they leave the museum, and nothing has changed.

An anecdote from another news story shows the same mixture of satire and news coverage:

“Dear, will you please tell me where the human figure is in this picture with such a shocking title?” asked a prim little woman. She was looking at [Marcel Duchamp’s] “Nude Descending a Staircase.”

“Of course,” responded her companion, “you are not supposed actually to see what the artist does. ... There is a formula by which you can see just what is represented. Take a careful survey of the picture, study the purported idea, whirl around three times, close your eyes, count twenty, bump your head twice against the wall, and if you bump hard enough the picture of the nude descending the staircase will be perfectly obvious.” (“Sunday Crowds” 3)

The punchline to this joke is well wrought enough that we might speculate about whether it reflects the sentiments of an actual man in the crowd or those of the journalist himself. The blasé question the “prim little woman” asks already suggests that she is not particularly shocked by the “shocking title” of the painting, and by the time her companion is done with his joke the shock has been transformed from the lightning-bolt of scandal so often associated with the avant-garde into a self-imposed blunt-force thud

on the head. The anecdote mocks Duchamp and his painting, and it mocks those who would feign appreciation for Duchamp's painting. It also, however, mocks a public perhaps a bit too eager to be shocked, even mocks the very idea that one could be particularly shocked by an abstract painting. Even as it does so, of course, it reasserts Duchamp's painting, and the entire Armory Show, as newsworthy and interesting.

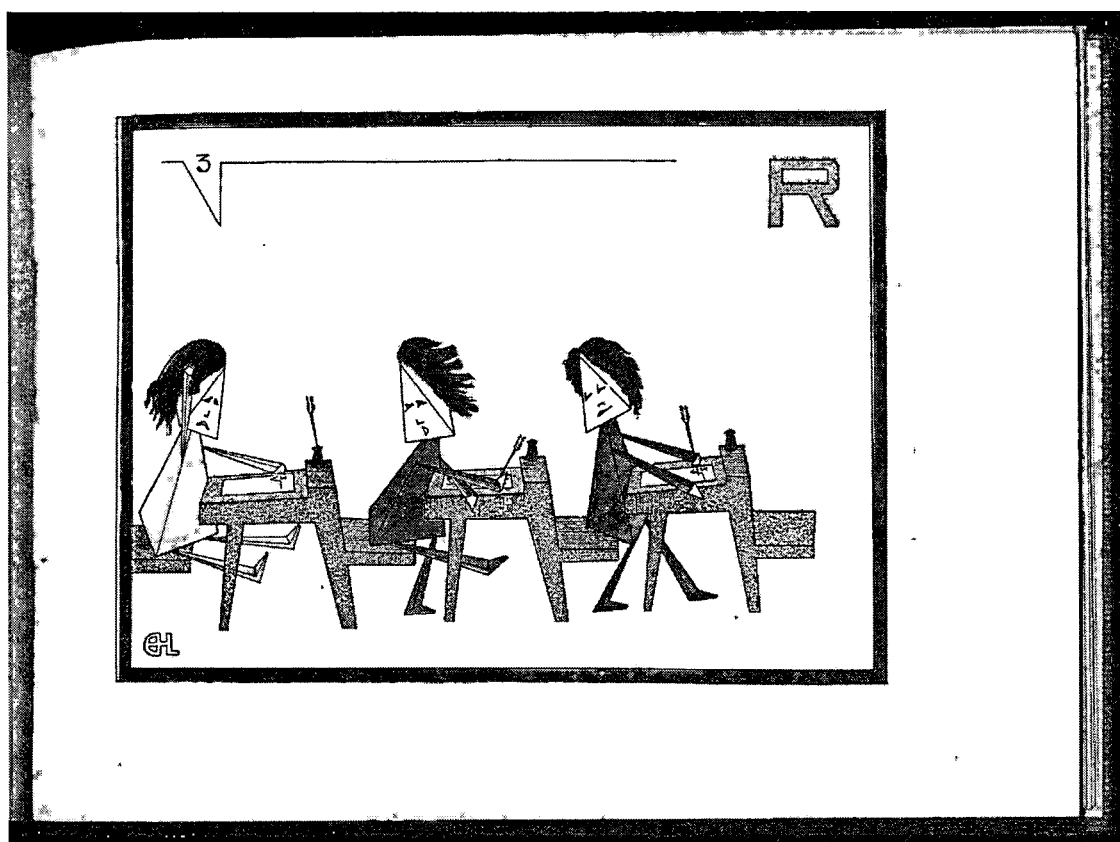
Such reactions to the Armory Show are typical of a larger set of responses in a variety of publications. Newspapers each had their own response to modern art, and the perspectives of individual writers also varied. Publications solicited contributions from the public, too, and the public enthusiastically obliged, offering parodic drawings and verses. Ridicule was not the only possible response to modernism, but the sheer frequency with which modernism became an object of satire in the press should not be overlooked. Most of these responses in the press are individually ephemeral and forgettable, but together they suggest that many in the public experienced modernism as a comic phenomenon. No doubt, many in the public saw these passing jokes in the newspaper and moved on, their initial engagement with modernism temporary and passing. The light verse about modernism that so often appeared in the pages of major newspapers, however, did offer the public a new familiarity with strange figures and movements we now take for granted. These responses to new experiences of modernism lack the sophistication and complexity of many more earnest responses, but they at least establish a sense of modernism as a public movement, establishing the status-quo position of incomprehension from which early critical work on modernism sought to depart.

The Cubies' ABC as Satiric Exhibition Catalogue

The early newspaper coverage laid the groundwork for *The Cubies' ABC*, a satiric alphabet book that came out only months after the Armory Show in 1913. Written by Mary Mills Lyall and illustrated by Earl Harvey Lyall, the book lingers on modernism longer than do the snippets in the press. The *R* spread of the book reads as follows:

R is for Reason and poor old Reality,
 Once in the fashion, but now obsolete,
 Banished forever with grim actuality.
 Now the sole law is one's own personality—
 Find its Cube Root and you have it complete.
 —R is for Reason and poor old Reality. (40)

While the collapse of reason and reality would be an earth-shaking phenomenon, the Lyalls undercut such gravity at every turn. The matter-of-fact tone of the passage downplays modernist claims to shock and novelty as so much childish naiveté, childishness only reinforced by the accompanying illustration of mock-cubist figures at schoolroom desks—and by the fact that the Lyalls' entire account of nascent modernism lies within the pages of an alphabet book, that most ostensibly basic of schoolroom texts.²⁰



The *Chicago Daily Tribune* coverage of the Armory Show could well be accused of the “refusal to read” that Diepeveen sees at work in so many comic responses to modernism, but the charge is harder to make of *The Cubies’ ABC*, which attempted to capitalize on the popularity of such satiric coverage of the Armory Show and the new art. The Lyalls’ unique solution to the perennial alphabet-book problem of what to do with the letter *X*, for example, indicates an aversion to engagement with modernist art:

X is the Xit, Xtremely alluring

When Cubies invite us to study their Art;

And the Xquisite pain we are sadly enduring

The while they protest, with an air reassuring:

“Of course this is merely a diffident *start!*”

—X is the Xit, Xtremely alluring. (52)

In the accompanying illustration, two grimly unsmiling cubist figures point to modernist paintings with schoolroom pointers as a third cubist figure holds his prismatic arms out to block the exit. However alluring the exit was, though, it seems the Lyalls spent their fair share of time in the galleries of the armory show. Even as this spread asserts the allure of the exit, it writes from the perspective of someone inside the gallery. In real life, the only thing that bars the exit is the fascination the paintings and the sensation around them hold over the perversely interested gallery-goers.

Far from a “refusal to read,” then, *The Cubies’ ABC*, though satiric and resistant, represents the product of a sustained engagement with nascent modernism. The Lyalls, like the *New Yorker* parodies at the center of Tracy’s argument, do not mock modernism from a position of ignorance. A deep interest in, surprising knowledge of, and even sophisticated reading of major artists and artworks comes through in the Lyalls’ book, despite the mockery in which that interest and engagement is couched. For all the childish mockery, light verse, and silliness that drives *The Cubies’ ABC*, it also has reserves of knowledge behind it: the Lyalls are not just satirists of modernism, but also students of modernism, and teachers of modernism in turn. A 1914 ad for the book informs potential buyers that “You can’t talk Cubism if you don’t know ‘Cubies’ ABC” (9). In part a self-mocking joke of marketing, this statement also demonstrates a surprising promise of *The Cubies’ ABC*. Even as its readers could expect to revel in the high silliness of the new art and its goofy practitioners, they would also receive an ad-hoc

education in notable names and styles of modern art. The surprising erudition that emerges in the Lyalls' satire would have required an intense and thoughtful engagement with the nascent movement of modernism.

The Lyalls' treatment of Gertrude Stein, for example, suggests a familiarity surprising for the time. In 1913, Stein was not the household name she would later become. An article on Stein in the *New York Times* published a few weeks after the Armory Show introduced Stein to the public. "Now They're Doing It In Words!" (8) the piece exasperatedly proclaims, treating Stein's experimental writing as a bizarre linguistic offshoot of the visual art on display at the Armory. The Lyalls, however, demonstrate at least some knowledge of the then-obscure writer, and they feature her twice in *The Cubies' ABC*. One instance imagines a conversation between Stein and a figure in a painting by Morton Schamberg:

S is for Schamberg's fair dame at her 'phone,

Conversing with G. Stein, the Futurist scribe.

The Cubies, eavesdropping, hear Gertrude bemoan:

"This one feeling many far seeming alone,

The bluer the bliss the redder the bribe!"

—S is for Schamberg's fair dame at her 'phone. (42)

In the accompanying illustration, the Cubies sit before a telephone switchboard adjacent to a representation of Schamberg's painting. Mocking futurist fixation on technology and the seeming attack on clear language represented by Stein's poetics, the poem represents an early instance of the parodic "Steinese" that would so often accompany coverage of

the writer later in her career. That the public could be expected to understand a joke about Stein's style this early in her career suggests a twist to Leick's argument that experimental modernists were more well known to the public than most critics have supposed. Most of the public would have only scattered access to Stein's actual work at this point, and the public may well have come to know Stein by way of parody and ridicule before they actually encountered her work.

Stein had become a ripe target for ridicule so quickly that the Lyalls also give her an entire spread of her own:

G is for Gertrude Stein's limpid lucidity

(Eloquent scribe of the Futurist soul.)

Cubies devour each word with avidity:

"*Alone* words lack sense," they affirm with placidity,

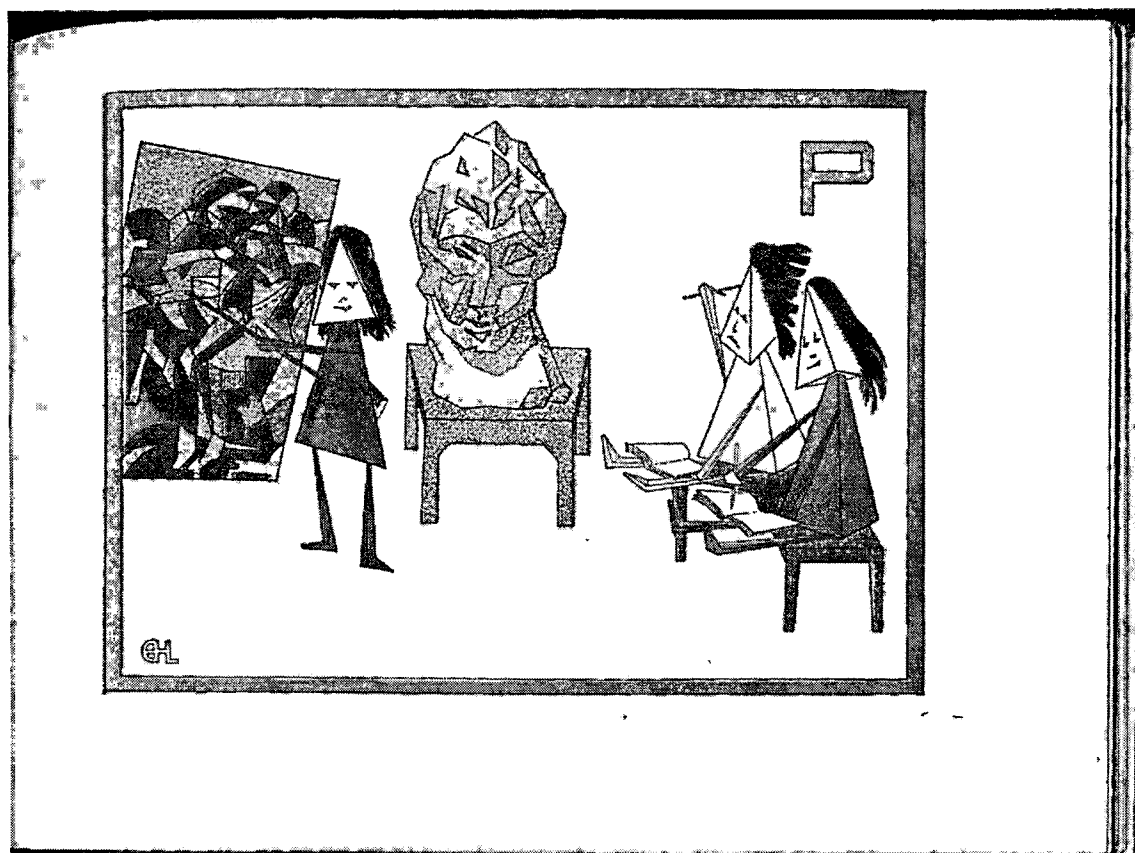
"But *how* wise we'll be when we've swallowed the whole!"

—G is for Gertrude Stein's limpid lucidity. (18)

By sarcastically declaring Stein's language clear and transparent, the poem mocks its actual obscurity—and the pretended comprehension of those who claim to understand it. The illustration shows the Cubies at a table holding up three-dimensional ovoid word-objects—"some," "many," "feeling," "being," and "which," among others—and bringing them to their mouths with long forks. On one level, the mockery is straightforward: proponents of modernism, the spread implies, are enthusiastically devouring a distasteful lie. On another, however, this depiction of Stein's words as tangible, material objects accords with Stein's own observations about her work. In a 1946 interview, Stein

Indeed, few spreads of *The Cubies' ABC* lack valuable information that would help a novice draw basic distinctions between and develop some familiarity with various modernist figures. The volume covers a wide spread of ideas and figures central to modernism, including “B is for Beauty as Brancusi views it” (8), “I’s for the Cubies’ Immense Intuition” (22), “M’s for Matisse’s Mam’selle Marguerite” (30), “P’s for Picasso, Picabia, and Party” (36), “T’s for the Type of Tree Chabaud’s erected” (44), and “V is for Villon’s musicianly lady” (48). The illustrations very often contain unapologetically caricatured but still accurate representations of the paintings and sculptures in question: Constantin Brancusi’s “Muse” (1912; 9), Henri Matisse’s “The Blue Nude” (1907; 17) and “Marguerite with a Black Cat” (1910; 31), Francis Picabia’s “The Procession, Seville” (1912; 37), Pablo Picasso’s “Head of a Woman (Fernande)” (1909; 37), Auguste Chabaud’s “The Flock After the Rain” (44) and many others. Such repackaging of paintings into cartoonish drawings might well be viewed as a grave violation of artistic intention, the parodists’ transmutation of highest art into lowest kitsch. Though stripped of their aura, however, these representations of the paintings and sculpture do offer a new venue for the popular dissemination of modernist art. If such dissemination might be viewed with scorn by certain of the high modernists, who would reserve attention for their hermetic works for the worthy few, it might have surprising appeal to avant-gardists, who putatively strove to reach out and alter society. Indeed, these kitsch representations offer an apt example of the surprisingly small distance between avant-garde and kitsch that Matei Calinescu observes: “these two extremes are strongly attracted by one another, and what separates them is sometimes much less

striking than what unites them” (254). If on the one hand *The Cubies' ABC* softens the avant-garde's edge by hastening its incorporation into the culture industry, on the other it expands the reach of the avant-garde by increasing its potential to impact a wider public.



Though the Lyalls position themselves firmly outside modernism, in fact, they take subtle jabs at their own aesthetic conservatism. Their own potential backwardness becomes the focus of the Q spread:

Q's for the Queerness we Stand-patters feel

When Progressive young Cubies start Art reformation.

They're strong on Initiative, praise the Square Deal:

“Though the Cubic is best!” they aggressively squeal;

“Painting things as you see them is rank deformation!”

—Q’s for the Queerness we Stand-patters feel. (38)

The queerness this passage describes, of course, comes partly from the stand-patters’ sense that they may be dealing with crazy people, or at least with squealing children. The Lyalls, though, do not present the “Stand-patters” of the passage in unilaterally positive terms, either. To the Lyalls, there is nothing inherently admirable about the Cubies’ progressivism and initiative, but the stubbornness of the stand-patters also begins to seem dubious in the face of change. The queerness in the verse has as much to do with the conservatives’ sense that they are the ones who might be wrong, the ones being left behind, as it does with an actual discomfort with the Cubies’ claims to novelty.

Silliness drives *The Cubies’ ABC*, both the silliness the Lyalls perceive in nascent modernism and the silliness they themselves adopt as a parodic response to it. No reader would seek out the book expecting an earnest explanation of modern art or a complex reading of it. Yet *The Cubies’ ABC* expresses a reaction to modernism more ambivalent and thoughtful than straightforward scorn, and the complexity of this text points to a number of reasons that modernist scholarship might benefit from paying more attention to the ridicule of anti-modernists and not just the successes of modernists.

The Cubies’ ABC, though mediated and packaged for publication, does seem to reflect a genuinely widespread response to modernism that was shared by a wide swath of the public. This comic response may be several steps away from the appreciation and admiration that teachers of modernism hope to instill in their students. Even in the midst of the ridicule of *The Cubies’ ABC*, however, the Lyalls demonstrate hints of delight in

modernism, even if that delight takes finally takes shape as opposition. A better understanding of this counterintuitive delight might help scholars understand the response to modernism as complex and ambivalent, rather than straightforwardly scornful.

Viewing such ridicule as complex and ambivalent also suggests complications to critical narratives of the avant-garde and to the story of the emergence of modernism as a public phenomenon. Putting ridicule at the center of the story of public encounters with modernism offers an alternative to the “shock” model in which many modernists and anti-modernists saw disagreements over the new art as playful opportunities for aesthetic exploration, not as contentious battles for the soul of culture.

Revisiting the widespread laughter and ridicule that modernism initially elicited might also help us foster better readings of modernist works. Scholarly methods of close reading and historical contextualization help academics arrive at sophisticated understandings of the meanings of literature and art. Yet the depth of the knowledge scholars finally arrive at can make them forget what it is like to experience such art as truly novel. By filtering a scholarly perspective through the perspective of the ridiculers, scholarship might arrive at greater knowledge of the surface of a work as much as of its depth.

If for no other reason, though, the archive of anti-modernist ridicule of which *The Cubies' ABC* is a part deserves attention because anti-modernist ridicule contributed to the rise of modernism itself. Ridicule in newspapers and in novelty books like *The Cubies' ABC* became an ad-hoc publicity machine for modernism. Even as philistines

ridiculed modernism, they focused attention on it, affirmed its importance to culture, and even offered basic, clumsy frameworks for understanding it.

The newfound fame that accrued to Marcel Duchamp after the Armory Show, for example, can be attributed in large part to the ridicule directed at the artist, in particular at his *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (1912). The painting was a major focus of the playful ridicule that flourished in the press, inspiring light verse, caricatures, and even contests to identify the supposedly hidden titular figure in the midst of the cubist morass of the painting. The Lyalls' spread focused on Duchamp is but one example of the widespread circus of ridicule that surrounded it:

D is for Duchamp, the Deep-Dyed Deceiver,
 Who, drawing accordions, [*sic*] labels them stairs,
 With a lady that must have been done in a fever,—
 His model won't see her, we trust, it would grieve her!—
 (Should the stairway collapse, Cubie's good at repairs.)

—D is for Duchamp, the Deep-Dyed Deceiver. (12)

If the Lyalls' readers were familiar with any single modernist figure, that figure would likely be Duchamp. Milton W. Brown describes the popular fixation dedicated to *Nude Descending a Staircase* in particular:

There was usually such a crowd before the Duchamp *Nude Descending a Staircase*... that it was difficult to see. The buzz of excitement was exhilarating. Some tried to understand, others tried to explain, the great majority either laughed or were infuriated. It could be seen as a symbol for the ultimate in moral

degeneracy or as a mad and irresponsible joke. People generally do not like to become too involved with art, probably because they do not know how; it is much easier to cover one's insecurity with laughter. And there was a good deal of laughter, especially in the "Chamber of Horrors," as the Cubist room was called. Because of a certain incongruity in its title and the puzzle which it presented, the *Nude* became the focal point of the Exhibition. One could come and see the joke and forget to be troubled by revolutions. It was the butt of humorous jibes, the object of verse, a puzzle to be deciphered. The search for the nude was on, as if discovery would reveal some great secret. (136)

Brown hastily explains away public laughter at the painting: philistines would "come and see the joke and forget to be troubled by revolutions." Such pat dismissal of laughter ought to be resisted, as I have already suggested. It is impossible, of course, to fix with anything approaching certainty the intentions and feelings that motivated such laughter, which were surely as diverse as the crowds that came to experience it. Whatever the intentions of the crowd and the meaning of their laughter, however, its counterintuitive effect is clear. Largely because he was ridiculed by so many, Duchamp secured an international reputation as a premiere artist of modernism, and *Nude Descending a Staircase* was enshrined into the nascent canon of modern art.

The subsequent development of Duchamp's career points to a final reason that modernist scholars should care about anti-modernist ridicule. More than serving the instrumental purposes of securing his fame and publicizing his art, the ridicule directed at him during and after the Armory Show helped inspire the ridiculous tendencies that mark

the artworks that followed. The ridicule directed at *Nude Descending a Staircase* can be read as divorced from the painting itself, which despite its novelty may be no more abstract or potentially risible than contemporaneous paintings by other cubists, including Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Francis Picabia, and Georges Braque.²² By the end of the 1910s, however, Duchamp, once the focus of so much ridicule, had adopted self-conscious ridiculousness as a central element of his artistic practice. The everyday mundanity of early readymades such as *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and *Bottle Rack* (1914) gave way to the full-throated embrace of lowbrow silliness implicit in *Fountain* (1917). The painter who had pushed the edge of cubism with *Nude* would later paint a mustache on the *Mona Lisa* in *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919)—or, rather, on a cheap postcard reproduction of the famous painting. *L.H.O.O.Q.* makes a serious artistic statement. By defacing one of the most iconic paintings, Duchamp questions the high value culture assigns to it; by doing so on a postcard, he emphasizes the mechanically reproducible culture industry in which once-high art now finds itself; by giving the postcard an implicitly bawdy title, he complicates and queers commonplace notions of sexual desire. Before *L.H.O.O.Q.* can convey all this varied and sophisticated cultural critique, however, it must first strike its viewers as fundamentally ridiculous, as so much puerile naughtiness. Many of the works Duchamp produced in the remainder of the decade anticipate and preempt ridicule. By bringing risibility to the fore, however, these works do more than simply deflect the attacks of potential ridiculers. They occupy the low cultural place such ridiculers might imagine them to hold, but they do so in the service of high-art novelty. Even once regarded as high art, however, such works continue to occupy and foreground their

potential position in the putatively lower realm of culture: the high and the low, the sublime and the ridiculous, have never been quite so far apart after all.

The Seriousness of Ridiculous Aesthetics

Duchamp and his supporters proudly claimed the term ridiculous as a description of his work in the wake of *Fountain* (1917). The story of the art-gallery urinal offers a familiar but important example of ridiculous modernist aesthetics. To produce the work, Duchamp obtained a mass-produced urinal, turned it on its side, scrawled the name “R. Mutt” on it in sloppy paint, and submitted it to the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists. The group had claimed before that it would show all work submitted, but the urinal had gone too far, and Duchamp’s work was refused. *Fountain* was at once a serious art-stunt that questioned the underpinnings of the very idea of art and a willfully ridiculous potty joke in the most literal sense. Duchamp’s urinal became an occasion not just to ridicule the hypocrisy of the art establishment but also for discussion of the interplay of seriousness and ridiculousness in art. Louise Norton’s “Buddha of the Bathroom,” published shortly after Duchamp’s stunt, directly addresses the coexistence of the serious and the ridiculous in *Fountain*:

Then again, there are those who anxiously ask, “Is he serious or is he joking?”

Perhaps he is both! Is it not possible? In this connection, I think it would be well to remember that the sense of the ridiculous as well as “the sense of the tragic increases and declines with sensuousness.” (71)²³

In the final sentence of this passage, Norton argues that *Fountain* demolishes a clear boundary between the serious and the ridiculous just as Nietzsche collapses distinctions between good and evil. Norton treats Duchamp's simultaneous use of the serious and the ridiculous as a condition that has long been possible for, if not as often explored in, art. Norton's question about whether it is even possible for Duchamp to be simultaneously "serious" and "joking," of course, may not be an entirely rhetorical one. Once *Fountain* has been accepted into the serious canon of important art, how can it retain its ridiculousness?

The simultaneity of the serious and the ridiculous presents a paradox that looms over much twentieth-century art and literature—and also over the project of this dissertation. The primary sense of *ridiculous* in the OED, "Arousing or deserving mockery or derision; absurd; preposterous; risible," might well be glossed as "not to be taken seriously." As Jure Gantar points out, "The adjective 'ridiculous' is inevitably used as a pejorative: what is worthy of laughter is in principle unworthy and definitely undesirable. A reduction to laughter is in this view a reduction to nothing" (73). In common usage, it is nearly impossible to call something ridiculous without also ridiculing it, without implying that it lies outside the realm of things and ideas worth serious attention or respect. In many ways, then, seriousness and ridiculousness oppose each other diametrically.

Indeed, many prominent modernists devoted pages upon pages to railing against cultural ridiculousness as a threat to seriousness. In his 1913 essay "The Serious Artist," Ezra Pound gives seriousness in art a moral charge. Seriousness, truth, and beauty all go

together, and the artist who produces bad or untruthful art commits “an offence of the same nature as” that of a negligent physician. The negligent artist “is responsible for future oppressions and for future misconceptions” (162) that arise from his untruthful art. In the preface to his 1918 novel *Tarr*, Wyndham Lewis similarly decries the “*worship of the ridiculous*” [his emphasis] he sees at work in contemporary popular art: “The worship (or craze, we call it) of Charlie Chaplin is a mad substitution of a chaotic tickling for all the other more organically important ticklings of life” (11). The social prescription Lewis offers in his preface argues for seriousness not just in the content of art but also in a general attitude toward life: “We must stop grinning” (11).

Even Theodor Adorno, however, that most ardent defender of modernist difficulty and seriousness, recognized the importance of the ridiculous in worthwhile art. “The task of aesthetics,” he argues in his *Aesthetic Theory*, “is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended” (118). In part because they let the incomprehensible aspects of art remain incomprehensible, that they let enigma remain enigmatic, even ridiculing philistines can offer insights into art that those order-making critics who champion difficult art might miss:

The ridiculous in art, which philistines recognize better than do those who are naively at home in art, and the folly of a rationality made absolute indict one another reciprocally; ... Ridiculousness is the residue of the mimetic in art, the price of its self-enclosure. In his condemnation of this element, the philistine always has an ignominious measure of justification. (119)

The critic's enthusiasm and knowledge contribute to her understanding of an artwork. Her comfort with art, however, hampers her ability to view art more naively, to recover a memory of an initial encounter with an artwork. As the critic reduces the baffling complexity of high art to so much tidy order, she collapses those aspects of art that exceed straightforward order, representation, and intention. She naturalizes the artifice that makes art art. For Adorno, such ridiculousness proved a regrettable but necessary element of art. The insights of a ridiculer would always remain "ignominious," but the critic who perceives what is ridiculous (yet still admirable) about art will see the artwork more fully and understand how that art works in relation to culture at large, and not just in relation to the enclosed culture of art.

By adopting the ridiculous as an aesthetic strategy, modernists accepted risks associated with the term. So, too, must a critic who strives to find much to praise in an aesthetics of the ridiculous. The ridiculous might well distract from problems for real people in the real world, for example. If ridiculous art renders itself worthy of laughter, it also risks trivializing its own political allegiances and relinquishing its potential to represent serious problems. By adopting a strategy of ridiculousness, some avant-gardists and modernists might also be seen to hasten their incorporation into the culture industry by turning art into a laughable confection. For such writers as Pound and Lewis, an excessive cultural attention to the ridiculous dulled the potential of art to effect change in the real world. Once the public becomes accustomed to the ridiculous in art, they might assume all art is ridiculous.

For many artists, however, the ridiculous offered advantages that outweighed the risks. Modernists and avant-gardists shared a distaste for bourgeois common sense, and a political aesthetic expressed through the ridiculous could arguably take on larger swaths of injurious common sense than a politics expressed more seriously. The ridiculous also offered a different mode of aesthetics and politics. Many modernists encountered the contemporary world as ridiculous, and the ridiculous represented that world more effectively than could the serious. An art that presents itself as ridiculous also has the advantage of striking a note of clear departure from the past. Newness was often interpreted as ridiculous, but conversely, appearing ridiculous offered a clear path to the new. The ridiculous also presented artists with a different way to approach the public than seriousness did. Adopting the ridiculous as an aesthetic mode might elicit ridicule from the public, but it would also ensure notice and engage the public through laughter.

To critics, the ridiculous has always seemed a regrettable excess. The ridiculous tends to be subordinated to a higher seriousness, and those who call artworks ridiculous are scolded for doing so. Yet acknowledging ridiculousness as a conscious part of the aesthetics of modernists and avant-gardists offers a fuller understanding both of how those artworks were constructed and of how the public encountered them. The account of Hugo Ball's Dada sound poetry that follows demonstrates the consequences of critics' craving for seriousness at the expense of ridiculousness. Many learned accounts of Ball's poetry have come before, and they offer deep insight into Ball's theoretical project. They rarely, however, explain why Ball's poetry, despite its willful incomprehensibility, has had a lasting impact on poetry or why anyone enjoys it in the first place. Finding the

ridiculous at work in Ball's poetics and performance begins to offer clearer answers to those questions and offers a test case for the limitations of serious critical consideration.

Laughter and Nonsense at the Cabaret Voltaire

Hugo Ball's sound poems, something of a limit case for poetic language in which the balance of form and content has tipped almost entirely to the side of poetic artifice, offer a fertile example through which to explore the question of artists' complicity in audiences' laughter. In composing these poems, Ball had renounced the words provided by ordinary language, "the language that journalism has abused and corrupted" (*Flight* 71). "We must give up writing secondhand," he wrote: "that is, accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own use" (*Flight* 71). A poetry based on entirely invented words, of course, resembles nonsense, as the poem "Karawane" suggests:

jolifanto bambla o falli bambla

grossiga m'pfa habla horem

egiga goramen

higo bloiko russula huju

hollaka hollala

anlogo bung

blago bung blago bung

bosso fataka

ü üü ü

schampa wulla wussa olobo
 hej tatta gorem
 eschige zunbada
 wulubu ssubudu uluwu ssubudu
 –umf
 kusa gauma
 ba–umf²⁴

Such a poetry, which Ball also referred to as a "verse without words" (*Flight 70*), largely stymies critics' attempts to interpret it in a traditional meaning-making manner, but it has proved fertile ground for the theorization of language in poetry. By ostensibly doing away with the side of language that has to do with representational meaning, Ball's poetry paradoxically directs attention to the operations and material of language itself.

It may be no surprise, then, that critical accounts of Ball's poetry have focused on the possibilities of its language or on its ability to express a politics through linguistic experiment. As Dada gained new prominence in the 1970s, Rudolf Kuenzli argued that Ball's experimental language attempted to recapture a primal meaning in language. In the absence of symbolic representation, the sound poetry tried to recreate sounds from nature. For Kuenzli, Ball's "main strategy in this 'new' sign production is onomatopoeia..." (67). "Karawane," or as it was called in an earlier iteration, "Elefantenkarwane," becomes an attempt to represent in phonemes the sound of an elephant caravan. Later critics look outside the language of the poem for conceptual meaning and emphasize the stated political goals of the sound poetry. The language becomes first and foremost an

expression of political ideology—Ball rebukes the mad society that spawned World War I by usurping and replacing the normative language of journalism. Even as Raymond Williams notes that Ball's sound poetry has precedents in earlier attempts to emphasize the material of sound and rhythm and language, such as Victorian nonsense poetry, for example, he sees a difference in terms of politics. "What is different" in the sound poetry, he writes, "is the attempt to rationalize it for specific ideological purposes of which the most common... is the deliberate exclusion or devaluing of all or any referential meaning" (69).

In his recent essay on Ball, Steve McCaffery attempts to find a union of aesthetics and politics in the sound poems. Before he usefully describes the kinds of effects that Ball hoped his work would have on its readers and auditors, however, McCaffery attempts to dispel what he views as a series of errors in readings of the poems:

It is tempting to theorize the *Lautgedicht* as Ball's voluntary abnegation of meaning, a splendid and festive nihilism designed to discover a self outside the limitations of reason and semantics. Yet neither the logic of the phoneme (Ball's chosen unit of composition) nor the poet's own recorded reflections support such a judgment. Ball's sound poem is thoroughly grounded in historical sense and awareness; it is formulated as a response not to symbolism or to any other rival avant-garde (such as cubism or futurism), but to the contemporary state of discourse under early twentieth-century capitalism. (120)

This "forcefully political dimension to Ball's sound poem" (121) depends on the responses of an addressee. Ball invokes a "radical conative poetics grounded in irrational,

infantile, and primary forces" (124) which the poems arouse in the mind of a listener.

"When precise denotation is eliminated," McCaffery argues, "the connotational potential of the phoneme and phonemic string—as well as its susceptibility to stirring the irrational and mnemonic strata in the addressee—is maximized" (125).²⁵ Like other language that approaches nonsense, then, Ball's poetry suggests a range of indeterminate possibilities for meaning rather than denoting a specific meaning. McCaffery also usefully situates the sound poetry in the context of multilingualism at the Cabaret Voltaire. Unlike the Cabaret's "simultaneous poems," which overlaid various national languages atop each other in a performance emblematic of international clash and misunderstanding, Ball's poetry seeks to escape national language altogether: "If Tzara's simultaneous poetry dismembers national language, Ball's *Lautgedicht* effectively destroys it" (123).

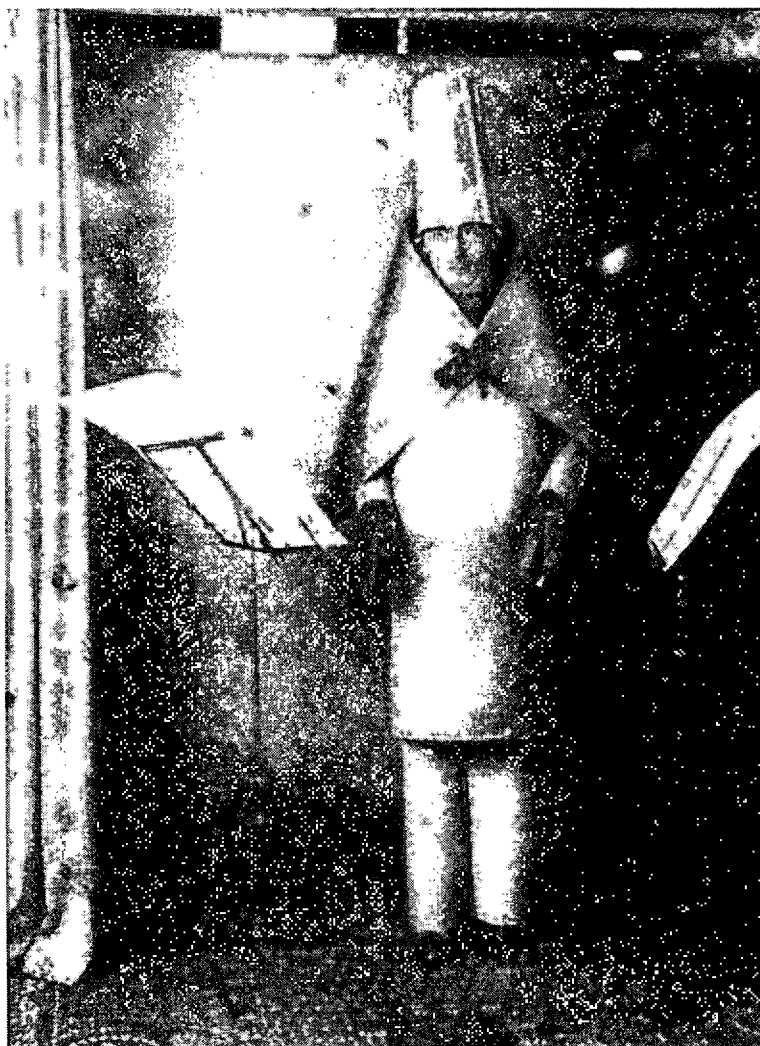
While each of these critical accounts offers insight into the poetry and its goals, they tend to repackage this expressly antirational poetry as the expression of tidy rationales. The sound poems overflow such rationales. Just as there is no such thing as pure nonsense, there is no such thing as pure sound, pure language, or pure rationale. What is auditory about these poems consistently spills over into the visual; what is politically rational about them consistently spills over into the irrational; what is serious about them consistently spills over into anti-seriousness. This capacity of the poetry to go beyond any simple explanation does not suggest some kind of fault in Ball's composition of them or deficiency in his art. Rather, the way the poems defy explanation is part of Ball's design.

Closer attention to the details of Ball's performance of these poems demonstrates that many of the aspects that McCaffery expels from the critical conversation about them—abnegation of meaning, splendid and festive nihilism, and a thorough response to prior avant-gardes, especially cubism and futurism—remain at play, even in the midst of Ball's serious aesthetic and political intentions.

When Ball introduced his poems in performance on June 23, 1916,²⁶ laughter, and not just poetry, filled the air of the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, and understandably so. At the performance in question, Ball mounted the stage in a shiny cardboard costume designed to evoke at once a cubist figure, a "magical bishop," and a giant bird. "I had made myself a special costume for it" (70), he wrote in his diary. "My legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which came up to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Over it I wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside. It was fastened at the neck in such a way that I could give the impression of winglike movement by raising and lowering my elbows. I also wore a high, blue-and-white-striped witch doctor's hat" (70). Because Ball "could not walk inside the cylinder," he was "carried onto the stage" (70). He "energetically" flapped his cardboard wings as he "slowly and solemnly" intoned several of the sound poems.

Some critics have assumed that audiences might view the performance just described as a shocking and threatening intrusion, as an object of derision to be scorned. After he describes the performance, for example, David Hopkins asks, "How would we have reacted?" and speculates that "The audience probably jeered" (31). Such speculation accords well with received narratives of avant-garde shock. The documentary record of

the event, however, reports affable laughter, not scornful jeers. The laughter at the Cabaret Voltaire that night was neither as unidirectional nor as mean-spirited as one might assume.



Hans Richter, who was present at the Cabaret Voltaire, describes the audience's reaction when Ball began reciting the poetry:

This was too much. Recovering from their initial bafflement at this totally new sound, the audience finally exploded. ...In the midst of the storm Ball stood his ground (in his cardboard costume, he could not move anyway) and faced the

laughing, applauding crowd of pretty girls and solemn bourgeois, like Savonarola, motionless, fanatical and unmoved. (42)

Richter first characterizes the laughter in negative terms as an explosion, a “storm.” The crowd soon mixes the laughter with positive response by “laughing, applauding,” a far cry from the scornful laughter of jeering. A few audience members react solemnly, but by and large, Richter describes a crowd that enjoyed Ball’s performance even if they did not understand it. Richter chooses Savonarola as the point of comparison, a figure associated not just with utter seriousness but with heroic sacrifice in the name of belief. The choice thereby depicts Ball’s performance as a ritual of self-humiliation. Noting Ball’s impending departure from Dada and his later embrace of Catholicism, some critics have taken the religious implications of the performance literally. To McCaffery, the performance suggests that Ball’s “poetic mission is atonement” and that the poetry is “an alliance of penitence and creativity” (127). Richter also implies irony in his comparison, though. Ball’s heroic and fanatical stoicism arise because he cannot move in the costume, not just because of his beliefs and convictions. Ball’s costume and performance do not merely replicate but parody the trappings of religion.

While Richter views Ball as “motionless, fanatical and unmoved,” Ball himself reports that the audience's reaction was on his mind throughout the performance. He even worried that he might succumb to the contagion of the audience's laughter in the midst of the performance: “Soon I realized that, if I wanted to remain serious (and I wanted to at all costs), my method of expression would not be equal to the pomp of my staging... I feared a disgrace and pulled myself together ...[I] tried not only to look serious but to

force myself to be serious" (70). On one hand, Ball's stated desire to remain serious at all costs seems to diminish the significance of laughter at this event. Nevertheless, Ball's intense effort "not only to look serious but to force myself to be serious," which he accomplished by chanting the poems methodically and internally figuring himself as a frightened child in church, suggests that he knew that looking serious would not be the expected outcome of this performance, let alone being serious. Though Ball suppresses his impulse toward laughter, he acknowledges it. The straight face in which he finally presented the poems becomes one more unlikely element in the preposterous visual tableau. He plays the performance straight not so much because he is hurt by the audience's laughter and stoically wishes to defend the integrity of his art but to become a straight man to the audience's laughing response to his costume and his nonsense language.

Laughter in general, of course, is notoriously difficult to understand, let alone interpret. It would be easy to write off the laughter of the crowd at the Cabaret Voltaire as unthinking derision or confused discomfort. Richter's account, however, complicates the picture, mixing delighted pleasure in with derision and scorn. A desire to undercut Ball's performance may have motivated some of the laughter, but it also may have arisen involuntarily and spontaneously. Recent theories of laughter, moreover, tend to attribute the causes of laughter to complex social interactions instead of assigning them to one single agent. Laughter arises not just because someone acts comically and causes the laughter of another person, or because someone chooses to laugh at someone and thereby render them comic. The intentions and perception of laughers and their objects fluctuate

constantly, as does the balance of discursive power that goes with laughter. Laughter can disempower the unwitting butt of a joke, but the butt's ability to cause laughter may also give her power over the laughers.²⁷

Definitively fixing the causes of laughter at Ball's performance would be impossible, but it is worth noting that classic theories of humor offer sound explanations for why the Cabaret Voltaire audience might find this performance funny. Theories of laughter divide into three camps: superiority theories, incongruity theories, and relief theories.

Superiority theories of laughter, which argue that the primary basis of laughter is in the laugher's expression of superiority over what she is laughing at, would say that in laughing, the audience asserts its superiority to Ball and his ridiculous performance by laughing. In light of superiority theory, the audience's laughter expresses a rejection of sound poetry, a rejection of Ball's performance, and a rejection of Ball himself.

Incongruity theories of laughter shift agency to the object of laughter by arguing that humor arises from unlikely juxtapositions of incongruous concepts and objects. The famous joke "Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side," for example, juxtaposes the addressee's expectation of a complexly comic answer with sheer tautological obviousness. Henri Bergson's theory of humor in *Laughter* (1900), part of which describes the comic as "something mechanical encrusted on the living," offers a prominent modern example of incongruity theory. Incongruity pervades Ball's performance: pseudo-organic claws break the sleek geometric lines of the costume; the futuristic metallic paint clashes with the costume's spiritualistic suggestions of a shaman,

witch doctor, or bishop; the uselessly flapping wings and Ball's inability to move of his own accord in the costume render static any suggestion of futurist kinesis; and out of a mouth from which the audience expects to hear communication comes only the incomprehensible sounds of nonsense.

Relief theories of humor, which approach laughter as a pressure valve for suppressed ideas and tensions, might also explain the audience's laughter. Freud's *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) offers the exemplary modern instance of relief theory. Relief theory can explain the audience's laughter from two distinct angles. The audience might laugh to escape its own confusion and discomfort, its inability to comprehend what Ball means by his performance. The historical circumstances of Dada, embedded as it was in Europe during World War I, also offer ample opportunity for relief as an explanation. In such a light, the audience, Dada in general, and Ball himself participate in a shared laughter, both relief from and rebuke to the capitalist system that spawned the horrific calamity of the war.

Each of these theories helps explain the audience's laughter, but they also implicate Ball in its production. If they laugh because of incongruity, it is Ball who has joined each of these incongruous elements together into a single preposterous performance. If audience members laugh because they seek relief from discomfort and confusion, Ball has taken great pains to ensure that the audience is confused. If they laugh to seek relief from the war, it is Ball who creates the occasion for them to do so.

By treating Ball as a stoic hero facing a ridiculing audience, moreover, most accounts have failed to acknowledge the ridicule implicit in Ball's performance itself.

Characteristic of Dada, the performance mocks bourgeois expectations for art. Some in the audience no doubt felt attacked by the unconventionality of the performance and attacked Ball in response. By mimicking the patterns of language but refusing its capacity for communication, Ball also breaches the social understanding of communication, so audience members might well have felt that Ball was teasing them. Given the linguistic diversity of the Cabaret, some might have initially perceived the sound poems as an unrecognizable foreign language, and once they discovered their error felt that Ball was playing them for fools.

Beyond his mockery of the immediate audience, Ball also mocks avant-garde movements that came before even as he honors them. McCaffery warns against the temptation to see the sound poems "as a response... to symbolism or to any other rival avant-garde (such as cubism or futurism)," but he ignores the visual allusions to cubism and futurism in Ball's costume. Ball, in fact, explicitly refers to the costume as cubist: "For a moment it seemed as if there were a pale, bewildered face in my cubist mask" (71). Like a cubist figure, the costume abstracts Ball's body into geometric shapes. His legs and head become cylinders, his torso an obelisk, his arms triangles. The sleek metallic sheen of the costume makes Ball appear a sort of automaton and points to a futurist approach to machines and technology. Ball does not only reference these prior avant-gardes, of course, but also visually mocks them. The regular lines of the cubist geometry of the costume end in the ineffectual, organic-looking bird claws that cover Ball's hands. Ball's static positioning on stage and uselessly flapping wings reverse the kinesis of Marinetti's futurist manifesto, which praises the "oscillating flight of airplanes,

whose propellor flaps at the wind like a flag and seems to applaud like a delirious crowd” (52). The costume finally resembles not a sleek futurist airplane but a twitching lump of painted paper, a flightless mechanical bird.

The influences behind Ball’s radical avant-garde costume, in fact, might come from the lowbrow mockery of philistines as much as from actual cubist and futurist art. Early satirists of modernism regularly marched out exaggerated cubist figures in parodic illustrations and on stage. The Cubies of *The Cubies' ABC* are but one example of a larger trend in satiric illustration in which cartoonish cubist figures’ geometric bodies become objects of laughter. Ball’s costume follows an earlier tradition of impractical geometric costumes used to mock cubism, as well. In a 1911 music-hall parody of modern art in Paris, for example, M. Armand Berthez wore a cubist clown costume: “His costume consisted of a conventional man’s suit that had been painted with overlapping polygons, with cubes attached at the shoulders and the trouser cuffs” (Weiss 3). Even amateurs produced similar mock-cubist costumes. A *Chicago Tribune* article that appeared weeks after the opening of the Armory Show in New York reports on a “Freak Party” with “Cube Gowns”: “Most guests went in costumes reflecting the new ‘block’ system of art interpretation—‘cubists’ they call themselves—a costume which requires the artistic services of a carpenter rather than a gown builder” (3). Like Ball after them, the attendees of this party at once paid homage to and ridiculed cubism, delighting in the impractical encumbrances presented by their unwieldy three-dimensional costumes.

Ball may not have been directly influenced by modernism-mocking illustrations and costumes, but he acknowledges with the philistines that modernism can be a comic

experience to be met with exaggerated comic imitation. The satirists, in general, perceived a ridiculousness in the radical novelty of modernist avant-gardes and responded by echoing and exaggerating that ridiculousness in their own responses. In the costume, Ball also seems to embrace the ridiculous as a response to prior avant-gardes and, perhaps, to the mockery those prior avant-gardes faced. Timothy O. Benson has observed that Dada represents at once a response to other versions of modernism and an "amalgam of modernisms" (91). In addition to the other modernisms he references, Ball's performance mixes the seemingly base laughter of the ridiculous into that amalgam. The modernism of Dada, Ball's performance emphatically announces, will not just be radical and novel but also willfully ridiculous.

Whether or not he hoped the audience would laugh at his baffling performance, Ball must have expected it to. Allen Roy has complained that many academics treat the "Dadas as a troupe of zany jack-puddings engaged in vaudevillian hokum and mischievous gags" (59). In doing so, Roy argues, these academics downplay the importance of Dada's genuine contributions to the history of art and literature. Ball's performance shows that it is possible to go too far in the other direction, though. The strategies of "vaudevillian hokum" that these "zany jack-puddings" deployed were not just so many spoonfuls of sugar to make the serious artistic medicine go down. The laughter Dada courted and earned from audiences was not peripheral but central to its project.

Ball's contributions to the audience's laughter complicate accounts of the performance that treat it as an aesthetic and personal breaking point for Ball. In what

Stephen Scobie calls a “rather hysterical interpretation,” Gerhardt Steinke asserts that the performance directly resulted in a nervous breakdown and Ball’s departure from Zurich—and from Dada. Greil Marcus seizes on the same idea in his interpretation of Ball’s response to the event:

It was a moment of panic: Ball suddenly realized he didn't understand what the costume was demanding of him, didn't recognize the audience, didn't know what his empty words ("blago bung / blago bung / bosso fataka") didn't mean. In his terror, he felt himself drawn back to the cadences of a priest celebrating the mass as he, little Hugo, knelt with his mother and father two decades before; the years rose up, then died. It was a moment of hubris and fear that took Ball straight out of dada [and] opened the road back to the [Catholic] church. (226)

Marcus’s retelling amplifies the drama of the moment beyond what is recorded in Ball’s diary. Ball does indeed “recognize the audience”: “I saw Brupbacher, Jelmoli, Laban, Mrs. Wigman in the audience” (70). He imagines himself in mass, as Marcus mentions, but not quite so tragically as Marcus asserts:

But how was I to get to the end? Then I noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic churches of East and West.

I do not know what gave me the idea of this music, but I began to chant my vowel sequences in a church style like a recitative, and tried not only to look serious but to force myself to be serious. For a moment it seemed as if there were a pale, bewildered face in my cubist mask, that half-frightened, half-curious face of a ten-

year-old boy, trembling and hanging avidly on the priest's words in the requiems and high masses in his home parish. Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried down off the stage like a magical bishop. (71)

Though he "feared a disgrace" (70), Ball maintained control of the performance throughout—he did not lose all control because he "didn't know what his empty words ...didn't mean."

So radical was Ball's formal experiment, Marcus seems to believe, that Ball himself fell victim to the shock he intended for his audience. The reversion to the cadences of a Catholic mass, however, accords not just with Ball's later embrace of Catholicism but with his prior conception of the Cabaret Voltaire: "What we are celebrating is both buffoonery and a requiem mass" (*Flight* 56). Raymond Williams, in fact, observes that "The relapse to the rhythms of the mass in the middle of an outraging Dadaist spectacle is ...funny" (68-9). For the most part, though, understanding the buffoonery in the requiem mass has proven a harder task for scholars than it was for the Dadaists.

Much of the laughter of the Cabaret Voltaire can be attributed to the performance as a whole rather than to the sound poetry considered in isolation. Nevertheless, nonsense language, when recognized as nonsense by a listener or reader, does have a special capacity to elicit laughter, and not just puzzlement or shock. Laughter, in fact, plays a prominent role in Russian-futurist *Zaum* poetry (a name sometimes translated as "beyonsense"), an important precedent for sound poetry. Velimer Khlebnikov's "Incantation by Laughter" (1909) produces a form of nonsense not by inventing entirely new words but by focusing on a single word. As Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh explain in

“The Word as Such” (1913), “a work of art could consist of a *single word*, and simply by a skillful alteration of that word the fullness and expressivity of artistic form might be attained” (237). It is not incidental that the single word Khlebnikov chooses to elucidate in one of his poems is “laugh”:

O laugh it out, you laughsters!

O laugh it up, you laughsters!

So they laugh with laughters, so they laughelize delaughly.

O laugh it up belaughably!

O the laughingstock of the laughed-upon — the laugh of belaughed laughsters!

O laugh it out roundlaughingly, the laugh of laughed-at laughians!

Laugherino, laugherino,

Laughify, laughicate, laugholets, laugholets,

Laughinkins, laughinkins,

O laugh it out, you laughsters!

O laugh it up, you laughsters!²⁸

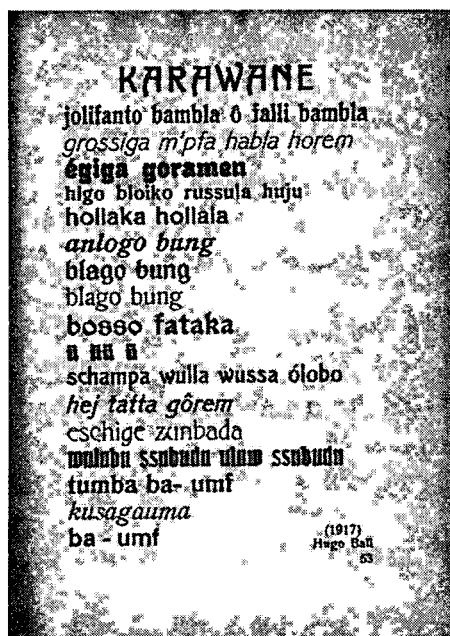
Again, it proves difficult to detect the tone or intentions of laughter in this poem. The poem itself does not laugh but instead addresses an unspecified group of laughers, perhaps even those who might laugh at the avant-garde. Whether this poem intends to curse laughter or to celebrate it, at the very least it acknowledges the probability that an addressee will laugh during an encounter with nonsense-like language. Mainstream instances of nonsense-like language in modernism also tend to elicit laughter from

audiences, as the titters that so often follow quotations by Stein, Joyce, or Sitwell at even the most serious of academic conferences confirm.

Like the sounds from which Ball constructs his poems, laughter is a non-verbal signifier similar to nonsense language in its indeterminacy and context-dependence. Sound poetry, like other language that approaches nonsense, focuses attention on language itself. When poets reduce the amount of signified meaning that inheres in their language, however, readers and listeners invariably grasp at the context around that language for clues to meaning. Nonsense, then, both directs interpretive attention inward to the form of language and outward to what is around language. The audience at the Cabaret Voltaire experienced the sound poems as one piece of a visually stimulating performance. Their interpretations of the meaning of the language was inseparable from their experience of Ball's costume and movements.

Assigning so much import to this initial performance of the poem, of course, breaks with a critical tradition that says any given performance of a poem is subordinate to the poem itself, some idealized version that exists outside any textual or oral performance.²⁹ Scholars have tended to subordinate auditory performance to the visual page, but Ball challenges this preference by emphasizing sound in the name of the sound poems. No recording of Ball reciting the poems exists, so the sound poems are subject to the same visual mediation that Johanna Drucker sees as the condition of all poetry: "The origins of poetry may well reside in sound and song. But the transmission history of poetry depends on visual forms" ("Not Sound" 237).

“Karawane” comes to the modern reader not as a sound recording of Ball’s voice, but either as the recorded voice of a surrogate or as a reconstruction through visual forms. As “Karawane” has been transmitted across time, however, it is worth observing briefly that its remediations have sought to retain some element of the ridiculousness that characterized the original performance. The typographically irregular printing of “Karawane” that appeared in Richard Huelsenbeck’s 1920 *Dada Almanach*, for example, has been reprinted so many times that it is almost synonymous with the poem itself.³⁰ The style of this printing likely reflects Huelsenbeck’s intentions, not Ball’s, but Huelsenbeck uses the typographic variation to mark the language as strange much as Ball had used his performance to do the same. The poem also retains a degree of ridiculousness in contemporary sound recordings, which vary considerably in their style. Jerome Rothenberg, for example, voices the poem as a slow chant with musical accompaniment, and Christian Bök recites it as a fast-paced song that becomes its own form of music.³¹



To contemporary audiences, however, the most seemingly ridiculous version of the poem appeared on an April 17, 1986 television episode of *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*³² Former teen star and country music performer Marie Osmond, adorned in the signature big hair and heavy makeup of the mid-1980s, hosts the segment. It begins with a shot of Osmond applying makeup before a mirror, as she contextualizes Ball:

When you know you're going to be on stage, you want to make sure that you look your best, and that you're properly dressed for the part. Appearance was especially important to a gentleman named Hugo Ball. He was a poet and the leader of an artistic movement called Dada.

Osmond proceeds to showcase another of Ball's Cabaret Voltaire costumes, in which a cardboard tube with the number 13, which "had nothing—or everything—to do with his performance," covered his face. Osmond notes that "Dada artists didn't claim to make sense, but they did want to make unconventional artistic statements, most in the form of social protest." As she holds up a large enlargement of the Huelsenbeck typography for "Karawane," Osmond prefaces her performance of the poem: "Here's what it sounds like: a totally imaginary language invented by Mr. Ball." Osmond holds the Huelsenbeck image before her eyes as if to absorb the text contained therein, and the camera angle briefly moves behind her head to showcase the visual text of the poem. When she recites "Karawane," however, Osmond sets the sheet down, stares directly into the camera lens, and energetically performs the poem from memory. The gaze she holds throughout the reading is intense, as is her speaking voice, which ramps up the intensity of the poem with arbitrary intonational expressivity. The jokiness of Osmond's introduction gives

way to the seriousness of the performance itself, to the extent that Osmond must exhale a prolonged breath as she dramatically closes her eyes and lowers them from the camera. Osmond's grin is restored, however, as she finishes the segment: "It didn't make any sense, but it wasn't supposed to make any sense. But nevertheless Mr. Ball's performance got a rousing ovation and turned out not to be a passing fancy, but a new art form: sound poetry."

This surprising reemergence of Hugo Ball's poetry on a network television program in the 1980s could be read as a belated victory for Dada, or, alternatively, as its ultimate failure, its crass repackaging as an entertainment product without aesthetic or political potential. Viewed in this light, Osmond does not frame the rationales for sound poetry in an especially sophisticated manner, and any shock that Ball's performance might have inspired gives way to the soothing explanation of an oddity of the past. The sound poems and the utter incongruity of Ball's performances take their proper, amusing place in the cultural curiosity cabinet of *Ripley's*. The avant-garde has been commodified for the culture industry it sought to negate. In other ways, however, one might view the segment as a surprisingly respectful presentation of "Karawane." Osmond anglicizes the pronunciation of the poems, but it is not clear that Hugo Ball would object to such a change—after all, he wrote the poems as a kind of escape from the nationalistic impulses of language. It is clear, moreover, that Osmond takes the performance seriously, even if she frames it with a knowing grin. As I have argued, Ball, too, seems to frame his sound poems with a knowing grin: he at once takes the aesthetic and political rationales of his sound poems seriously and, through his performances, showcases them as odd, baffling,

even ridiculous. Ezra Pound famously wrote that “Literature is news that STAYS news,” (*ABC* 29). By this measure, the continual recirculation of Ball’s sound poetry in culture has ensured that they are a phenomenal success. In part because of the traces of Ball’s performance that live on in remediations of the sound poems, they stay not just new but also enduringly ridiculous.

CHAPTER 2

Gertrude Stein and the Modernism of Nonsense

“Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”: Stein’s Nonsense Motto

When they encounter the work of Gertrude Stein, many readers share an overwhelming impression that her work is nonsensical. Where could meaning possibly lie in sentences as apparently obscure as those in the first section of Stein’s famous 1914 work *Tender Buttons*?

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (9)

From the start, people reacted to this strange language as if it were nonsense. A 1914 piece in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* called it “a mad jumble of words” (“Public Gets” 15), and the *New York Evening Sun* called it a “farrago of nonsense” (as qtd. in Leick 44). The literary celebrity that would eventually come to define Stein’s public persona³³ would forever be paired with a suspicion that her writing utterly lacked meaning, value, and seriousness. In fact, her fame may have had as much to do with Stein’s perceived penchant for the nonsensical as it did with public admiration for her literary skill.

One might think the critical discourse would be well past suspicion that Stein was a writer of nonsense. The same impulses that once led Michael Gold to characterize Stein’s work as “literary idiocy,” “monotonous gibberings” of “deliberate irrationality,

deliberate infantilism” (23), however, arise again and again. Brett Bourbon, for example, begins a 2006 essay on Stein with a careful typology of nonsense categories at play in her work, including “syntactical nonsense,” “inferential nonsense,” “concatenation of phrases,” and “the appearance of randomness” (69-71). What appears to be a careful taxonomy, however, soon gives way to an attack:

The repetitions and funny grammar are just tricks to give the appearance of depth, and are easily translated away. ...Stein’s semantic and quasi-syntactical distortions force us to question if these statements can count as thoughts. ...Her sentences do not mean or they mean one unique thing. I often have the impression that she means something, but she is not sure what. (Some people might think this describes the ineffable, but I think it rather describes the empty.) ...The Stein oracle ...is factitious. A failed oracle is a pied piper. If we squint we can hear the music. (74-76)

Bourbon, who elsewhere finds much to praise in the nonsense of *Finnegans Wake*, thinks Stein’s nonsense goes too far, and he can find nothing of value in it.

For many in the public, Stein’s famous epigram “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” a particular focus of many press accounts, became an emblem of all that was ridiculous and nonsensical about the strange author. A review of *Lectures in America* from 1934, for example, rejected Stein’s explanations of the line: “And so ‘a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose’ is poetry. ‘So I say poetry is essentially the discovery, the love, the passion for the name of anything.’ This is one of those statements that look probable, but of course are sheer nonsense” (Strauss BR12). A Washington Post review of *The Autobiography of*

Alice B. Toklas from 1933 notes offhandedly that “to most people that sounds very queer” (Hall SM10). In 1934, June Provines declared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that “What she really meant, perhaps, was ‘a pose is a pose is a pose’” (17).³⁴

Stein took unabashed delight in this sentence that was so often invoked to abuse her in the press. While she would warn against putting “too much emphasis on that line, because it’s just one line in a longer poem” (Wilder vi), she also went to great lengths to attach the rose sentence to her public persona. She first used the line in “Sacred Emily,” a poem she wrote in 1913 and published in *Geography and Plays* (1922), and then she used it, and variations of it, over and over again. The sentence was printed not only in the pages of Stein’s work but also on the dinner plates and table linen in the Paris apartment she shared with Alice B. Toklas,³⁵ household goods she references in “A French Rooster” (1930): “Indeed a rose is a rose makes a pretty plate...” (213). The phrase adorns the covers of both *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Stein’s best-selling memoir, and *The World is Round* (1939), a children’s book also destined for commercial success, a rare occurrence in Stein’s career. In that book, “Rose is a rose...” takes additional significance as the book’s protagonist, named after Stein’s real-life Belignin neighbor Rose d’Aiguy, carves the sentence around a tree as a proper name in a climactic affirmation of her identity. This story resides in a book with brightly printed rose-colored pages. Stein chose an artist named Sir Francis Rose to illustrate the book’s British edition. As she repeated the word *rose* and the infinite circle she had built from it, Stein piled more and more meanings onto it. By the time she died, the overdetermined phrase had become inseparable from her public identity. The phrase appeared in the headlines of

her obituaries in both the *New York Times*—"Gertrude Stein Dies in France, 72: American Author Was Known for Her 'A Rose is a Rose is a Rose' Literary Style" (40)—and the *Chicago Daily Tribune*: "Gertrude Stein, Famed Author, Dies in France: Known for Her 'Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose'" (26).

That Stein embraced so wholeheartedly a line that was so often used to associate her with nonsense seems to undermine one of the main projects of Stein criticism of the last thirty years, in which she has assumed a heralded place in the modernist canon. Since the 1970s, critics have successfully rescued Stein from a critical neglect that followed directly from the early press attacks that portrayed her work as nonsense.³⁶ Marianne DeKoven summarizes a pattern of gendered dismissal of Stein that continued from her earliest experiments until the waning of the New Criticism in the 1970s: "Stein's work is materially different from that of the great, canonical, white male high modernists, and therefore not recognizable as great to the New Critical acolytes and exegetes of the high modernist religion" ("Transformations" 470). One of the main goals of the critical reclamation of Stein has been to take seriously works that were once dismissed as nonsense. When contemporary critics broach the topic of Stein and nonsense, they are usually reacting to the dismissals of old and carefully distinguishing Stein from mere nonsense. Michael Edward Kaufmann, for example, argues that Stein "wants not to create nonsense, but to subvert the non-sense that language—after its centuries of encasement in print—has become" (448).

Stein is not nonsensical, critics argue, but difficult, like so many other modernists. Those who view Stein's works as nonsense are simply not being patient or diligent

enough to understand them. *Difficulty* has become an oft-repeated term in criticism of Stein. Christopher Knight, for example, argues that in *Tender Buttons* “the difficulty follows not from a deficiency of exactitude but from an overabundance of the same” (41). Marguerite S. Murphy begins her investigation of the work with the hope that her essay might “help lead us... to some of the ‘sense’ behind these difficult compositions” (383). Steven Monte notes that “Stein’s notorious difficulty” (161) leads to many shortcomings in the critical literature. Even the few critics who discuss Stein in terms of nonsense attempt to reveal some stable rational sense underlying what they see as a textual obscuring of meaning. For Ellen Berry, for example, Stein traffics in nonsense that performs a rational subversion of hieratic 19th-century realist practice. The title of Alison Rieke’s 1992 book *The Senses of Nonsense* offers another concise illustration. Rieke groups Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation* and *Tender Buttons* with other difficult modernist texts suggestive of nonsense, such as James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. - -

Stein would bristle at the suggestion of affinity between her own and other modernist texts associated with difficulty, such as T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*. In 1946, Stein grouped famously difficult Joyce with a set of authors “who generally smell of the museums,” who “have one hand in the past” (“Transatlantic Interview” 29). Works like those of Joyce, Pound, and Eliot are built from complex webs of allusion. They at least offer a way in, a method by which readers can begin to progress toward deeper understanding. Eliot provides footnotes for *The Waste Land*, and books have been published with extensive notes on *Finnegans Wake* and *The Cantos*.³⁷ Like Stein’s works, those of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound often seem impossible to

synthesize into meaning. At the same time, though, it would be impossible to build a truly useful set of notes for Stein's most enigmatic works. For all the difficulty of Stein's works, they also feature a remarkable simplicity. "Rose is a rose..." after all, is a ten-word sentence constructed of only three separate words, all of them ordinary and short.³⁸

When critics emphasize Stein's difficulty, they disregard Stein's own reactions against suggestions that her work was difficult. In "Composition as Explanation" (1926), Stein insisted not that avant-garde works of literature like her own were "difficult," but rather that they were "irritating annoying stimulating" to minds attuned to current expectations for art. Faced with the skepticism of the radio interviewer William Lundell in 1934, Stein again rejected the notion that her work was difficult to understand:

Lundell: You come to the United States to lecture, Ms. Stein, and imply that there are many people who will be able to comprehend your ideas. - -

Stein: Look here. Being intelligible is not what it seems. You mean by understanding that you can talk about it in the way that you have a habit of talking, putting of it in other words, but I mean by understanding enjoyment. If you enjoy it, you understand it, and lots of people have enjoyed it, so lots of people have understood it. (Pennsound)

Stein consistently rejected the idea that "putting of it in other words" would provide greater insight into her work.³⁹ Rather than continuing to attempt to put her works in other words, we should attempt to understand Stein through the very terms by which she was so long dismissed, the varied terms of nonsense. Reading Stein's work through the characteristic lenses of nonsense might help us come closer to reading Stein in the

unconventional ways she imagined her work might be read, turning our attention to the “enjoyment” her texts offer rather than to our impulses to commit the error of “putting of it in other words.”

The explanations that Stein offered for “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” the sentence that proved such a point of bafflement for the public, demonstrate the value of thinking about the role of nonsense in her work. The first such explanation came not from Stein herself but from Alice B. Toklas, in a letter from 1933 that was deemed newsworthy by *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York Times*. Or rather, the letter purports to be from Alice B. Toklas—after all, 1933 was the year of the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and it seems reasonable to think the letter might well have come from Stein herself. A Cleveland bookseller wrote Stein to ask about “rose is a rose...,” and Toklas (or perhaps Stein masquerading as Toklas) responded: “Miss Stein is unfortunately too busy herself to be able to tell you herself, but she trusts that you will eventually come to understand that each and every word that she writes means exactly what she says, for she says very exactly what she means, and really nothing more, but of course nothing less” (“Book Notes” 17). Some were reassured by such explanations, with the idea that “rose is a rose is rose is a rose” means something similar to Shakespeare’s famous line, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Theodore Hall, for example, wrote in *The Washington Post* that “all she means, in spite of the redundancy, is that a rose is a rose, to be understood as a rose and not as anything else, to be seen purely and simply and with utmost fidelity as a rose” (Hall SM10). The multiple contexts in which Stein deployed her famous sentence, though, and the many

different denotations that the term *rose* adopted in those different contexts, should make it clear that Hall's explanation does not fully hold up. Stein's efforts tended toward making *rose* indicate more things—flowers, multiple characters, illustrators, colors—rather than fewer. Considering that the sentence's initial appearance is in a poem whose title contains the word "Lifting," *rose* (as the past tense of *rise*) or *arose* also seem suggested as possible meanings. Moreover, the circular "rose" sentence activates an obvious pun on *eros*.⁴⁰ There is much more to the sentence than a straightforward assertion of the rosiness of roses.

An antecedent to the Toklas letter in the Humpty Dumpty scene from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* suggests a thoroughgoing playfulness to the sentence and a tongue-in-cheek posture to Stein's explanation. After Alice objects to Humpty's use of the word "glory," he explains the rather different meaning he intended: "a nice knock-down argument." When Alice objects, "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Humpty explains his meaning in a way that Toklas seems to be citing in her letter: "When *I* use a word, ...it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less" (213). Toklas's letter does not mean that "a rose is a rose..." should be simplified to a self-reflexive equation, but rather that Stein means exactly what she means as she is saying what she means. That is, Stein may not be arguing for an utter transparency to her language but instead suggesting that whatever significance the rose sentence has for her may ultimately be unrecoverable by the reader. Toklas's assertion that Stein means "really nothing more, but of course nothing less" than what she says

seems to point toward an utter simplicity in Stein's sentence, but the playful reference to Humpty Dumpty actually implies a far more involved game of meaning.

Stein's further explanations of the rose sentence only complicate its meaning. During the lecture tour Stein offered two separate explanations of the rose sentence, both of which suggest an emphasis on the word *rose* rather than on the image or flower implied by that term. The first appears in one of Stein's lectures, "Poetry and Grammar" (1934):

When I said.

A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

And then later made that into a ring I made poetry and what did I do I caressed completely caressed and addressed a noun. (327)

Rachel Blau Duplessis argues of this explanation that "The rhyme of 'caressed' and 'addressed' in the enunciation clarifies the link between the romance plot and poetic vocation, but the object of attention is a grammatical unit" (37). Even as it plays on the physical sensations of *eros* and the literary tradition of lyric poetry, the sentence treats a piece of language, the noun *rose*, as a tangible entity that can be both "caressed" and "addressed."

In another explanation cited by Thornton Wilder in his introduction to *Four in America*, Stein argues that the sentence brings meaning closer to the surface of language and emphasizes real qualities of roses:

Now listen! Can't you see that when the language was new—as it was with

Chaucer or Homer—the poet could use the name of a thing and the thing was

really there? He could say ‘O moon,’ ‘O sea,’ ‘O love’ and the moon and the sea and the love were really there. And can’t you see that after hundreds of years had gone by... he could call on those words and find that they were just worn out literary words? ...Now listen! I’m no fool. I know that in daily life we don’t go around saying, “is a... is a... is a....” Yes, I’m no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years. (v-vi)

Here, Stein seems to argue that her sentence brings language closer to true mimesis. In contrast to centuries’ worth of clichéd invocations of rose imagery, she argues, her repetitive citation of the term somehow brings its meaning closer to the red actuality of roses. Again, however, there may be more to this explanation: the ostensible redness of roses does not tell the full story of what she means by meaning exactly what she says. The explanation comes from a public appearance by Stein, and she is speaking rather than writing. Stein may well not just mean that “the rose is red” in the sense that the flowers have a characteristic color, but also that the term *rose* is *read* for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years, that is, that the reader becomes aware of the term’s very word-ness in the process of reading it again and again. As William Carlos Williams argued of Stein, “The feeling is of words themselves, a curious immediate quality quite apart from their meaning, much as in music different notes are dropped, so to speak, into a repeated chord one at a time, one after another—for itself alone” (345). In “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” Stein is not suggesting some utmost linguistic transparency but a process of repetition and re-signification that reveals the material presence of language.

After all, saying the word “rose” again and again does not necessarily bring it closer to a signified red rose. Stein begins her first use of the phrase not with “a rose,” but with “rose”: “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.” The absence of an indefinite article at the sentence’s beginning removes *rose* from the referential realm of floral reality and emphasizes its manifest presence in language: Stein is dealing with the word, not just with the flower. Stein’s explanation about the redness of her roses recalls, in fact, another literary instance of an attempt to turn roses red. As Alice enters the Red Queen’s garden in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, she encounters three anthropomorphized playing cards performing this very transformation:

“Would you tell me, please,” said Alice, a little timidly, “Why you are painting these roses?”

Five and Seven said nothing, but looked at Two. Two began, in a low voice,

“Why, the fact is, you see, Miss, this here ought to have been a *red* rose tree, and we put a white one in by mistake; and, if the Queen was to find it out, we should all have our heads cut off, you know....” (106)

The term *rose* is capacious enough to represent not just red but also white roses, and also, as Stein shows with *The World is Round*, the names of a little girl, a color, and an artist. Carroll’s playing cards, those otherwise arbitrary numerical symbols given material bodies, aim to restore an artificial order of redness to the Queen’s design, to render red roses that would otherwise be white. Likewise, Stein’s ringed *rose* sentence seems straightforward and obvious, seems to assert a clear order to the relationship between language and reality: a rose is a rose, and that is that. In actuality, however, the repetition

of the phrase *ad infinitum* forces readers to confront each instance of *rose* on newly defamiliarized terms.⁴¹ Stein, “no fool,” knows that the unfolding of meaning in her *rose* sentence is far more complicated than she implies.

Stein probably meant no allusion to Carroll’s playing cards with her explanation of the *rose* sentence, but in another similar instance she seems to invoke a more explicit allusion to Carroll’s nonsense worlds. In “Poetry and Grammar,” Stein explains her repetition in these terms: “After all the natural way to count is not that one and one make two but to go by one and one as chinamen do as anybody does as Spaniards⁴² do as my little aunts did. One and one and one and one and one. That is the natural way to go on counting” (324-325). “One and one and one” here offers an apt explanation for Stein’s famously unrelenting repetition. Rather than summarizing a series of similar conversations between Jeff Campbell and Melanctha Herbert in *Melanctha* (1909), for example, Stein recounts every last detail again and again. In this text whose signature stylistic feature is repetition, it is as if the narrator has no access to the abstract idea of repetition that would allow her to say, “And then they had several similar conversations, with these slight differences.” Stein’s “one and one and one,” her emphasis on a separate accounting of the particular detail and her refusal to acknowledge abstract wholes, is a trend that extends across her entire body of literary production—while *Tender Buttons* does not feature the same kind of repetition, it seems to ask readers to account for each phrase, each word, even each phoneme, on its own terms as the text refuses to consolidate meaning into wholes.

“One and one and one” descends directly from Carroll’s Looking-Glass world. The Red Queen and the White Queen begin inviting themselves to a party that Alice has not yet said she will be hosting, and the Red Queen soon begins chastising Alice for her rudeness:

‘...I daresay you’ve not had many lessons in manners yet?’

‘Manners are not taught in lessons,’ said Alice. ‘Lessons teach you to do sums, and things of that sort.’

‘And you do Addition?’ the White Queen asked. ‘What’s one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Alice. ‘I lost count.’ (252-3)

There are ten “one”s in the White Queen’s question, but no reader would know that until she went back and counted. Like Stein’s infinite rose sentence, the Queen’s question presents a simple problem that Alice cannot comprehend because it asks her to hold so many separate “ones” in her head simultaneously. This “one and one and one...” incident has been an important example for scholars of nonsense literature. Elizabeth Sewell argues that the Queen’s notions of addition the approach to parts and wholes in nonsense. “The sum total is unimportant,” she writes. “It is the composition of it that matters, for this is to be the composition of the universe of nonsense, a collection of ones which can be summed together into a whole but which always fall back into separate ones again” (54). Susan Vigeurs echoes this observation when she argues that “In nonsense, ...parts stay separated. ...Nonsense takes great pleasure in long lists of things that have nothing to do with each other” (141).⁴³ Carroll’s repetitive *one* sentence transforms a simple

problem of sums into a complex problem of linguistic excess; just so, Stein's rose sentence transforms a simple poetic image into a complex performance of linguistic presence and excess of meaning.

Stein has often been depicted as a figure victimized by the press and cruelly ridiculed as a peddler of nonsense. These citations of Carroll in her explanations of the rose sentence, however, suggest a different version of Stein. Stein was not forcefully exiled to the realm of nonsense but willingly stepped into a looking-glass world of literary experiment. Nonsense was not just a pejorative label applied against Stein's will but a source of fascination and poetic fecundity that helped drive literary innovation at various points in her career. To be sure, Stein's marginalization through the years had much to do with her gender. It also had to do, however, with assumptions about the tone that high art and serious literature are expected to adopt. Like that of nonsense, Stein's style is almost always comic,⁴⁴ even when her subject matter is tragic. Finding a place for that puzzlingly playful style in the midst of high modernist authors lamenting the perceived collapse of culture has always been a challenge. The last thirty years of critical reclamation of Stein, which have shown her literary experimentation to be serious indeed—in the sense of important and worthy of consideration—have made Stein's overall project seem more serious—in the sense of somber, solemn, and grave—than it is. Exploring the workings of various modes of nonsense in Stein's literature will show that she presented a modernist aesthetic quite different from those of, for example, Eliot, Pound, and Joyce, an aesthetic in which ridiculousness, delight, and play held places alongside the vaunted seriousness of high modernism.⁴⁵

This chapter considers two main types of nonsense with which Gertrude Stein engaged. First, I emphasize Stein's late turn toward children's writing, a period in which she not only demonstrated a comfort in the realm of childhood but also took to writing overt nonsense literature following the styles of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Having shown through an exploration of *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (1940) that Stein was an author who delighted in the tradition of nonsense literature, I next turn backward to Stein's most famous book of avant-garde poetry, *Tender Buttons* (1914). Understanding the book as an experiment in nonsense language, I argue, allows us to better understand its project than traditional critical close-reading has. The way Stein's experiment has elicited variable interpretations, I argue, resembles the reactions to the nonsense language of "Jabberwocky" that Carroll writes into *Through the Looking-Glass*. The ridicule that Stein faced as a putative nonsense artist and the way she manipulated that charge in her public appearances serve as a backdrop for the entire chapter.

To Do and the Nonsense Tradition

Stein's affinity for the nonsense tradition of literature goes beyond playful citation during public appearances and a parallel aesthetic logic in her writing. In *To Do, A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (1940), Stein wrote a book that fits directly into the tradition of nonsense literature exemplified by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. *To Do* was Stein's second attempt at writing for children. At the end of the 1930s, a decade during which Stein had consolidated her status as a celebrity through the successful publication of *The*

Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, the sensational debut of *Four Saints in Three Acts* in New York, and her well publicized 1934 lecture tour, William R. Scott Press published *The World is Round*, Stein's first children's book. Most American reviewers reacted positively and with relief that the book seemed to be a product of the readable Stein of *The Autobiography* rather than the obscure Stein of *Tender Buttons*. Ellen Lewis Buell's *New York Times* review emphasizes this contrast between Stein's old, baffling work and the more approachable writing of *The World is Round*: "For a skeptic who never quite finished the first paragraph of 'Tender Buttons' it is pleasant to report that Miss Stein seems to have found her audience, possibly a larger one than usual, certainly a more appreciative one" (94). Buell offers wholehearted praise of the way that "Miss Stein has caught within this architectural structure of words... the essence of certain moods of childhood" (94). For all its praise, the review carries an unintentional subtext of condescension: the larger, more appreciative audience of which Buell writes is composed entirely of children.

The public always suspected that there was something less than adult about Stein's work, and a sense of persistent age-inappropriateness extends to other reviews of *The World is Round*. The *New Yorker* reviewer, for example, uses the opinion of an unusually mature child to punctuate her negative response to the book. The eight-year-old "guinea pig," "a bookworm of catholic tastes" who "likes to be read to," "got up quietly, slid over to the table, and picked up a copy of *Time*" as the reviewer read the book to him. The reviewer deduces from this casual test what an appropriate age group for the book might be:

Perhaps he was too young to appreciate the book, but I think he was too old. He was bored, just as I was, by the endless repetition of words and phrases, and by the meaninglessness of many of them. Very little children like the sound of words said over and over. The reiteration of “The World is Round” may quite possibly be comical or soothing to a two-year-old. (72)

The atypically adult eight-year-old, with his interest in important world affairs and catholic reading tastes, serves as an implied foil to Stein, the 65-year-old woman who writes “meaningless” books that only a two-year-old could appreciate. Like the press coverage of Stein’s work throughout her life, this review presses the idea that Stein is childlike, aloof, and unsophisticated.

Associating Stein with nonsense also associates her with childhood. In *The Poetry of Nonsense*, a pioneering study from 1926 that links the work of Carroll and Lear closely to nursery rhymes, Emile Cammaerts suggests that “A healthy child is, by nature, sufficiently imaginative, exuberant and irresponsible to enjoy the visions of Wonderland” (17), in contrast to adults, who may not have the same capacity to judge. Most contemporary critics of nonsense have distanced themselves from Cammaert’s notion of nonsense as a freewheeling childhood wonderland. Wim Tigges, for example, warns on the first page of his monograph that he has chosen to add the word “literary” to his book’s title “to indicate that nonsense can be and has been used for aesthetic purposes, and is by no means to be inherently equated with trivial writing or mere ‘kid’s stuff’” (1). While nonsense certainly presents intellectual problems that appeal to adult critics, and not all nonsense has been written with children in mind, the defensive reaction against

associations of nonsense with childhood leaves out an important part of its connotations. The two figures that Tigges himself treats as undisputed central figures of the nonsense genre, Lear and Carroll, wrote explicitly for children, and their books were marketed toward children. Critics should not be afraid to admit that many of the greatest works of nonsense were written with children in mind. It is hard to imagine the sophisticated linguistic world of misbehavior and silliness that nonsense presents without an imagined child reader and an author willing to undertake childlike writing.

Similarly, critics of Gertrude Stein have too long avoided the overwhelming impression of first-time readers of Stein that her style represents something more childlike and babble-like than the norm. Linking Stein to childhood and nonsense may at first seem to risk repeating Gold's depiction of her as a spoiled bourgeois child, but there is also manifest value to thinking about Stein in this way. Peter Schwenger believes, for example, that Stein's language can be understood in terms of childhood: "To say that she uses language as children use it is neither to praise nor to damn; it is merely to understand better Stein's reiterated claim that the language she wrote was not a bizarre con-job... but an entirely 'natural' use of language" (121). Donald Gallup encourages critics to pay close attention to the works that Stein wrote for children because "they are composed in a style intermediary between that of such works as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and her abstract writings. They afford an opportunity to study some aspects of her method of composition almost in its simplest state" (x). While Gallup's notion that Stein's children's books are "simple" ignores their complexity, his notion that they offer an opportunity to view Stein in a different light is undeniable.

In fact, if the “Transatlantic Interview” of 1946 is any indication, Stein thought her children’s writing excellent and worthy of as much attention as her other works. Stein treated the poetic innovations of her children’s writing as a signature moment in her career. As she attempts to respond to the question “Have there been any new developments in your attitude toward poetry?” Stein emphasizes two notable developments: “The children’s books and some of that in *Tender Buttons* and in some of the children’s plays. There have been no new developments in poetry farther than that” (22-3). Stein was a prolific author, and that she chooses of all her works besides *Tender Buttons* to single out the children’s books suggests that they offer a useful lens through which to view her career. When the interviewer asks Stein to explain the differences between poetry and prose, the suggestiveness of her comments about children’s writing become even more pointed:

Somehow or other in war time the only thing that is spontaneously poetic is children. Children themselves are poetry. The poetry of adults in wartime is too intentional. It is too much mixed up with everything else. My poetry was children’s poetry, and most of it is very good, and some of it is as good as anything I have ever done. *The World is Round* is being included in a new American anthology. (23)⁴⁶

While at first Stein seems to limit her comments to the scope of wartime, she includes ambiguities that imply she might have welcomed the idea that her poetry is childlike. By contrasting “the poetry of adults,” a phrase that suggests poetry written by adults, to “children’s poetry,” a term defined by its readership, Stein slyly plants herself in the

position of a child author. “My poetry was children’s poetry,” a clause that initially seems to refer only to Stein’s work during the war, thus becomes more suggestive of Stein’s entire career.

Other instances from Stein’s life also suggest her strong self-identification with a childlike persona. In her correspondence with Carl Van Vechten, for example, the two frequently referred to Stein as “Baby Woojums,” with Van Vechten occupying the role of “Papa Woojums” and Alice Toklas the role of “Mama Woojums.” While Van Vechten invented these appellations, Stein embraced them. Stein was the youngest of five children, and it appears that this “baby” role stuck with her throughout her life.

Moreover, an early version of *The World is Round* published in Winter 1939 in *The Partisan Review* bears the title “The Autobiography of Rose.” While Stein dedicated *The World is Round* to her neighbor Rose Lucy Renée Anne d’Aiguy, the early version’s title suggests that Stein may also have identified with the book’s protagonist. In Stein’s other playful “autobiography” titles, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein posits as autobiography of others what is actually writing about herself. We might easily, then, read “The Autobiography of Rose” and *The World is Round* as texts in which Stein identifies closely with her child protagonist. *The World is Round* has received notable critical attention only in the last few years. For too long, critics viewed the book as an aberration, a departure from Stein’s true artistic project. Stein’s repeated emphasis on the significance of her children’s books in the 1946 interview, however, suggest that neither these books nor the childlike authorial persona they promote were sources of embarrassment for Stein.

The American edition of *The World is Round* proves a conspicuous embrace of that childlike persona, a material synthesis of Stein's avant-garde persona and the excesses of childhood fantasy.⁴⁷ The book's pages are covered in a layer of bright pink ink, and its type and illustrations are printed in blue. Stein wanted the colors because the pink extends the rose motif of the protagonist's name onto the page, and blue is that character's favorite color. The book, then, bears on its face the heavily gendered colors of the nursery. The illustrations by Clement Hurd turn Rose's world into a soft, round wonderland, depicting whimsical insights that to protagonist Rose become sources of great concern, for example whether "If the world is round would a lion fall off" (25). Reviews of *The World is Round* marveled at the book's material form, referring to it as "a delicious confection of a book" (*New Republic*), "as toothsome-looking as ten-cent store candy" (Buell), with its pages covered in "an awful color" that "every small child will think ...perfectly lovely" (Lamberton). Stein's involvement with the production process of this ostentatious book suggests that she wanted the public to notice that she had turned her attention to children's books.⁴⁸

The World is Round shows Stein's new immersion in children's writing, and it features notable connections to nonsense literature. Rose, the protagonist of *The World is Round*, is about the same age as Carroll's Alice, and she goes on a journey through a lonely world. Compared to Carroll's Wonderland, however, the world Stein imagines for Rose is drab and unpopulated, a setting that Barbara Will reads as a reflection of the wartime circumstances of the book's composition. Like Carroll's two *Alice* books, the narrative of *The World is Round* centers around a child who discovers an alternative order

to the world than the one to which she has been accustomed. When she learns that the world is round, Rose undergoes an epistemological crisis that has been variously read as a crisis of unstable identity, as an epiphany of sexual vulnerability, as a feminist rewriting of the masculine quest narrative, and as Stein's sublimation of the impending war in Europe.⁴⁹ When she learns in school that the world is round, Rose begins to view it as an unfamiliar deception, a surface hiding dark secrets. She realizes the crippling limits of her own knowledge, and "It was so sad it almost made her cry" (11). Rose remembers a prior crisis of realization similar to Alice's ruminations on the world across the mirror in

Through the Looking-Glass:

And then a dreadful thing was happening

She remembered when she had been young

That one day she had sung,

And there was a looking-glass in front of her

And as she sang her mouth was round and going around and around. (11)

The roundness of her mouth implicates Rose herself in this unseen roundness, and going-around-ness, of the world. This memory sets off the chain of events with which most of the story is concerned: Rose leaves the house with her favorite chair and journeys up a mountain alone. Some parallels with Carroll's famous stories are clear, but the overall effect is quite different. If Carroll's story asks Alice and its readers to see society's rules and reason in the arbitrary terms of nonsense, Stein's story forces Rose to accept the world's limits. Rose finally affirms a stable identity, but only through the ever-expanding

“Rose is...” circle, and the book’s hasty ending, in which Rose suddenly marries her cousin, suggests an inescapable dominance of the norms of society and narrative.

To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays, the 1940 follow-up to *The World is Round*, falls more squarely within the nonsense tradition. The book did not see publication during Stein’s lifetime. Young Scott Books, the publisher of *The World is Round*, rejected the manuscript because “the book would be much less appealing to children than the earlier one because of its lack of episode and the fact that the characters do not recur with sufficient frequency to hold children’s interest” (Gallup viii). Alice Toklas agreed, apparently; according to a letter that Stein wrote to Robert Bartlett Haas, “Alice says the book is very funny it makes her laugh but she says it is too old for children and too young for grown-ups” (*To Do* viii). Carl Van Vechten agreed that it was excellent but inappropriate for children: “I’ve written DOZENS of times and ALL about the book which I’m MAD about but I hardly think it is for les enfants” (679). Stein undertook several abortive attempts to publish the book through another publisher, but it did not make its way into print until 1957, when Yale University Press published it as the seventh volume in its edition of Stein’s unpublished writings.

Stein’s experimental work, including *Tender Buttons*, is famous for performing problems and issues of language through style. *To Do* engages directly with these same issues of language, but instead of performing them, it narrates them. It is therefore surprising that it has received so little critical attention. *To Do* is nevertheless, as Richard Bridgman observes, “a strange and captivating book” (311). At the very least, *To Do* is the most formally interesting of Stein’s three books for children.⁵⁰ The scant critical

discussion of *To Do* has focused not on its experimental formal features or its strange engagement with language, but on its apparently violent disposition. The space that Bridgman gives the book elaborates the idea that it is “dominated by acts of aggression and disaster” (311). Likewise, Barbara Will, who argues that the book is heavily influenced by the war that was going on while it was written, argues that it “remains shadowed by the dark realities of life in wartime...” (346-7). To be sure, *To Do* features many such dark moments: of children drowning, for example, and of typewriters at war, and of cannibalistic rabbits. An unvarying focus on these moments of violence, however, misses the playful linguistic experimentalism that makes *To Do* so lively, funny, and fascinating.

Moreover, it is surprising that *To Do* has not yet been critically situated in the nonsense tradition from which it clearly springs. This is a book in which typewriters talk, in which letters argue over their appropriate places in the alphabetic line, and in which anthropomorphized words fret over the semantic implications of their constituent letters. It contains a fictive world that lays bare its construction through language, that constantly reminds the reader that it is comprised not of representation but of narrative creation. It therefore follows the conventions of nonsense literature, which, Elizabeth Sewell argues,

is not a universe of things but of words and ways of using them.... We are dealing with words. In Nonsense all the world is paper and all the seas are ink. This may seem cramping, but it has one great advantage: one need not discuss the so-called unreality or reality of the Nonsense world. The scope of enquiry is limited to what goes on inside a mind. (17)

The episodes through which *To Do* explores its titular concerns—alphabets and birthdays, two great structuring institutions of childhood—are the result of a language game put to the page. Its alphabetic frame delivers an exploration of linguistic order with similar features to those of nonsense literature.

The first such feature involves a shifting dynamic between order and disorder. By arranging the book according to the letters of the alphabet, Stein invokes a tradition of alphabet books, which have traditionally been pedagogical instruments that help children learn the order and phonics of the alphabet. The book moves procedurally through the alphabet, from “A. Annie, Arthur, Active, Albert. / Annie is a girl Arthur is a boy Active is a horse. Albert is a man with a glass” (3) through “And now it is Z. / Z is not the last but one it is the last one. / Zebra and Zed, Zoology and Zero” (80). Gallup argues that the alphabetic arrangement offered a convenient prompt for Stein’s writing:

Having for the most part discarded conventional narrative and the useful framework of beginning, middle, and end, Gertrude Stein often found it difficult to start and, having started, to continue. The use in “To Do” of specific groups of names beginning with the various letters provided a device for overcoming this problem. (x)

Alphabetic arrangement, it would seem, offers a stark procession of order. In typically Steinian fashion, however, the most interesting parts of “To Do” occur not in order but in the disorder that arises from that order. A parenthetical comment by Gallup that in manuscripts “Stein occasionally departed from the strict alphabetical order by going back to an earlier letter” but she eventually “abandoned this idea, doubtless because it would

have proved too confusing for children" (x) does not do justice to the complexity of the arrangement of the book. While Stein gives markers of progress through each of the 26 letters, the characters and situations described between those markers regularly transgress their bounds and demonstrate the arbitrariness of the book's alphabetical ordering principle.

The interplay of order and disorder is a central fascination of nonsense literature. Critical accounts of nonsense have adopted as their first task a dispelling of the notion that, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle characterizes it, "it presents us with the charming disorder of freedom" (25). In fact, much nonsense literature is obsessed with order, albeit orders different from our own. T.V.F. Brogan, in fact, argues that nonsense means not "no-sense" but "shared-sense or new-sense" (839). Elizabeth Sewell develops a complicated system for understanding the place of order and disorder in nonsense, coming finally to the idea that "If nonsense is not created by the principle of disorder in the mind, and if it is not that resolution of order and disorder in the field of language which is poetry, there is only one thing left which it can be, and at first sight this is disconcerting. For the only thing left is the mind's force toward order" (44). Lecercle largely agrees with Sewell, but he positions his comments more squarely in the realm of language: "Nonsense, therefore, is a kind of textual double-bind, or paradox. It is both free and constrained. It tells the reader to abide, and not to abide, by the rules of language" (25).

As it moves through the order of the alphabet, *To Do* flaunts its violations of that order. In the section for the first letter, for example, the letter K already intrudes. The horse Active, it turns out, has not always been Active: "Well, anyway there he was and

Active was his name, it was his name now but it had not always been, it had once been Kiki” (4). Active has become Active, it turns out, only in the context of war. In sections for subsequent letters, differences between phonetic sounds and written spelling introduce obvious disruptions of the alphabet on the page: for example, “G is George Jelly Gus and Gertrude” (13) and “K is Kiki, Katy, Cake, and Kisses” (22). In other parts of the text, letters themselves become characters with independent motivations, jealously holding their positions in the apparently arbitrary line of the alphabet. At times, the narrator makes explicit judgments about the qualities of letters: “You can see what an awful letter N is, just an awful letter...” (32).⁵¹ If the purpose of the alphabetical ordering of the book was, as Gallup asserts, to reduce confusion in the child readers it was destined for, something has gone horribly wrong. More confusing still may be the proclamations about birthdays: “It is very astonishing about birthdays, some people are born on their birthdays and some are not” (7). To be born on a day other than one’s birthday, it turns out, is calamitous indeed; the rich boy Brave, who sometimes goes fishing at night, is quickly drowned, and we learn that “This is what happens when you are not born on your birthday” (6).

The book operates in clear violation of the ordered tradition of alphabet books. Even nonsense alphabets like Walter Crane’s *Absurd ABC* (1874) and those of Edward Lear maintain a conventional alphabetic order designed to aid language pedagogy. *To Do* operates according to an anti-pedagogical logic instead, implying that its readers should recognize how arbitrary all this ordering of language actually is. Stein at once highlights the rules of language and demonstrates their undoing. The most prominent instance of

this phenomenon occurs when Stein departs from the characters of her lettered Dramatis Personae and anthropomorphizes the letters themselves. Edward Lear uses a similar device in one of his nonsense alphabets:

A tumbled down, and hurt his Arm, against a bit of wood.

B said, 'My Boy O! do not cry; it cannot do you good!'

C said, 'A Cup of Coffee hot can't do you any harm.'

D said, 'A Doctor should be fetched, and he would cure the arm.' (420)

Lear treats the letters as characters, but their actions are largely restricted to mere statement. A, it seems, has the capacity to move, but after that the letters speak as static actors. Each of the letters, in keeping with alphabet book tradition, matches at least one keyword: A: Arm; B: Boy; C: Cup, Coffee; D: Doctor. The narrative progresses in a strict, consistent sequence. We are unsurprised when we get to the end to find that "Z said, 'Here is a box of Zinc!'" Stein's version of anthropomorphized letters blatantly disrespects the order of the alphabet even as it ensures the maintenance of that order. As D begins to transition to E, things get truly peculiar:

So D comes after C. Just after. C does not care whether D comes after C or not he just does not care. C is C. What difference does it make to C that D comes after C.

But D does care he cares very much that it is such that E comes after D. It makes all the difference to D that E comes after D. Sometimes D says bad words to E says don't come tagging after me, I have had enough of E, let me be. But there is no use making a fuss E is always there, it is better to be like C and not to care. But D was never very like that, he just could not help being fussed that E was always

there, he just could not help being fussed D was and E well E was used to D so he said let it be, no said D no it is not B it is E it is E that I don't want there, well I don't care said E and that was the way it began and D ran and E also ran and Annie had a fan and paper began and A and B and C and D and E were ready to see that nobody came after E. But they did F came after E which was most exciting to see and they hoped it would be a race they ran or to play catch as catch can but not at all, they had to be there at call B after A and C after B and D after C and E after D and F after E. F is in after and that makes it faster. Forget me not.

(8-9)

In the end, as one would expect, the arrangement of these letter-characters remains A B C D E F. The order in which letters appear in the passage, however, is vastly more complicated: D C C D C C C C D C D E D D E D D E E E C D E D E D D B E E E D E A B C D E E F E B A C B D C E D F E. Stein maintains alphabetic order but plants a whirlwind of alphabet soup within it. D's paranoia that he will be displaced from his rightful position, however, begins to seem more realistic as he draws the reader into the defensive fancifulness that consumes him. And Stein offers a sly confirmation that D may be justified immediately after she restores the alphabetic order and continues on to E: "And so here is E. / Nobody must forget that E follows D. Edith, Edward, Eagle and Eat" (9). Even as she urges the maintenance of the D-E order, Stein puts E before D on the page, and she immediately follows up her admonition with two names in which D, in fact, follows E, EDith and EDward. Similar jockeying for position among the letters occurs throughout *To Do*.

This example highlights a second nonsense characteristic of *To Do*: pieces of language are treated as if they are real entities rather than transparent means to the end of communication. Insofar as Stein's work asks readers to confront language as language, this approach is true of much of her work. Here, however, letters and words are given animate life. They participate in narratives like the one just cited, and they have desires, eccentricities, and identity crises of their own. The pieces of language that compose *To Do* become characters with as much life as the named human characters, much like Carroll transforms the Queen of Hearts's playing-cards Two, Five, and Seven, typically lifeless ciphers, into walking, talking playing cards with abilities, motivations, fears, and desires.

Stein's interest in the dual existence of language as print on the page and sound in the ear gives the language-based characters of *To Do* a built-in identity crisis. Many of the characters fret over disjunctions between their status as printed characters and as heard phonemes. The inclusion of the written but not oral mismatches "Jelly" in the G group and "Cake" in the K group begin to highlight this problem, but a more extended example occurs in the X section. "X is difficult," Stein notes, "and X is not much use and it is kind of foolish that X should have been put into the alphabet, it almost makes it an elephant" (71). The apparent uselessness and foolishness of X is a most pressing concern to a word-character that Stein invokes here, Christmas, which reacts with great confusion that it is sometimes called Xmas on the page:

It is very confusing, why should there be an X in Christmas when there is no X in Christmas why should there be one and why should the Xylophone not be the best of all when they sell them and they spell them with an X at Christmas.

Life is very confusing said the Xylophone to his Mrs.

Very very confusing said Xmas to Christmas. (73)

This exchange initiates a narrative in which the Xylophone, seeing that Christmas has both a C and an X, jealously broods over the fact that it does not have a C of its own. Curiously, Xylophone has little desire for the phonetically more proper Z that might begin his name. These words do not know what to make of Xmas's strange initial letter, which in actuality descends from the Greek letter Chi. Only the material embodiment of the page is available to these word-characters, and they can access neither the etymological nor the aural realms.

The problem of aural similitude and written difference occurs also in the human characters of *To Do*. The clearest example comes with the M group, which consists of "Marcel, Marcelle, Minnie and Martin" (26). The homophony of Marcel and Marcelle's names not only prompts an extended aside on that homophony but also determines the fates of the characters:

Marcel is the name of a boy and Marcelle is the name of a girl.

It takes an eye to see that a girl has a double l e and the boy has only one l.

It does take an eye a quick eye or a slow eye but it does take an eye. An ear well an ear is good enough but it is not enough it takes an eye. (27)

The phonetic version of Marcel/Marcelle presents a problem because it fails to disclose information about the characteristics of its possessor that is disclosed in the two written versions: in this case, the ear hears less than the eye would see. The scene's anxiety arises in part because it is, so to speak, queer to the ear. The phonetic confusion over the two separate names has a deterministic impact on the fate of these characters: "Marcel and Marcelle were going to a marrying bee. A marrying bee is where you go to see and when you see you say she will be married to me. Marcelle and Marcel had not seen each other before but when they went through the door he said she for me and she said he for me" (27) For Marcel and Marcelle, the homophonic nature of their names means an identification and, eventually, a marriage. Stein's reference to the event as a "marrying bee" reinforces the linguistic basis of the problem of the episode. While the term *bee* can be used to signify, as the OED specifies, most any "gathering or meeting for some object," its most common use in English is in *spelling bee*. For Marcel and Marcelle, the marriage resolves the crisis of split language, tames the apparent crisis of queerness suggested by that split, and suggests a fate determined by linguistic happenstance.⁵²

As the Marcel/Marcelle episode suggests, the human characters of *To Do* find themselves enmeshed in problems of language just as much as the characters built of embodied linguistic fragments do. Barbara Will calls *To Do* "an alphabetic list of characters and their birthdays," but a more precise formulation might be that the book is an alphabetic list of *names* and birthdays—the human characters of *To Do* are characters in only the most limited sense. Jean Jacques Lecercle argues that "nonsense, not a mimetic genre, does not construct characters, but rather presents eccentricities, more

often than not quirks of language” (71), and the names that *To Do* presents likewise serve as opportunities for linguistic rumination more than they serve as binding terms for realistic character qualities. No single character gets much extended attention in *To Do*, largely because of the alphabetic and linguistic drives that propel the narrative forward. From the beginning, the text makes clear that the existence of its characters is contingent on the willful functions of language:

Alphabets and names make games and everybody has a name and all the same
they have in a way to have a birthday.

The thing to do is to think of names.

Names will do.

...without an alphabet without names where are you... (3)

The book announces that it is a game in which the first “thing to do is to think of names.” Elizabeth Sewell views the entire field of Nonsense as a series of self-contained games, and “Since Nonsense is made up of language, its playthings will be words” (26). In *To Do*, Stein’s playthings are names. Naming was crucially important to Stein, as a comment from her lecture “Poetry and Grammar” suggests: “that is what poetry is it is a state of knowing and feeling a name” (328). In *To Do* as in the bulk of her poetry, Stein attempts to know and feel not people and objects but the words that represent those real-world entities in language.

The pronouncement of names is the founding act of *To Do*, and it is these acts of naming that will be loosely constrained by the alphabetic sequence that is to follow, that initiate the characters in the book as characters. Unlike a traditional alphabet book, in

which a letter and a keyword point to some object in the real world, here the letters produce keywords that constitute characters that would not otherwise exist. The birthdays from which people originate in the real world are replaced by an arbitrary alphabetic origin, and fixed real-world birthdays are replaced by *To Do*'s arbitrarily assigned movable birthdays. Because Stein has rejected realism in favor of a linguistically interested metafiction, the flexible identities of these unabashedly fictive characters remain subject to narratorial whim, even once the narrative has begun.

One effect of this game of origin-by-naming is an expectation that proper names will be linked to qualities of the people and animals they represent. The first extended narrative of the book, for example, focuses on the horse Active:

Active.

Active is the name of a horse.

Everybody has forgotten what horses are.

What horses are.

What are horses.

Horses are animals were animals with a mane and a tail ears hoofs a head and teeth and shoes if they are put upon them. (3)

Here, the problem of naming extends to common nouns. Stein invokes the name "Active," then uses the word "horse" to define "Active." Once everyone has forgotten what horses are, "What horses are" becomes its own sentence on its own line, just as "Active" had earlier. The task of explaining what Active means produces only more language. The associative logic extends next to a brief discussion of horseshoes and luck

before it moves to the main explanation of where Active's name comes from. The horse, we learn, has only become Active in the course of the war, in which he actively pulls a cannon behind him. His name before was Kiki, "not that he ever kicked not he" (4). The narrator expects that readers will think Kiki kicks, just as Active is active. Even other qualities of the animal are dependent on its having a name. Getting a new name, for example, renews Kiki/Active as a horse: "they did take Kiki along and he was old but he was young and strong" (4). Just as getting a new name gives the horse new life, taking away the name carries great risk: "he said he would lose his mane if they took away his new name" (4). With the absence of *name* comes the absence of its anagram *mane*: Active, it seems, is a strong believer in the reality and manipulability of language. After the war, once Active again becomes Kiki, the loss of his new name forces a transformation in his physical being as the technological present overcomes the biological past:

So he said he thought an automobile, just one day he said he thought he would be an automobile not a new one an old one and he was one, he was an automobile and an automobile never has a name and it never has a mane and it has rubber shoes not an iron one and finding rubber shoes does not mean anything like finding iron horse-shoes did and that was the end of everything. (5)

The transformations undergone by the horse in this sequence are contingent on its status as a creation of an arbitrary fragment of language. Only once we get to the end of the narrative do we understand why "Everybody has forgotten what horses are": they have been replaced by automobiles. The letter *A* prompts the name Active. The name Active

prompts a story that justifies that name. The Kiki back-story arises from an implicit acknowledgment of the necessary belatedness of the name Active—that is, the horse cannot be Active until he has been active. And in the end, this horse’s world that arises from the arbitrary promptings of linguistic order can just as easily transform entirely, though it seems notable that what it transforms into returns to the letter prompt:

Automobile. The narrative operates almost solely to demonstrate how the horse has gotten these various names rather than for the inherent interest of the stories themselves.

The reverse narrative process of *To Do*, in which names precede narratives, echoes a Looking-Glass logic that Stein also invokes in “Poetry and Grammar.” In *To Do* as in the more ostensibly serious works Stein discusses in that lecture, “People if you like to believe it can be made by their names. Call anybody Paul and they get to be a Paul call anybody Alice and they get to be an Alice” (313).⁵³ The attention that *To Do* devotes to its acts of naming and subsequent character-creation narrate the phenomenon that Stein sees at work in her earlier poetry. Though Stein qualifies this idea in relation to things—“things once they are named the name does not go on doing anything to them and so why write in nouns” (313)—she continues to insist on the importance of proper names for constituting human character and narrative characters. In the logic of *To Do*, “Names will do” (3) both in the sense that they will suffice and that they will perform and create.

Stein’s sense that proper names constitute as well as describe would be welcomed by Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty:

“...but tell me your name and your business.”

“My *name* is Alice, but—”

“It’s a stupid name enough!” Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. “What does it mean?”

“Must a name mean something?” Alice asked doubtfully.

“Of course it must,” Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: “*my* name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.” (208)

According to Humpty, names dictate forms. Martin Gardner succinctly describes this approach and adds an observation that the reverse is true of common nouns: there is a Carrollian inversion here that is easily overlooked. In real life proper names seldom have a meaning other than the fact that they denote an individual object, whereas other words have general, universal meanings. In Humpty Dumpty’s realm, the reverse is true. Ordinary words mean whatever Humpty wants them to mean, whereas proper names like “Alice” and “Humpty Dumpty” are supposed to have general significance. (208 n. 4)

So, while proper nouns must necessarily have some meaningful connection to the qualities of the object they represent (and could therefore represent some category of objects, rather than one single thing), common nouns in Humpty’s logic will mean one specific thing.

While Humpty Dumpty sticks to this reverse logic of nouns rather rigidly, *To Do* features a fluid exchange between the qualities of proper nouns and common nouns. In the P group, for example, “Pancake” is suggested as a human character but then reverts to common-noun status:

And then she met Pancake, that was his name Mr. Pancake. Now you might have supposed that she would find that astonishing that his name was Mr. Pancake and that she met him but not at all, she did not find him astonishing at all, she just ate him and after that, well after that, well it made her feel funny to have eaten him and after that well after that nothing was astonishing, that was the kind of a girl Pearl was, she was that kind of a girl. (42)

Pancake's name dictates Pancake's fate. Insofar as this passage has a literal level of meaning, one might suppose that Mr. Pancake has simply been a common pancake all along, which would explain Pearl's initial lack of astonishment. Nevertheless, Pearl does demonstrate a bit of remorse after her consumption of Pancake, and the sense of dual common noun/proper noun status persists throughout the passage. The language of the passage goes beyond a simple defamiliarization of the act of eating a pancake, since the pancake has been constructed first as a character through an act of proper naming.

Birthdays, like alphabets and names, become movable and sometimes tangible entities in *To Do*. Early in the book, after we have learned of characters not born on their birthdays, characters whose birthdays perpetually move forward in time, and characters whose birthdays are entire months, the book explains that "It is very astonishing about birthdays, some people are born on their birthdays and some are not" (7). In one scene, the two dogs Never Sleeps and Was Asleep fight with four J characters, James, Jonas, Jewel, and Jenny, over only two birthdays: "they quarreled more than before and pretty soon they tore the two birthdays in pieces and now there were six without birthdays... and six without birthdays is just six too many" (21). The disruption of birthdays in this

book is less straightforward than those of alphabets and names, but there are some consistent patterns. Despite the tendency of birthdays to move around and shift in time throughout the book, the characters consistently desire normative fixed birthdays, and they have strong incentive to do so: Brave, the rich boy, drowns, the book tells us, because he “was not born on his birthday” (5). On one level, Stein’s engagement with birthdays may allude to an English tradition of birthday books, in which each day of the year is paired with brief poems and small illustrations.⁵⁴ On another, this unconventional approach to birthdays reminds readers that these characters’ origins are linguistically based rather than grounded in reality. Birthdays give real people real life, but these characters receive birthdays according to the whims of the author and the will of language. The book concludes with a celebration of Zero, because “thanks to the Zero the hero Zero we all have a birthday. / Hurray” (86). The reason that the characters throughout the book have had such trouble fixing their birthdays, it seems, is that the concept of Zero, which would allow for the concept of a fixed chronological origin, has not yet been named and thus does not exist until the final letter of the alphabet has been listed.

To Do, then, has more interesting linguistic and narrative play at work in it than the brief comments of critics who have emphasized the idea that the book would confront young readers with too much reality, violence, and death would suggest. Just like nonsense literature, the book at every turn reminds readers that it is constructed whole cloth from language. It should be noted, nevertheless, that several real-world figures do make their way into the book. Stein’s friends Robert Bartlett Haas and Carl Van Vechten

make appearances as “Bobolink” and “Van,” and Stein at least gestures toward herself: “Not to remember Gertrude” (13). Even though Stein bases these characters on their real-world counterparts, she fits them into her linguistically based framework. Without the contextual information of a scholar, there would be no way to know the character Van, or “Papa Woojums,” as he is also referred to in the book, is any more real than Brave or Kiki or Active or Pancake. Several moments in the book also allegorize current events, including a scene about typewriters that is a clear allusion to the events of World War II: “Henriette was a French typewriter Yetta was a German typewriter and Mr. House was an American typewriter and they all lived together, they click clacked together only Mr. House made the least noise” (16). The section begins with an extended reflection on the characters’ various attributes and interactions: Henriette de Dactyl longs to “cook cookies” and “cook mutton chops,” Yetta von Blickensdorfer sleeps “with one eye one eye one eye,” and Mr. House “was not a mouse he was a great big typewriter” (16-17). Soon, however, “the three typewriting machines went to war, they said they would, they would they said. / Henriette fell off the shelf. / Yetta was left there all by herself” (18). Clearly, the violence of war intrudes here, as it does, as Barbara Will argues, in various other episodes in the book. At the same time, however, it is notable that this is a war of typewriters, of machines whose primary means of input is a field of alphabetic characters, machines that make language.

The remaining violence in the book, Will’s “compilation of calamities that occur randomly and without warning” (346), can be understood as keeping in the tradition of nonsense. The Queen of Hearts shouts a refrain of “off with his head!” throughout *Alice’s*

Adventures in Wonderland, and Edward Lear's limericks regularly feature grotesque violence. For example,

There was an Old Man of Peru,
Who watched his wife making a stew;
But once by mistake, in a stove she did bake,
That unfortunate Man of Peru. (72)

What distinguishes this grotesque scene from violence in the real world, of course, is that the Man of Peru's fate is determined as much by a linguistic and prosodic logic as it is by a causal one—if the name of his country did not rhyme with “stew,” this man would be wholly unsuited for the oven. The fates of the characters of *To Do* are similarly determined by their chance place in the orders of alphabets and birthdays rather than by some kind of submerged violent impulse on Stein's part.

In *To Do*, then, a seemingly orderly alphabetical list of proper names gives way to an unstable fictive world of words. The characteristics of the book that overlap with those of the famous nonsense writers Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll are such that *To Do* can be identified as a book written squarely in that literary tradition. While Stein's approach to writing certainly changed over the course of her life, her late decision to actually write a book of nonsense does seem to suggest that Stein was friendlier to the traditions of nonsense than has often been supposed, however tainted by associations with childhood and triviality they are. In fact, the characteristics of language that Stein emphasizes in the narrative representation of vivified language she presents in *To Do* may well help to explain the singular linguistic styling of Stein's earlier experimental works.

Tender Buttons and the Interpretation of Nonsense Language

To Do shares so many of the characteristics of the nonsense tradition of literature that it is safe to call it a part of that tradition. Making the same claim about *Tender Buttons* would be dubious, however. *To Do* shares the same tone of frivolity and fancy that marks the great works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, but *Tender Buttons* has long been regarded as a serious work indeed, a product of the Paris avant-garde with literary goals as lofty as those of the great paintings of Stein's close friends Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. If grouping Stein's famous experimental book with the nonsense of Lear and Carroll seems inaccurate, however, so does denying that the book's language rejects ordinary notions of sense, that its language approaches nonsense.

Critics have often invoked a comment from Stein's 1946 "Transatlantic Interview" to suggest that Stein thought nonsense nonexistent. The very same comment, however, demonstrates that questions of sense and nonsense were on Stein's mind during the composition of *Tender Buttons*:

I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and I found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them. (18)

Language that purports to be nonsensical, Stein seems to be saying, will inspire meaning nevertheless. The complex grammatical play with which Stein imbues this passage,

however, complicates the idea that she is simply denying the possibility of nonsense. The fact that she was thinking about the possibility of language that does not make sense actually shows that she was interested in such a possibility: why else would she make "innumerable efforts" to "put them together without sense"? Moreover, the subtle grammatical shifts of who is responsible for the production of meaning in the passage complicate ideas about whether meaning resides in the minds of authors and readers or in texts. Sense-making at first belongs to the author: "it is impossible to put them together without sense." In the next sentence, however, "words" becomes the subject of the verb "write," putting agency in the hands of language itself, as if the author is merely prodding a language with its own independent will into action. In the final sentence of the passage, the subject of the act of "putting down words" becomes more generalized to "Any human being" as the act of making sense becomes subsequent to the act of writing. The author has all but removed herself from an intention-driven writing scenario and become her own sense-making reader. As Juliana Spahr argues, in Stein's work "questions of authorial intent are not a priority. It is not that the author is dead, just never really in control" (43). Texts and readers will create meaning from seemingly non-meaning language even if authors do not.

Whether language "without sense" exists or not, Stein sits much closer to the nonsense end of a spectrum from language without sense to language with clear and obvious meaning than most authors do. The problems of meaning that her work raises, in fact, are similar to those of one strain of nonsense literature, the strain in which, as T.V.F. Brogan describes, "the dislocation is less that of plot or fictive world than of l.[anguage]

itself," in which either unusual words, unusual syntax, or both predominate. For Brogan, such linguistic disruption defines the entire field of nonsense verse. This view wrongly leaves most of Lear's verse and many of the poems that appear in the *Alices* out of the nonsense field, but its seeming intuitiveness makes some consideration of the interrelation of nonsense language and nonsense literature necessary here.

Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" sits at the intersection of nonsense language and nonsense literature. What makes the poem an instance of nonsense language should be clear: while the poem's English syntax and a number of functional words are ordinary, it also features an invented vocabulary. What makes "Jabberwocky" fit into the same category of nonsense literature as Edward Lear's limericks, however, bears more consideration. The shared characteristics of nonsense literature have as much to do with tone and spirit as they do with specifically identifiable formal or grammatical features, and on its linguistic face, "Jabberwocky" bears few of the tonal characteristics of silliness, triviality, and logic-reversal that mark most of Lear's and many of Carroll's poems. What makes "Jabberwocky" a nonsense poem, what gives it similar tonal qualities to those of Lear's willfully silly poems, has as much to do with the narrative and interpretive contexts in which it resides as it does with isolated qualities of its language.

The allure of treating "Jabberwocky" as an instance of isolated language, an alchemical laboratory in which the structures rather than the semantics of language produce meaning, has been irresistible to the producers of linguistics textbooks. In *The Structure of English* (1952), for example, Charles Carpenter Fries omits the invented words to demonstrate such a point:

All the words that one expects to have clearly definable meaning content are nonsense, but any speaker of English will recognize at once the frames in which these words appear.

Twas -----, and the -----y -----s

Did ----- and ----- in the -----;

All -----y were the -----s,

And the ----- -----s -----.

The "ideas" which the verse stimulates are without doubt the structural meanings for which the framework contains the signals. Most of the nonsense words have clearly marked functions in frames that constitute familiar structural patterns.

These "ideas" seem vague to the ordinary speaker because in the practical use of language he is accustomed to dealing only with total meanings to which lexical context contributes the elements of which he is conscious. (71)

Isolating the structural terms of the stanza, Fries argues, results in a system of meaning, even when the words with ostensible content are expunged. The example recurs again and again. George Trager uses it in *Language and Languages* (1972), parsing the information supplied by linguistic structure for each of the ostensibly content-free words:

The slithy toves are obviously unpleasant creatures; what a tove is we don't know, but there are several of them (because of the plural ending); they are described in a phrase that must be read [... as] regular for the "adjective-noun" sequence. ...we think of slide or slime and writhe, and decide that toves must move something like snakes, only more unpleasantly! (93)

The example of “Jabberwocky” appears again in David Crystal's *Making Sense of Grammar* (2004). A sidebar addresses the linguistic magic of the poem:

Why do we think we can make sense of this utterance? Because we recognize English sentence structure, and can relate it to other structures in the language. We know intuitively that the mother of one of the slithy toves would be able to tell her offspring to 'stop gimbling at once!', or that one of the toves could tell its schoolmates that "We gyred and gimbled yesterday'. We could not do this if we did not recognize the utterance as a possible English sentence. (19)

Each of these linguistic approaches⁵⁵ that depict "Jabberwocky" as a poem whose interest lies in the fact that meanings and structures emerge despite its ostensible nonsense has merit. As the poem goes on, even more meaning begins to emerge to the point that even Alice, perhaps the poem's most hapless reader, knows that "somebody killed something: that's clear, at any rate—" (150).

The interest in "Jabberwocky" as an independent linguistic or formal object, however, has often dominated discussions to the extent that the narrative contexts with which Carroll invariably framed the poem have been ignored. From the time he first wrote it, Carroll did not present the poem as an autonomous poetic object, but as a poem within a fictive world. The first such instance appears in *Mischmasch* (1855-1862), one of the manuscript books that Charles Dodgson⁵⁶ produced during his days at Oxford and before. Dodgson presents the first stanza of the poem not as "Jabberwocky" at all, but as the rather more staid "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry." The ancient-looking stanza

appears in a hand-drawn Old English alphabet alongside a modern transcription: as Carroll notes, "This curious fragment reads thus in modern characters":

TWAS BRYLLYG, AND THE SLYTHY TOVES
 DID GYRE AND GYMBLE IN THE WABE:
 ALL MIMSY WERE THE BOROGROVES;
 AND THE MOME RATHS OUTGRABE. (139)

The pseudo-academic piece supplies a catalogue of meanings for each of the unfamiliar terms: "SLYTHY: 'Smooth and active'" (140), for example, and "GYRE, verb (derived from GYAOUR OR GIAOUR, 'a dog'). 'To scratch like a dog,'" (140). After falsely claiming that the various words have modern meaning that he has deduced through rigorous scholarship, Dodgson supplies a full gloss: "It was evening, and the smooth active badgers were scratching and boring holes in the hill-side: all unhappy were the parrots; and the grave turtles squeaked out" (141). The poem's presentation finishes with an editor's note that maintains the posture of historical integrity and critical gravity that has been maintained with a straight face throughout the passage: "This is an obscure, but yet deeply-affecting, relic of ancient Poetry" (141).

Dodgson's complicated paratext invents a false narrative for the production of "Jabberwocky." Because that narrative is delivered with an academic face, it raises the possibility that some readers might not recognize this piece of nonsense as nonsense. George Orwell raises a relevant idea about the role of history in the creation of nonsense in his essay on nonsense poetry: "The bulk of [English nonsense poetry] is in nursery rhymes and scraps of folk poetry, some of which may not have been strictly nonsensical

at the start, but have become so because their original application has been forgotten” (187). The joke of Dodgson's mock-scholarly hoax plays on such an idea: if the editor only tells the reader what all the words mean, that reader will soon understand how affecting this seemingly random narrative of badgers, parrots, and turtles actually is. Were the first stanza of "Jabberwocky" actually a story about badgers and parrots and turtles, what import would it possibly have for a modern reader? The editorial apparatus that Dodgson invents for the poem answers the inevitable cries for explanation that nonsense language elicits and transforms it into a poem not about badgers or dragons but about the folly of interpretation and the failure of academic discourse.

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Carroll both expanded the poem into the version now famous and multiplied the interpretations to which it is subject. Alice and the reader both encounter the poem first as a visual anomaly, a series of backwards words that Alice at first assumes are "some language I don't know" (148). Like the ancient-looking script that presents the poem in its first appearance in *Mischmasch*, the visual reversal suggests a profound otherness to the poem. Once she holds it up to the mirror, Alice realizes that "Jabberwocky" is an English poem:

"It seems very pretty," she said when she had finished it, "but it's rather hard to understand!" (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that's clear, at any rate—." (150)

As the first interpreter of "Jabberwocky" in the book, Alice demonstrates some recognizable characteristics of a reader encountering language that she does not understand. Her reluctance to admit incomprehension arises largely from the fact that she recognizes the poem as English, and the one part of the poem that she seizes onto, the fact that "He left it dead" (150), that the son has "slain the Jabberwock" (150), becomes the defining meaning of the poem. That narrative, however, has little to do with the famous opening stanza.

The pages on which Alice's initial encounter with the poem reside feature another interpreter, illustrator John Tenniel. Tenniel's fearsome dragon with giant claws, incisors, antennae, and wings has become the definitive public image of a jabberwock: the word has become synonymous not just with non-meaning language but with a particular kind of dragon. In the lower-right hand corner, the poem's ostensible protagonist nearly falls backward as he struggles to wield a sword, the poem's famous "vorpal blade," an image that undercuts the seeming efficiency of that moment in the poem: "One, two! One, two! And through and through / The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!" (149). Tenniel's illustration accurately captures details supplied by the poem: "The jaws that bite, the claws that catch" (148), the "eyes of flame" (149), and the general fear that this "manxome foe" arouses. It also represents a subjective interpretation, however. Beyond those few details, the poem supplies as little information about the Jabberwock's form as it does about the "Jubjub bird" (148) and "The frumious Bandersnatch" (148). The rather specific interpretation suggested by Tenniel's illustrations contrasts with Henry Holiday's

illustrations for *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), which in the last pages show an ambiguous darkness rather than a specific form of a Snark or a Boojum.

The interpretation of "Jabberwocky" in *Through the Looking-Glass* most similar to the editorial trickery of Mischmasch, and the most seemingly authoritative in the book, comes from Humpty Dumpty, a character Carroll reimagines as a haughty academic. When Alice finds that Dumpty is "very clever at explaining words" (214) and asks him to interpret the poem, Dumpty claims an omniscient capacity for interpretation: "I can explain all the poems that ever were invented—and a good many that haven't been invented just yet" (214). Dumpty's arrogance renders suspect Carroll's later suggestion that "Humpty-Dumpty's theory, of two meanings packed into one word like a portmanteau, seems to me the right explanation after all" (*Snark* 219). Carroll cedes his interpretive authority to the arrogant egg only partly in earnest: to be sure, we can understand some of the words of "Jabberwocky" as combinations of other words, but doing so does not explain the full possibilities of their meaning or tell the full story of their origins. Dumpty's explanations owe much to the fictive glossary in *Mischmasch*, but he adds more absurdity. In *Mischmasch*, a tove is "A species of Badger. They had smooth white hair, long hind legs, and short horns like a stag: lived chiefly on cheese" (140). In Dumpty's explanation, "'toves' are something like badgers—they're something like lizards—and they're something like corkscrews. ...also they make their nests under sundials—also they live on cheese" (215). Scholarly verisimilitude has given way to the absurdity of the Looking-Glass world. The absurd, disconnected details have multiplied significantly since *Mischmasch*. Dumpty's thoroughly speculative yet utterly confident

reading of the poem has become a catalogue of utterly disconnected absurdities held simultaneously within the same aesthetic frame. Dumpty confidently fixes more and more details for the scene established by the stanza: a wabe "is a grass-plot round a sundial. ...It's called 'wabe,' you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it" (215), and "a 'rath' is a sort of green pig" (216). As Dumpty explains more and more of the situation, it becomes less and less probable that his reading is correct. As Tenniel's accompanying illustration visually confirms, there is not much to be made of a grove with a sundial in which pigs, birds that look like mops, and badgers that are a bit like corkscrews and lizards coexist. Some of Humpty's explanations sound straightforward enough, but the sequence, "one and one and one," fails to cohere into a single meaningful scenario.

By overloading it with impossibly multiple interpretations, Carroll transforms "Jabberwocky" into a forthrightly ridiculous poem. The interpretations reveal themselves as wrong again and again and only reinforce the fact that the poem is constructed from nonsense rather than from an English vocabulary. As an isolated instance of poetic language, "Jabberwocky" need not be so ridiculous. Recent versions produced as children's books sometimes deliver a simple dragon-slaying narrative and sometimes take on more serious themes.⁵⁷ Carroll, however, constantly reminds his reader that an English poem built from made-up words is a ridiculous thing indeed, but perhaps not as ridiculous as the misguided interpretations it is bound to invite.

Stein does not provide frame narratives to remind readers that writing in ways that strike readers as incomprehensible can be understood as a ridiculous act. *Tender Buttons*

does not bill itself as a ridiculous book, and little evidence suggests that Stein thought of it as merely trivial or silly. Though they share the quality of being written in language that departs from English norms, Carroll's through invention of new words and Stein's through the rearrangement of old ones, "Jabberwocky" and *Tender Buttons* are more different than they are similar. What Carroll strove to constantly remind readers about "Jabberwocky," however—that language that lacks some essential element that breaks the communicative triangle between author, text, and reader will nevertheless invite and be subject to multiple, forceful, and sometimes silly interpretations—has certainly been true of Stein's text. For many years, critics have tried to decipher Stein's intentions in writing *Tender Buttons*, whether by finding a meaning that Stein intended or a theoretical concept that Stein intended to demonstrate through formal play. Less often, however, have critics considered that Stein may well have intended her text as a stimulus for the varied reception history that has followed it. Stein would claim a seriousness to *Tender Buttons*, but it might well be different from the seriousness that most critics have tried to impute to the book. Stein (writing as Alice) describes the methodological change that led to *Tender Buttons* in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: "They were the beginning, as Gertrude Stein would say, of mixing the outside with the inside. Hitherto she had been concerned with seriousness and the inside of things, in these studies she began to describe the inside as seen from the outside" (156). At the same time as Stein suggests a change in focus from internal being to external reality, she suggests a shift away from "seriousness" as a primary mode of composition. Stein suggested throughout her life that she thought *Tender Buttons* a significant book, an important intervention in contemporary writing.

She did not, however, claim the gravity and loftiness of message and meaning that so many critics have tried to find in it.

Critics of *Tender Buttons* tend to go in two contradictory directions at once, acknowledging almost universally that it is a thoroughly ambiguous book but then pointing to some unifying idea that the text ostensibly performs. Most every critic offers a caveat explaining the final impenetrability of the book. Marjorie Perloff explores Stein as a central figure in what she calls *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981). Richard Bridgman notes that "*Tender Buttons* is unusually resistant to interpretation" (125). For Mena Mitrano, *Tender Buttons* "remains impermeable to any interpretive operation aimed at thematic synthesis" (87). Close readings of the work are invariably followed by brief apologies about the preceding reading's inadequacy. Pamela Hadas, for example, follows up a convincing biographical reading with an inevitable step back: "At least this is one way to read it" (57). Even Lisa Ruddick, who argues for an identifiable and consistent meaning behind *Tender Buttons*, notes that her "readings are not meant to substitute for this experience of uncertainty and mobility [that characterizes the text]" (203).⁵⁸

At the same time as critics generally acknowledge ambiguity as a first principle of thinking about this text, they go on to make clear claims about what it is doing. If meaning cannot be found by parsing and close-reading the words of the text, it must be found in textual performance and in the reader's experience of that ambiguity. For Michael Hoffman and Randa Dubnick, *Tender Buttons* is an abstract emulation of cubist painting in words. For Pamela Hadas and Margueritte S. Murphy, the book becomes a vexed abstraction of feminine domesticity and a submerged biographical record of Stein's

own home life. For Ruddick, the book becomes an involved allegory of oppressive patriarchy and king-making. For Corinne Blackmer, *Tender Buttons* represents "Stein's efforts to create a metaphorical sexual vernacular of lesbianism" (638). For Christopher Knight, *Tender Buttons* becomes a surprisingly traditional reflection on the concerns of classical epistemology. For critics such as Neil Schmitz, Perloff, and Michael Kauffman, the book becomes a reflection in language on language, a metadiscursive instance of artistic self-reflexivity and poetic opacity.

All literary works share a degree of ambiguity, or critics would have little to talk about. *Tender Buttons*, however, represents an extreme case in which the most foundational questions of meaning remain unresolved nearly one hundred years after its writing. What are critics to do with a text that does not just present ambiguities of overarching meaning but countless local problems of meaning that are not just difficult but impossible to solve? Stephen Monte has summarized the pitfalls that face critics of the book:

Interpretations of *Tender Buttons* founder in a variety of ways. Stein's notorious difficulty gives some critics free rein to interpret, urges others to stand outside the hermeneutic process or question its appropriateness to the work, and causes still others, the majority, to limit their readings to a few passages and heavily qualify their findings. (161)

Monte's own method for reading *Tender Buttons* might well be charged with the second of these offenses. Like some other critics, he focuses on listing local word patterns. For example, "The word 'center,' and variants of it, appear often at the beginning of 'Rooms'

and periodically throughout," (171) after which he lists a number of such variants: "Act so that there is no use in a center...", "A whole center and a border make hanging a way of dressing," and so on (171). Listing isolated words that appear throughout the text as evidence of larger patterns can certainly give us information about its repeated concerns,⁵⁹ but doing so hardly marks a bold embrace of the hermeneutic process.

The critical method of Lisa Ruddick, who claims that "*Tender Buttons* can be unlocked, to a far greater extent than has been supposed" (190), represents an opposite extreme. Monte's lists make clear the discomfort most critics feel making assertive statements about the meaning of *Tender Buttons*, but Ruddick forgoes such discomfort and claims to have found a solution. A passage from her reading of "BOOK" suggests the perils of her method of allegorical reading:

The next paragraph begins, "Suppose a man a realistic expression of resolute reliability suggests pleasing itself white all white and no head does that mean soap." Although the next sentence says, "It does not so," the negation does not quite undo the suggestion that some "man" is "pleasing" himself by an act of cleaning or whitening, with "soap." This passage follows by about a page the reference, noted earlier, to whiteness as the color of falsely innocent and disembodied womanhood. The poem as a whole, then, describes the whitewashing or erasure of the feminine by the master "cleaner" or paternal book, which replaces the live energies of women with stereotypes of purity. Maybe the book suppresses women's brains as well as bodies: "and no head." (210)

Glossing over the negation that follows the sentence to which Ruddick's reading refers does not undo the problems of the reading of the sentence itself. Ruddick completely rewrites the grammar of the sentence. She ignores, for example, the "a realistic expression of resolute reliability suggests" that intervenes between "a man" and "pleasing" and simply substitutes "with soap" for "does that mean soap." Instead of untangling the grammatical knots into which the passage intricately folds itself, Ruddick simply cuts them away and pretends the resulting threads are good as new. Before she even takes the significant leaps necessary to arrive at her master allegory (white + soap = cleaner = paternal book), she must stabilize the symbolic vocabulary with which she wants to work by imagining an entirely different passage than the one that is on the page. Ruddick's reading of *Tender Buttons* represents an extreme case of reading that depends on imaginative acts that delete and add to the words on the page, but others have undertaken similar approaches to explaining problems as simple as why Stein matches a particular heading with the text that follows it.⁶⁰

Stein's critics have been open to a surprisingly wide spectrum of readings of *Tender Buttons*, including those, like Ruddick's, that describe complex systems of meaning that arise only through acts of audacious critical invention. Even when the readings seem improbable, something in the text seems to have suggested them, and we have no basic grasp on what the text says with which to refute what we intuitively sense it was not meant to say. Several critics, however, have reacted negatively to one striking comment from Marianne DeKoven, who does "not think it matters the work contains these particular words in this particular order" (*Different Language* 82). For many critics,

DeKoven's insight threatens the validity of Stein's entire project (and the entire critical project of thinking about Stein). If what DeKoven thinks is true, Stein has abandoned the sanctified process of authorial design. How, then, can we think of her as a master poetic craftswoman, a genius? Without meaningful and rational design, how can we call *Tender Buttons* anything but nonsense?

If we accept the idea that an experiment in nonsense can be an interesting literary work, DeKoven's comment stops seeming so threatening. In fact, Stein herself took little offense at the idea that her work did not represent so many intricately crafted well wrought urns of language. For Stein, achieving newness was a primary creative imperative, and the manifold interpretive possibilities to which *Tender Buttons* remains subject can be seen as an extension of the new, a continuous present of interpretive reshaping. DeKoven's idea that the particular words and particular order of *Tender Buttons* do not matter as much as the overall conception, in fact, is suggested by the ways Stein's method of composition has been described. Michael Hoffman argues that

Her method of composition seems to go something like this. She focuses directly on a particular subject for as long as it may stick in her mind. Then she may depart from the subject to follow an association or report something that has entered her consciousness. The subject at hand returns again and again, but the importance of this whole retrospective is to express the continuous present ongoing of her consciousness. This is, after all, the only pure knowledge according to her theory. (195)

Others confirm Hoffman's notions. Bridgman describes a similar scenario: "...Gertrude Stein sought to reproduce her verbal responses to selected objects with the imposition of as little formal organization upon the words evoked as possible" (136). Michael Delville argues that the objects "are a springboard for the observer's abstract reflections" (61). For Randa Dubnick, the words on the page are a direct representation of "the intersection of the object with consciousness" (30). There is no doubt that Stein imposed "formal organization" on *Tender Buttons*, but the composite picture that emerges from these descriptions of her compositional procedure suggests a work more similar to the automatic-writing experiments Stein had participated in as a student at Harvard than to the word-by-word weaving of an intricate tapestry of *les mots justes* that many critical readings would indicate. The element of chance played a significant role in the composition of *Tender Buttons*.

When Stein chided audiences for clamoring about the difficulty of understanding her work, she really did mean that what they saw on the page was what they were going to get. She did not imagine a stable content for the text but built a text of linguistic surface with which readers could do what they wanted. She returns to the idea that sense-making is as much the role of the reader as of the text or the author in the "Transatlantic Interview":

I was not interested in what people would think when they read this poetry; I was entirely taken up with my problem and if it did not tell my story it would tell some story. They might have another conception which would be their affair. It is not necessarily attached to the original idea I had when I wrote it. (30)

Stein does not lament the fact that *Tender Buttons* had become detached from any "original idea" from the moment of composition. There is no stable meaning for readers to misinterpret, but only dynamic "stories" of meaning that develop in the moment of reading. She also makes clear that she believes *Tender Buttons* to be an imperfect book that she can understand now only as a retrospective reader:

This book is interesting as there is as much failure as success in it. When this was printed I did not understand this creation. I can see now, but one cannot understand a thing until it is done. With a thing in the process of doing, you do not know what you are doing until it is done, finished, and thus you cannot explain it. Until then you are struggling. (29-30)

As she explains *Tender Buttons* thirty-two years after she wrote it, Stein recognizes that she understands the book from a different perspective. Stein the explainer of 1946 feels a growing distance from Stein the author of 1914. The passage of time has switched her role from a knowing author to the role of a creative reader.

The readings that she offers of passages of *Tender Buttons* in the interview could not be more different from the kinds of readings that characterize the contemporary critical discourse around Stein. In the sequence in question, the interview selects a passage from the book, reads it, and asks Stein to respond. For example:

A DOG.

A little monkey goes like a donkey that means to say that means to say that more sighs last goes. Leave with it. A little monkey goes like a donkey.

“A little monkey goes like a donkey...” That was an effort to illustrate the movement of a donkey going up a hill, you can see it plainly. “A little monkey goes like a donkey.” An effort to make the movement of the donkey, and so the picture hangs complete. (24)

In order to understand this passage as an earnest reading based on authorial intention, we must accept that it has nothing to do with dogs or monkeys. We must ignore a variety of omissions, in fact: Stein provides no explanation of "that means to say that means to say that more sighs last goes," which we might as a stretch suppose to be an onomatopoeic invocation of a donkey's bray, or "Leave with it." We must suppose that Stein initially intended that the passage describe a specific movement on a hill despite the absence of any suggestion of a hill in the passage. Even if we accept these absences and additions in the explanation, we must suppose that that there is some intrinsic appeal to the idea of an author using an involved code to describe a simple rustic image with no apparent meaning beyond itself.

Explanations of other passages are no more illuminating. Consider, for example, her reading of A WHITE HUNTER:

A WHITE HUNTER.

A white hunter is nearly crazy.

This is an abstract, I mean an abstraction of color. If a hunter is white he looks white, and that gives you a natural feeling that he is crazy, a complete portrait by suggestion, that is what I had in mind to write. (24)

Even though she has elsewhere claimed that she did not understand her text until it was already written, she speaks in the confident language of intention: "that is what I had in mind to write." She again speaks in a language of perfect ease. The reader gets a "natural feeling that he is crazy," just as in the prior passage the reader "can see it plainly." Just as she does in the first passage, Stein invokes language of completion and closure: "so the picture hangs complete," "a complete portrait by suggestion." That sense of completion flies in the face, however, of the qualified partiality in the "nearly crazy" of the passage from *Tender Buttons*.

Critics have often cited Stein's theorization of *Tender Buttons* from "Composition as Explanation," the *Lectures in America*, and in other parts of this interview. Few, however, have taken on these bizarre close readings. Can Stein possibly be serious in these passages? Given their sheer improbability and Stein's avoidance of explaining significant parts of the passages even as they make claims of closure and completion, it seems unlikely. Stein was not a proponent of "putting of it in other words," as she made clear on the lecture tour, so it is no surprise that when someone asks her to put her work in other words the result seems like a joke. By offering close readings of her own work every bit as incomplete and inventive as those of the critics who would follow her, Stein plays Humpty Dumpty to her own impossible poetry.

Declaring *Tender Buttons* impossible should not be understood as a call for critical defeatism but for recognition that Stein expected something quite different from her readers than most authors before her or contemporary to her. James Joyce, for example, played up the great difficulty of his work: "The demand that I make of my

reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works" (qtd. in Ellmann 703). Stein repeatedly asked not that her readers devote their lives to reading her works but that her readers experience delight and enjoyment through her works. She did not want readers to carefully reconstruct the process through which she composed her poetry, nor did she plant secret coded meanings in it for diligent readers to uncover. She wanted her readers to find their own stories in it, even if those stories were different from her own. Stein's newness was not just a way of saying the old things in new ways but a revision of traditional notions of authorship and readership, a revision that keeps her work persistently new:

You see it is the people who generally smell of the museums who are accepted, and it is the new who are not accepted. You have got to accept a complete difference. It is hard to accept that, it is much easier to have one hand in the past. That is why James Joyce was accepted and I was not. He leaned toward the past, in my work the newness and the difference is fundamental. ("Transatlantic Interview" 29)

Asking readers to studiously work to uncover meanings and intentions that an author planted in a coded text represents just one more way of leaning toward the past. The complete difference in practices of writing and reading that Stein proposes looks toward the future, when a reader will interpret her language with a new kind of sense. If the reader leans toward the authorial past, she will only find nonsense.

How fitting, then, that this impossible poetry built from nonsense language sits inside a book whose engagement with order and disorder makes it worthy of

Wonderland. On its face, *Tender Buttons* seems the picture of order. The tripartite structure of Objects, Food, and Rooms appears as an orderly list on the contents page. In the first two sections, the capitalized titles appear next to the text of the poetry as if to suggest a term and its meaning. As Kaufmann notes, Stein "designs the book like a dictionary" (458).⁶¹ The second main section, Food, even offers an itemized menu of the poetry that will follow:

ROASTBEEF; MUTTON; BREAKFAST; SUGAR; CRANBERRIES; MILK;
EGGS; APPLE; TAILS; LUNCH; CUPS; RHUBARB; SINGLE; FISH; CAKE;
CUSTARD; POTATOES; ASPARAGUS; BUTTER; END OF SUMMER;
SAUSAGES; CELERY; VEAL; VEGETABLE; COOKING; CHICKEN;
PASTRY; CREAM; CUCUMBER; DINNER; DINING; EATING; SALAD;
SAUCE; SALMON; ORANGE; COCOA; AND CLEAR SOUP AND
ORANGES AND OAT-MEAL; SALAD DRESSING AND AN ARTICHOKE; A
CENTRE IN A TABLE. (263)

One need only look at the terms in this orderly menu, however, to see the kinds of disruptions of category, knowledge, and reading with which the book interests itself. ROASTBEEF and MUTTON are food, of course, but what about BREAKFAST and LUNCH, which are composed of food but actually designate the custom of meals? CUPS would fit better into the preceding section, Objects. The adjective SINGLE proves an aberration in this parallel list of noun phrases. AND CLEAR SOUP AND ORANGES AND OAT-MEAL suddenly rejects the by-then established convention of the semicolon

as a paratactic marker for the list's items. And what could A CENTRE IN A TABLE possibly be?

The picture of order that this warped table of contents suggests breaks down further once the reader discovers it does not accurately describe the sections that follow it. Two separate poems named MILK appear. POTATOES becomes three poems, two named POTATOES and one named ROAST POTATOES. Foods features four separate poems named CHICKEN. The two poems SINGLE and FISH promised in the initial list become the one poem SINGLE FISH. CHAIN BOATS and WAY LAY VEGETABLE appear in the sequence, seemingly from nowhere. The CLEAR SOUP and OAT-MEAL of AND CLEAR SOUP AND ORANGES AND OAT-MEAL vanish from the sequence only to appear as part of a sentence in the poem ORANGE IN: "Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oatmeal" (58) actually appears twice in that poem. These repeated inconsistencies are not printing errors or frivolous details but an integral part of the structure of the book, a book that seeks at every turn to remind its reader that its external picture of ordered meaning will give way to a text whose ordering force must come from the reader herself.

These willful inconsistencies are funny, even ridiculous. They reflect an authorial spirit concerned not so much with revealing the true reality of carafes, or glazed glitter, or oranges, or salmon, but with revealing the unexpected pleasures that readers will find in words, even in words that reflect an unrecoverable play of consciousness, words that may resolve into sense but only a sense different from the author's. Stein and Carroll both understood that there is something funny about the human drive toward meaning, what

Sewell calls "the mind's force toward order" (44) that nonsense elicits. Nonsense language inspires interpretation nonetheless, as the multiple interpretations that Carroll applies to Jabberwocky and the involved critical discourse around *Tender Buttons* show. Stein finishes *Tender Buttons* with a punchline: "all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain" (78). "All this makes" promises a synthesis, a meaningful significance to all the baffling words that have come before. That Stein gives the reader the magnificently incongruous pair of an asparagus and a fountain as the seeming resolution of the book gestures only toward more bafflement and absurdity in the interpretive process.

The anecdote from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in which Stein describes the production and reception of *Tender Buttons* reveals the lighthearted attitude she adopted toward the work:

...at any rate it was a very charming little book and Gertrude Stein was enormously pleased, and it, as every one knows, had an enormous influence on all young writers and started off columnists in the newspapers of the whole country on their long campaign of ridicule. I must say that when the columnists are really funny, and they quite often are, Gertrude Stein chuckles and reads them aloud to me. (156)

Stein does not deny the import or influence of her book, but she describes it in diminutive terms as "a very charming little book." She does not appear to be wounded by the "campaign of ridicule," but to delight in the attention that her strange work receives. So what if the columnists think her book ridiculous? In many ways, it is. Ridicule is an

acceptable risk for a writer of productive nonsense, and the interest of the columnists only shows that Stein's experimental project has worked, that it is producing the varied reactions and meanings that she hoped it would. Now that Stein's work has become an accepted and widely read part of the modernist canon, it would serve our critical discourse well to adopt an attitude closer to Stein's own. Stein was a poet of words rather than a poet of images, and the pleasure of *Tender Buttons* lies in the sound, surprise, and delight of a language close to nonsense more than in the heavily qualified and contingent meanings that critics have found in it.

CHAPTER 3

Nonsense Play and Ridiculous Aesthetics in Bob Brown's *Readies**The Readies, Modernism, and Information Overload*

During the 1910s, while the hack writer, stock trader, and avant-gardist Bob Brown was living in New York City, he sat in an office watching the unceasing flow of information on his ticker-tape machine. The stock symbols and numbers that flowed by, "TB-400-63-1/2-1/4-200-3/..." (*RFBBM* 167), while undeniably boring, reminded Brown of his recent experience reading Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. "I didn't know what it was about then any more than I know what's about anything she's writing today," Brown would write in 1931, "but I can still read it when I haven't anything more stimulating, and get a kick out of it" (*RFBBM* 161). Stein's writing had shown Brown that "a story might be anything," that "A story didn't have to be a tangible hunk of bread interest" (*RFBBM* 162). To alleviate his boredom, Brown attempted to find a story in the ticker tape more engaging than the coded flow of capital between corporations and shareholders. Imposing his modernist literary interests on the ticker-tape code, Brown imagined what kind of stories the ticker-tape would tell if it had authorial intention behind it:

A heavy didactic market came along, must be Henry James at the helm. A wave of joss-stick chop-stick jazz made the tape toss choppily in a Conrad sea. A melodramatic market, a Chinatown horror by Thomas Burke. That was it. "TB"

might stand for Thomas Burke as well as for Timken Roller Bearings. (*RFBBM* 167)

When Brown got bored of imagining an authorial voice for the ticker-tape's alphanumeric code, he imaginatively deformed the text in hopes of producing something more interesting than mere numbers and stock symbols:

Might be interesting like Gertrude Stein if you read it backward and left out the figures: "Tonnage Oct. divided passes MKT... UPR sheet balance quarter. Owners favor settled Wash. Tacoma in Strike... Total Sept. orders West. Us. for contract big rumored:" No, not any more interesting, but certainly different, and that in itself was a relief" (*RFBBM* 167).⁶²

Brown marks this experience of creative reading as a key inspiration for the reading machine he proposed in 1930 and for which he is most well known today: "I had to think of the reading machine... because I read Gertrude Stein and ticker-tapes in Wall Street" (*RFBBM* 160).

The fortunes that he had made on Wall Street and later, in Brazil, had allowed Brown to pursue an expatriate lifestyle in Paris starting in 1928, where he associated with avant-garde circles. Among the contributors to *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine* (1931),⁶³ the collection in which he tells his ticker-tape story, were such pivotal modernists as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Stein, and F.T. Marinetti. Brown lived in Paris for only a few years, until the stock ticker on which he had once attempted to impose fanciful stories intervened in his own story. Brown's investments on Wall Street and in Brazil had foundered, and Brown was forced to return to the United States.

Brown produced eight books of experimental poetry during his time in Paris, but he is remembered best for proposing a reading machine that was to realize the ticker-tape experience he had only imagined before. Much like a microfilm reader, Brown's machine was to be comprised of two reels. A tape printed with microscopic text would flow between them at a rate determined by the reader. The reader would situate her eyes before a magnifying glass, its zoom level decided by the reader, and the text would flow by. A *New York Times* article has recently called Brown "The Godfather of the e-Reader" (Schuessler), and Brown's seeming prophecy for digital devices has kindled critical interest in his writing, particularly for critics working at the intersections of literary studies and media studies. Brown has also proven interesting to critics studying visual poetry. Brown's emphasis on an optical writing that would not merely ape sound but assert its own visual identity, for example, guided Jerome McGann's assertion that *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine* will eventually "be recognized as a work of signal importance" (*Black Riders* 89).

By emphasizing Brown's predictive powers, however, many critics have taken as straightforward and enthusiastic a proposal that is often ironic and ambivalent. McGann rightly calls Brown's reading machine "half-serious half-playful," but many critics have disregarded the playful side altogether. Accounting for this playful side marks Brown's *Readies* experiment as an important episode in modernist nonsense and ridiculousness, not just as an important episode in modernism and technology.

In Brown and his preposterous *Readies* project, a number of strands that characterize ridiculous modernism come together. Like the lowbrow philistines of

Chapter 1, he experiences modernism less from the lofty vantage of high art than from a position several notches lower on the cultural spectrum. Brown does not always ridicule modernism, but he nevertheless recognizes keenly and celebrates the element of the ridiculous at work in modernism. Like Hugo Ball, Brown urges a new form of nonsense that might prompt a radical rethinking of the ways that readers approach language and the ways that writing can intervene in the world. Like Stein, Brown attempts to foster a modernist aesthetic that breaks with the lofty significance and seriousness of high modernism and embraces delight and engages with the low impulses of laughter.

Critics have often felt the need to demonstrate that Brown intended the machine not as a speculative fancy but as a real thing in the world. For the most part, for example, Michael North takes Brown's "sheer boosterism" (75) seriously, observing that "Brown has astonishing faith in the effect of speed to overcome the conventional nature of alphabetic text" (77). Craig Saper chides those who would regard the reading machine as "a mere novelty, an avant-garde artwork, a clever joke" ("After *Words*" 39). Craig Dworkin looks on much of Brown's writing with a degree of disapproval, observing that "Modernist technophilia was rarely as unconflicted as Brown's" (83 n. 6).

Brown did take steps toward building his machine. A photograph of a prototype adorns the frontispiece of *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine*, and Brown's *Words* (1931) tests the microscopic print technology necessary for the production of reading machine tapes. The humorous style in which Brown presents his plan, however, make his goals for the machine less clear. Hardly a sentence of the *Readies* manifestos passes without a loaded pun, an outrageous portmanteau, or a glaring contradiction, and this densely

playful style casts doubt on the earnestness of Brown's intentions for the machine. Brown puts just enough effort into the machine to convince others that he might be serious. But in the *Readies* manifestos, he makes his machine appear a preposterous encumbrance to reading that turns all texts into a speedy flow of nonsense. In select moments in the manifestos, Brown makes bold claims for the promise of the machine, but his willfully ridiculous nonsense play makes it clear that he does not often believe those claims.

The first page of *The Readies* pamphlet begins straightforwardly and seriously. "The written word hasn't kept up with the age," Brown writes. "The movies have outmanoeuvred it. We have the talkies, but as yet no *Readies*" (7). Soon however, Brown begins to pack his language with playful puns:

I don't mean maybe breakemup words I mean smashum (from the ancient Chinese ginseng root s a m s h u).

I Proustly rejoice in Jamesre.

I regurgitate with Gert. (7)

Many readings of *The Readies* have sifted out Brown's puns and language play in favor of more declamatory moments, such as, "Writing must become more optical, more eye-teasing, more eye-tasty, to give the word its due and tune-in on the age. Books are antiquated word containers" (18). Brown proclaims the book antiquated, of course, in the midst of a book that revels in the possibilities of print. The apparent realization of the reading machine in digital technology has blinded critics to the irony of his work. To understand the significance of *The Readies* as a piece of experimental writing and the reading machine as a speculative provocation for modernism, one must grapple with the

nonsense. *The Readies* may contain suggestions of the instruction manual and the advertising brochure, but Brown writes it as a playfully modernist literary text, and it must be read as one.

In part because he adopts such a playful and nonsensical style, blending Stein's disruptive grammar, Joyce's portmanteaus, Marinetti's aphoristic insistence, and Barnum's huckster showmanship, it can be hard to place Brown's proposals in relation to other versions of modernism. Brown nevertheless pulls together many recent strands of modernist criticism. Brown, for example, traverses the entire spectrum of cultural value, from elite high culture to unrepentantly popular writing for the culture industry. In addition to his experimental works, North notes, Brown wrote "jingles, advertisements, news stories, and popular novels," along with the first novelization of a Hollywood film, *What Happened to Mary* (1913; *North Camera Works* 74). After his time in Paris, Brown even wrote cookbooks and food guides, including *Let There Be Beer!* (1932). Like many modernists, Brown traveled a transnational circuit. In addition to his time in New York and in Paris, he spent most of the 1920s in Brazil. In *Globe-Gliding* (1930), published in the United States as *Nomadness* (1931), Brown writes poems about his travels. As much recent critical work suggests, Brown's work also has special relevance to critics interested in the media ecologies of modernism and to critics interested in the influence of technology on writing.

As the anecdote about Brown's imaginative recreation of the ticker tape indicates, moreover, Brown's work speaks to our current digital moment, characterized by the rapid introduction of new, sometimes confusing technologies and the "information overload"⁶⁴

they foster. Brown offered the Readies as a counterintuitive remedy to the profusion of information from early twentieth-century media technologies. As Paul Stephens notes, Brown tries to “fight overstimulation with more overstimulation” (152), making reading faster, if shallower, to accommodate the speed of the age. Brown embraces the ephemerality not just of the book but of the word itself, which on the machine dashes away from the reader’s eye as soon as it appears. Brown rejects nostalgia in *The Readies* even as he embraces the materiality of print: “forget for the moment the existing medievalism of the BOOK (God bless it, it’s staggering on its last leg and about to fall)” (“Readies” 167). At times in the manifesto, it seems that the book is the enemy to be vanquished by the obviously superior reading machine.

Brown shades his ostensible refusal to look back to the antiquated technology of the book, however, with an earnest appreciation for the book and a sense of the awkward comedy that reading on his machine would induce. In the early twentieth century and in the early twenty-first, the press has tended to speak of public reactions to rapid technological advance in terms of shock, fear, and wonder.⁶⁵ In his *Machine-Age Comedy* (2009), however, Michael North argues that a different reaction, that of laughter, was actually far more common. The machine age “seems to have brought, along with all its other dislocations, a new motive for laughter and perhaps a new form of comedy” (5). Along with the alienation and collapse of authenticity often associated with mechanical reproduction, North asserts that the machine-age public found “something inherently funny in mechanical reproduction” (5), from Buster Keaton to Dziga Vertov, from Rube Goldberg to Marcel Duchamp. Since the “incessant novelty” (5) of modernist art and

writing washes over the public like the repeated cycles of a machine, North points out that it is “possible that modernity itself is governed by a comic rhythm, even when it is not particularly amusing” (5). Whether Brown actually intended to produce the machine or not, he recognized the frightful comedy that would inhere in readers’ experience of it.

In combining an embrace of literary methods enabled by technology with the comic potential of technology, Brown gestures not just toward our contemporary devices, but also toward recent poetic developments that depend on, but also mock, the Internet. In *Uncreative Writing* (2011), Kenneth Goldsmith argues that the vast quantities of text available to people today at the touch of a button have necessitated a poetics of selection that replaces a romantic poetic model of originality and self-expression, which Goldsmith argues lived on even in the so-called “objectivity” of modernism. Poets today need less to write more new language than to “negotiate the vast quantity that exists” (2) through techniques involving “word processing, databasing, recycling, appropriation, intentional plagiarism, identity ciphering, and intensive programming, to name but a few” (2). Such procedural techniques often result in a deeply funny and self-consciously ridiculous aesthetic, as the examples to be explored at the end of this dissertation show. Brown’s *Readies* is relevant to the digital present, then, not just because it describes an early prototype of the machines we increasingly read on today, but also because it comically anticipates the hash of conflicted emotions with which many today embrace technological innovations and the flourishing culture of purposeful ephemeral silliness that has thrived in taste-making circles on the Internet.⁶⁶

The relevance of *The Readies*, however, should be located as much in its own time as today. In contrast to the serious writing and reading that T.S. Eliot promoted so vigorously, Brown reads his modernist contemporaries with unabashed delight. His descriptions of reading Stein and Joyce in particular indicate that Brown had a fine ear for nonsense play and ridiculous poetics, recognizing them as central to the importance, rather than threatening to the seriousness, of the aesthetic novelty of the era. When Brown blends the nonsense style of his chief modernist inspirations with futurist technical writing and the bold claims of advertising hyperbole, he holds together in one text many of the binaries that once characterized the critical discourse on modernism: the hermetically elite and the unapologetically popular; the language of science and the language of poetry; the futurist's acceleration of the new and the traditionalist's nostalgia for the past; the power of language to describe and inaugurate new realities and the heedless aesthetic meaninglessness of nonsense. The heteroglossic nonsense of Brown's style thereby exemplifies the "dialogics of modernism" that Ann L. Ardis has described. That is, Brown's ambivalences reflect the competing desires that characterize most modernist projects—Matei Calinescu has described literary modernism as "both modern and antimodern" (206)—and his contradictions dramatize a larger transnational contest to define the aesthetic characteristics and sociopolitical goals of modernism.

YEZNO! and NOYEZ!

To take at face the proposal in Brown's manifesto, one must either ignore the internal conflicts and contradictions that fill it or treat them as careless accidents of

language that distract from the description of the machine. Brown embraced the contradictions at the heart of the Readies project, and the *Readies* pamphlet playfully defends his simultaneous championing of contradictory points of view. For Brown, modernist nonsense styles offer an ability to speak in multiple directions at once.

At the beginning of the second chapter of *The Readies* pamphlet, Brown “humbly ask[s] to take both sides” “on the question of Word Revolution,” and he invents the nonsense terms “YEZNO” and “NOYEZ” to express his commitment to multiple, contradictory points of view:

Answering “Shall We Demand a Revolution of the Word?” I say Yezno! (From the Am. Fresno [a city], combined with Yes [a state of mind] and Zeno [Z as in Zebra and 0 as in naught.] Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! NOYEZ! (From No as in Knowledge, with a left handed but adriot [*sic*] allusion to the No in the French no i s e t t e and the classical Japanese “No” plays.) (*Readies* 19)

In contrast to the rapid, straightforward writing style that would be necessary for comprehension on the reading machine, this passage demonstrates Brown’s fondness for more explosive forms of signification. Brown says yes and no (and no and yes) to immediately graspable language and to thoroughgoing contortions of language that reveal an underlying polysemy that lurks beneath even the simplest words. Fresno, Zeno, zebras, zeros, knowledge, noisette (Fr. “hazelnut”), and No drama ultimately have little relevance to the project of the reading machine. Brown, however, revels in the material connections that yield these preposterous ideas for what YEZNO and NOYEZ mean. Brown builds a chain of linguistic association built on alternating vocal and visual likeness. He associates

Yezno with Fresno because the two rhyme, but the shift to Zeno depends on the visual rearrangement of letters on the page. The “o” in “Zeno” transforms into a number, “0,” the word for which, absent from the page, bears a visual likeness to “Zeno”: “zero.” The “Z” in the simultaneously nonsensical and meaningful terms “YEZNO and NOYEZ,” a visual mirror of the S of yes, seems chosen specifically for its ability to suggest the verbal ejaculation in the middle of the passage: “Oyez!” By using the term, associated with court proceedings and town criers, Brown asserts a forceful orality in the midst of this text which ostensibly declares the dawn of a purely optical literature independent of sound. Even the most arbitrary suggestion Brown sees in “NOYEZ,” “n o i s e t t e,” serves to complicate the idea of a literature only vocal or only visual as it spreads out to become a piece of visual noise on the page. Even before Brown expresses a wish in the following paragraph that “proof-reading be well looked to” (*Readies* 19), the misspelled “adriot” begins to appear intentional in its adroit clumsiness and also marks *The Readies* as an “ad riot,” a riotous advertisement.

Neither a demonstration of a style of writing of which Brown disapproves nor a purely incidental digression, Brown’s simultaneous embrace of NOYEZ and YEZNO informs the poetics and meaning of *The Readies* as a whole. Brown’s machine purports to offer more flexibility in writing and reading, but the chain of associations that he follows in this passage suggests that print already offers flexibility to writers and readers. Flitting between speech and writing, transforming themselves into other words, and delighting in the playful multiplicity of it all, Brown’s words expand in all directions, demonstrating

on the page the limitations of the straightforwardly linear reading he imagines for the machine.

Failing to take into account the extent to which Brown says “no” at the same time as he says “yes” throughout the *Readies* manifestos can lead to misreadings of Brown’s attitude toward his own project. At one point, for example, Saper insists that Brown “makes explicit the scientific seriousness of his project. In his descriptions of his machine, he talks about his ‘recondite research’ and ‘actual laboratory tests’” (“*After Words*” 37). Brown does indeed mention research and tests in his manifestos, but he does so in ways that undermine the scientific underpinnings of his project and only serve to emphasize distinctions between scientific and literary discourse. The subjects of Brown’s laboratory are words, and his “recondite research” mocks seriousness itself:

But even for the sake of weariness I will not recount more of my recondite research. I only wanted that you should carry away from this chatty reading tonight the picture of a serious little word-wonderer at work among his retorts and cabalistic paraphernalia ...dissecting words for you, TeeTer-ToTtering on Their T-bones, Playing PoPeep with sheePish PPPs, OOzing thrOugh adenoidal OOs, Zipping in Zig-Zags with the Zany Zeds. (*Readies* 4)

Brown may be a scientist, but if so, he is a mad one. The dissection of words he undertakes in this passage leads to Humpty-Dumpty mimologic conclusions in which the shapes of letters determine their characteristics. The crossbar of the *T* totters; the curve of the *P* suggests Little Bo Peep’s crook; the rounded *O*s ooze themselves along; the *Z* zig-zags in accordance with its shape. The passage, like so much of *The Readies*, shifts

between the vocal effects of a “chatty reading” and the assertive visuality of the capitalized *Ts*, *Ps*, *Os*, and *Zs*. Brown takes a similarly fanciful approach to his “actual laboratory tests”: “From actual laboratory tests I have proved that long drawn-out gutta-percha words when stretched to the limit of elasticity invariably snap back and hit the experimenter on the nose with unexpected violence” (*Readies* 11). Brown paints himself into a slapstick parody of an impossible experiment, making flubber of language thirty years before *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961). Brown’s appeals to scientific authority as justification for his machine must be taken with rather more than a grain of salt. He invokes science less to validate the seriousness of his reading machine than to play digressively with the potential of language.⁶⁷

Brown offers praise for the potential of his machine, but his approach to science also shades his approach to the new technology. In the context of the nonsense aesthetics of so much of *The Readies*, a sense of “YEZNO” and “NOYEZ” creeps into Brown’s seemingly clear-cut “yes” to technology. The exaggerations that many critics have understood as evidence of Brown’s naiveté can more confidently be read as caricaturing utopian futurism. The literal rhetoric of *The Readies* implies that the changes brought by the machine will be instantaneous and earth-shaking, but Brown, a careful student of the history of print, knows that changes occur more gradually.

On a literal level, however, Brown promises sweeping change: “Wind-bag writers will find themselves automatically deflated by the new method of reading” (*RFBBM* 206), and “conventional word-prejudices will be automatically overcome, from necessity reading-writing will spring full-blown into being. The Revolution of the Word will be

won” (“Readies” 172). Not only will these changes be momentous, they will be easy: “All that is needed to modernize reading is a little imagination and a high powered magnifying glass” (“Readies” 169). The rhetoric of the *Readies* manifestos makes it sound as if the reading machine will very quickly trump all other approaches to writing and reading, but Brown’s experimental language, in the manifestos and in his other works, suggests that the future will look more varied than that. The promise of a vast “Revolution of the Word” telescopes into the rather more mundane image of Brown’s words revolving around the reels of his machine. His exaggerations at once assert the reading machine as the most significant change in writing and reading technologies since Gutenberg (“Yezno!”) and present the machine as a trivial consumer novelty that Brown hawks with the dubious promises of a sales pitch (“Noyez!”).

Cumbersome Books and Effortless Machines

As he says “yes” to his machine, Brown repeatedly shouts “no!” to its predecessor, the supposedly antiquated book. At the beginning of the appendix to *Readies for Bob Brown’s Machine*, Brown urges the reader to

...shift this tiresome book in your hand, prop up your eyelids with match sticks and move your eyes wearily back and forth over another three thousand lines or so. When you have a reading machine to bring the type right up before your eyes you won’t need to prop them open, or search from one side of the page to the other; words will be brought right up flush with your vision and the reading intake of your mind. (161)

Apologies for the limits of their own print format become a frequent refrain in the *Readies* manifestos. To get through the appendix, “you’ll have to move your eyes back and forth over the fixity of these columns probably four thousand times, and you’ll have to turn at least forty pages” (*RFBBM* 153). In the literal rhetoric of the manifesto, Brown longs for the day when culture will be “rid at last of the cumbersome book, the inconvenience of holding its bulk, turning its pages, keeping them clean, jiggling his weary eyes back and forth in the awkward pursuit of words from the upper left hand corner to the lower right, all over the vast confusing reading surface of the page” (“*Readies*” 168). “But book me no books” (“*Readies*” 170), he writes in response to a competing reading machine designed to display miniature pages. Reacting to a competitor’s proposal of the “Talking Book” as a much-needed invention, Brown writes that Roger Babson “missed the point. What’s needed is a Bookless Book” (*Readies* 39). The reader who prefers to read in a more old-fashioned manner is depicted as a dull laggard, supine at his book, “sipping his thin alphabet soup out of archaic volumes of columns, mewling a little like a puling baby taking mush from the tip of an awkward wooden spoon too gross for his musical rose-buddy temperamental mouth” (*Readies* 47).

The reading machine, on the other hand, will enable reading with the utmost speed and ease. The speed of the reading machine will depend on “the natural celerity of the eye and mind” instead of “the clumsy hand” (*Readies* 35). When the reader turns on the machine, “the whole 100 000 200 000; 300 000 or million words spills out before his eyes and rolls on restfully or restlessly as he wills, in one continuous line of type ...not blurred by the presence of lines above and below as they are confusingly placed on a

columned page” (*Readies* 35). North argues that Brown’s faith in the reading speeds attainable to users of his machine is real, that applying “the movement of the cinema” to the written word “would somehow short-circuit the conventional meanings of words and letters, allowing other, more genuine meanings immediate access to the eye” (78). Brown could only have recognized, however, that there are real limitations to the speed with which the human mind can read.

The literal sales rhetoric of Brown’s manifesto promises that the new forms of literature his machine would foster will help readers overcome such natural limitations, but such claims are purposely overblown. Thumbing his nose at all practicality, he claims that “at high gear ordinary literature may be absorbed at the rate of full length novels in half hours” (“*Readies*” 168). Entire trilogies could “be read at one sitting” (“*Readies*” 169). Leaving aside the fact that a reader who attempted to spin a novel by his eyes in thirty minutes would experience it as incomprehensible nonsense, Brown imagines readers who would absorb dozens of books a day. The need even to change reels would disappear as new products became available, including “clips of a dozen.” Reading all the content the reader wants would “be as simple and painless as shaving with a Schick razor” (169). The mail-order Book of the Month club, which began in 1926, would be superseded by “The Book of the Day or the Book of the Hour Club” (169). By modestly proposing the commodification of the literary product in such a way, Brown ironically embraces a culture industry that privileges quantity without regard for quality. Far from an earnest selling point for the machine, the metaphor of the razor indicates that Brown

believes the fast pace of contemporary culture transforms books into so much cultural pap.

Brown complains of the cumbersomeness of print, but his machine takes reading cumbersomeness to a new level. Brown repeatedly praises the machine as portable and convenient, but its typewriter size proves significantly larger than the vast majority of books. The reader, stationary before the relentless flow of the machine, runs the risk of total exhaustion at the hands of the machine, a situation for which Brown proposes another technological remedy:

The only apparent change the amateur reader may bemoan is that he might not fall asleep as promptly before a spinning reading roll as over a droning book in his lap, but again necessity may come to the rescue with a radio attachment which will shut off the current and automatically stop the type-flow on receipt of the first sensitive vibration of a literary snore. (*Readies* 35)

The machine will be so captivating that the reader will forget to turn it off. The “literary snore” in this passage, of course, points at once to the text flowing through the machine and the reader’s own snore, produced by the hypnotic motion of the text. This image of the reader at the machine is not an especially rosy one. As Stephens points out, “Brown implicates his reader in a sort of *Clockwork Orange* scene wherein the tired reader must continually fight sleepiness and distraction through artificial means” (153).

This depiction of a reader trapped by the the machine contrasts with the promise of reader empowerment that Brown offers elsewhere in the manifestos. “Many readers cannot stand the strain of small type,” so Brown offers the reader “6 point, 8, 10, 12, 16

or any size that suits him" (35). The machine contains "all modern improvements," and the reader can determine the pace at which the words stream by (36). In addition to these advantages in terms of user experience, the machine has several practical advantages over conventional reading, including a smaller expenditure of ink, a significant savings in paper, and a lower cost.

Brown's emphasis on practicality and utility in these catalogues of advantages, however, pales in comparison to his passion for the book. Brown asserts that the Readies will inaugurate a new era of visual writing, but his other experiments in visual writing would be impossible on the reading machine, for they depend on conceiving of the page itself as an image. Words regularly shift between visual and verbal registers and transform into other words on the page in *The Readies* manifestos themselves, and many of Brown's other projects from the same era, especially *1430-1930* and *Words*, emphasize the space of the page. Even in the midst of *The Readies* pamphlet itself, Brown uses the dimensionality of the page to significant effect, especially in chapter 2, "A Twoway Fish," where the dialogic relationship between two columns of print seems the very point. As critics including McGann and Dworkin have noted, moreover, *The Readies* does not just augur a new era of visual prosody but also embodies it. The pages of *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine*, supposedly designed as a surrogate for an optical literature only to be realized in the future, often use the space of the page as a formal element of the poetry. Even the name Brown chose for his press, "Roving-Eye Press," glorifies the eye in motion, not an eye rendered static before the flow of text on the machine.

The books regularly apologize, however, that they are hobbled by their status as print. In the *Readies* anthology, for example, Brown explains that “All the hyphens, arrows, dots, dashes and connecting signs in the stories printed are put in only to suggest a flow of type, when these stories are printed on a tape for moving reading all marks will be left out...” (207). Hilaire Hiler’s preface to the same book similarly stipulates, “The text in this book ...has been expressly written to be read on the reading machine” (8). Hiler nevertheless hopes that “the reader will be able to visualize these experiments in optical reading in spite of the fact that they are not in motion” (8). Though Brown fashions his books as surrogates for a technology yet to come, a “presentation in book-form of the imagined literary effect of a technology that had yet to be produced” (Saper “Afterword” 61), the books have a unique visual prosody of their own. If the dashes, dots, hyphens, and other symbols were so purely incidental to the writing they punctuate, Brown might have chosen a single standard marker that represented the motion of the machine. Instead, Brown and his contributors strew a variety of dingbats and spaces across their writing, rendering *The Readies* books themselves, and not just the Readies of the future, visually remarkable texts.

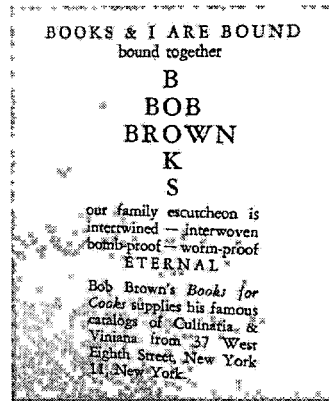
Brown balances his condemnations of the book, in fact, with outright expressions of his deep and abiding love for the book form. Though he regularly speaks of the death of the book, Brown acknowledges that the reading machine will augment, not replace, the traditional codex form: “There will be books always in spite of the reading machine, just as there will be Fourth of July balloons forever in spite of airplanes...” (*RFBBM* 207). While an airplane might well be eminently practical and, to many futurists, beautiful,

Brown does not present himself as a person who would deny the value of seemingly frivolous balloons. The story that Brown tells in the appendix of *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine* repeatedly references his love of books: "I accepted the book. I kissed the book and believed" (156). As often as he presents himself as the great destroyer of Gutenberg's legacy, Brown asserts himself as a devoted inheritor of print:

I have lived with five hundred years of printed books and have felt the same papyrus that Nebuchadnezzar might have touched, and all this time I have lived in living wonder, a great want-to-know about words, their here and their there, their this and their that, and the most efficacious manner of administering the written word to the patient. ("Readies" 173)

The emotions at the beginning of this passage, Brown's "living wonder" and "great want-to-know about words," contrast with the clinical language at its end, with its emphasis on efficacy and "administering the written word to the patient," as if literary language were a pill to be grudgingly swallowed or a liquid remedy to be shot through a syringe. By juxtaposing this cold vision of efficiency with the willful vagueness and alliteration of the clauses that come before, Brown implicitly establishes the value even in the seeming frivolity of formulations such as "their here and their there, their this and their that."

Old and antiquated as it may be, Brown continued to treat the book as a central element of his identity even as he proclaimed its end. The 1959 edition of *1450-1950* bears a signature that intertwines Brown's name with the word *books*:



Given the closeness Brown apparently felt to books, he offers declamations such as “book me no books” with tongue planted firmly in cheek. As he complains about the faults of the book throughout *The Readies*, Brown also backhandedly insinuates that the book offers a rather pleasant reading experience, all things considered, and one that allows for a significant degree of visual experimentation.⁶⁸ *The Readies* points to a bold technological future of reading, but it also satirizes a rush to adopt quickly the newest consumer technologies that has only accelerated with time. Indeed, as Brown well knew, his vision for future versions of his machine—“As soon as my reading machine becomes a daily necessity certainly it will be out of date. Pocket reading machines will be the vogue then” (*Readies* 46)—had already been realized in the compact package of the old-fashioned book.

The Literary Language of the Readies

Much of Brown’s manifesto concerns itself first with outlining the practical advantages of the reading machine for readers, but he also expected that the machine would effect radical changes in writing. Extending the changes in writing that

experimental modernists like Joyce and Stein had already begun, the machine would not just enable new literary forms but significantly revise grammar itself.

In *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine*, Brown refers to an article he once read that helped inspire the machine. The article, called "No Talk Perfect," cited scientific studies that affirmed a speaker's ability to communicate ideas in language, even if the listener heard only part of an utterance. "Even when he fails to hear correctly 25% of the sounds of speech," the article noted, "a normal person understands the conversation" (*RFBBM* 171). Though the article concerned orality, Brown adopted its lessons for his new optical literature.

On the most basic level, then, the reading machine would excise from literary language many of the short words that connect grammar but signify nothing in and of themselves. Brown suspected that modern readers, much like the listeners in the study, could miss seemingly crucial verbal cues but still understand communication.

The up-to-date eye scarcely sees the "thes", "ands", "ofs", "tos", "as", "ins", "thats", "fromits"; it picks out the meaty nouns, verbs and qualifying words so placed as to assume importance; only essential words get over to the practiced reading eye, the bulky residue is overlooked. (*Readies* 42)

Brown's machine would only put to the tape what was already occurring for the modern reader. "Useless, unimportant sentence-encumberers" would be abandoned, and "they will not be missed at all by the eager eye in its excitement at witnessing a moving type spectacle, a READIE, performing before its Mind's Vision and the sensitive Inner Ear" (*Readies* 42). By letting "useless" words drop out of language, the reading machine

would help “fresh Spring pansy winking ones pop up” (*Readies* 43). Brown does not actually believe that “thes,” “ands,” and “fromits” are so useless, however, or he would leave them out of his manifestos. Indeed, much as Stein hoped to make seemingly trivial aspects of language visible, by dismissing these functional pieces of language Brown actually emphasizes their importance.

If the “thes” and “ands” are too short and useless, those fresh Spring pansy winking words must not be too lengthy. At the same time as Brown rails against the polysyllabic language of academia, language that he sees as dominant in high modernist poetics, he gleefully employs it in his own writing:

Shortening words I understand better than dragging them out. Eftsoons: linking letters in festoons I abhor. Underslung German dachshund, blown-up bumpy blimp, sausage words may be salivary to the starving mind but they’re enough to shatter my meticulous monocle. Temptation to new word-bunglér’s is to make meaningless mouthings like “Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination....” (*Readies* 11)

Similarly, “long-winded maundering words like Pseudpigraphous just go Puff when pricked with a pin, and pompous, prolix, sesquipedalian, Johnsonian inflations like infundbuliform when lightly poked in the bladder instantly inspissate and whortle down the funnel” (*Readies* 9). Less critiques of academic writing or difficult modernist poetics than playful digressions, however, these passages highlight the paradox of Brown’s preferences about short words and long words. However short words written for the

reading machine will be, the motion of the machine will end up stringing them together into the very “sausage words” that Brown complains about.

The sample readie writings that Brown offers in his manifesto, in fact, resemble a series of word-sausages linked together by hyphens. At one point, Brown spontaneously shifts into readie style as he recounts the intertwined history of print and language. He begins with Gutenberg:

...a READIE runs on before the eye continuously — on forever in-a-single-line-I-see-1450-invention-movable-type-Gutenberg-Wynkyn-de-Worde-Jimmy-the-Ink-Caxton-though-Chinese-centuries-before-printed-thousand-page-books-on-silk-leaves-furinished-by-local-silk-words-no-two-leaves-tinted-alike-printing-from-dainty-porcelain-type-same-stuff-makes-teacups- -dreams-Shakespeare-bending-over-workshop-making-language-laboriously-bellowing-blacksmith-tuning-out-grotesqueries-at-forge.... (43)⁶⁹

As the names of figures important to the early history of print flash by, Brown’s sequence suggests a vision of rapid technological progress toward the machine. The qualifying clause about Chinese printing technology, however, demonstrates the usefulness of those seemingly useless grammatically connecting words. “Gutenberg-Wynkyn-de-Worde-Jimmy-the-Ink-Caxton” may successfully convey to the reader a rapid history in names, but Brown cannot convey the complex corrective to common sense represented by the history of Chinese print without the simple words he dismisses elsewhere. The image of Shakespeare as a word-blacksmith at the forge, while memorable, depends on many of the longer words that Brown has stated a preference against. Eventually, the sequence

proceeds past modernism—"Walt Whitman-Gert Stein-Jim Joyce-Stephen Crane's-Black-Riders ... Cummings-Boyle-Sandburg"—to the future era of the Readies:

Optical-Writers-running-round-newhorizon-rims-rhythmically-Eye-Writers-
writing-endless-lines-for-reading-machines-more-optical-mental-more-colorful-
readable-than-books - - - - simple-foolproof-Readie-Machine-conveying-
breathless-type-to-eager-eyereaders-tickling-Inner-ears-dumping-Inner-ear-
Eyefuls-of-wriggling-writer-right-before-receptive-ocular-brain-portals-bringing-
closer-hugging-readerwriter-now-there-is-more-mental-necking-radioactivity-
television-readievision-going-on-more-moving-reading-more-moving-. (44)

Even in these short sections, the "ofs," and "fromits," if not the "ands," clarify relationships between words and help make sense out of the stream of words. Though he dismisses the section as a "crude attempt" to demonstrate the motion of the machine, Brown's choice to continue using the functional grammatical words that he has elsewhere dismissed demonstrates the contradictory game of his writing.

Brown's forcefully promoted yet inconsistent proclamations about the future of grammar follow in an avant-garde tradition of reshaping language. Marinetti had been proposing radical revisions to poetic language since 1912, in his "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature":

1. **It is imperative to destroy syntax and scatter one's nouns at random, just as they are born.**
2. **It is imperative to use verbs in the infinitive,** so that the verb can be elastically adapted to the noun and not subordinated to the I of the writer who

observes or imagines. Only the infinitive can give a sense of the continuity of life and the elasticity of the intuition that perceives it.

3. **Adjectives must be abolished**, so that the noun retains its essential color. The adjective, which by its nature tends to render shadings, is inconceivable within our dynamic vision, for it presupposes a pause, a meditation. (119-120)

The grammatical proclamations go on: “Adverbs must be abolished,” “Every noun must have its double,” “Abolish all punctuation” (120). Brown’s manifesto extends the logic of speed and action in Marinetti’s manifesto to the point of exaggeration. Manically parodying Marinetti’s manifesto, Brown scatters haphazard stances toward language throughout the manifestos only to violate them at every turn.

Brown’s language-simplifying fervor also bears comparison to more practical proposals for language change in the twentieth century, particularly C.K. Ogden’s 1930 proposal of Basic English. The simplified version of English promised to become an international language, foster “debabelization,” and thereby contribute to the project of world peace. With Basic, which featured a core vocabulary of only 850 words and a short set of grammatical rules to arrange those words, Ogden hoped “to give to everyone a second, or international, language, which will take as little of the learner’s time as possible” (*Debabelization* 9). In Basic, Ogden argued, “everything may be said for all the purposes of everyday existence; the common interests of men and women, general talk, news, trade and science” (*Debabelization* 9). The dream of world peace implied by the project of Basic, of course, was tinged with an edge of imperialism, the inherent belief that of course English should be the common language of the world.

Much like the language of Brown's *Readies*, the proposed simplicity of Basic also stood to introduce new complications to language, as Rudolf Flesch memorably pointed out in 1944. As World War II drew to a close, Basic was bandied about as a post-war universal language embraced even by Winston Churchill. Flesch pointed out, however, that the effort to simplify introduced more and more connective words, Brown's "ofs," "ands," and "fromits." "Meet my cousin Mary" would become "Come across Mary, my father's sister's daughter." "I have a steady job as file clerk with a stock-broker" becomes "I have well fixed regular work as an office worker on boxes for keeping paper in order, with a man whose business is trading in equal parts of the money with which a company's business was started and which gave the owner a right to a part in the company's profits" (Flesch 342). The promising political motives of Basic, Flesch pointed out, resulted in a linguistic mess, an aesthetic abomination that finally introduced obscurity where it hoped to introduce clarity.

Like Ogden and many avant-garde linguistic experimenters, from the *Zaum* poets' dream of "A transnational language, starting from 'zero'" (Caws 235) to Ball's evasion of national language in the sound poems, Brown satirically posits his reading machine as a potential solution to polyglot transnationalism. As he does with regard to so many other matters in the *Readies* manifestos, however, Brown speaks in two directions at once on whether his machine hopes to transcend or solidify linguistic barriers. At times, he offers an extreme anti-international rhetoric that parodies a jingoistic nationalist mindset: "These desperanto language-melangers spik English writers who threaten to internationalize the word horrify, scarify me, as the Bolshevik Boy of socializing intent

hobgoblined all virtuous kept women five years ago” (*Readies* 13). In predictable fashion, Brown seems to take great pleasure in mixing dialects and languages at the same time as he condemns the same practice. When Brown says that he “had enough of Melanguages back in Milwaukee when I was a bleating kid,” he points to a short verse in hybrid German and English vernaculars as an illustration:

Der cow hat over

Der fence gejumped

Und der cabbages

Goddamaged. (*Readies* 14).

At times, Brown frames his impulse to mix languages as endorsement: “The pidgin English rendering of Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be, that is the question’ into ‘Can do, no can do. How fashion?’ short-suits me” (*Readies* 11).

Such admixtures of linguistic traditions play into the most-far reaching implication that Brown imagines for his machine. At one point, he argues that the machine, like Ogden’s Basic English, might become a medium through which various linguistic traditions can be united as one. He presents the project as a world-unifying project on the order of the Tower of Babel:

Manifestos have been broadcast in all tongues in all times, dating from the one

God issued at the Tower of Babble, which carries on today in the Unknown

Tongue by which Holy Rollers commune. Maybe when we lift our creative heads

too high again through the unexpected outlet of the Reading Machine God will

come along and pie the type and we'll have to begin all over again. But until then
lets be busy at our tower. ("Readies" 171)

Brown's rhetoric implies that his machine might contribute to debabelization in a few distinct ways. First, the simplified language of the reading machine might make it easier for those unfamiliar with English to process the language: because actual motion, rather than linguistic grammar, would offer the connections between words, learners could focus on vocabulary without worrying about grammar. Second, the machine might resemble the image-based aesthetic of the movies, entertaining the reader, if not through actual signification, through the entertaining motion of the type itself. Finally, the machine might contribute to an internationalization of language by promoting a different sort of reading attention. Much as Brown enjoys reading Gertrude Stein despite his inability to understand her writing, the machine might help readers experience language as a series of images and sounds for the Inner Ear, rather than as a conduit to intentional meaning. The Readies that Brown and others wrote for the machine use an English vocabulary, but the idea seems to be that it levels the playing field because everyone, whether she knows English or not, will have to learn a new way of reading to experience the machine properly. In that sense, the machine renders all language foreign and demands that its users learn to read anew.

While Brown proposes many strict formulations about what the style of literary language ought to be, the actual feelings about language he expresses in his manifestos tend toward letting a thousand flowers bloom over proposing one specific model for the future of language and literature. For Brown, words rarely seem to be the vehicles of pure

mechanic efficiency that his descriptions of the machine often depict them to be. More often, Brown writes about words in terms of a playful organicism, as “butter-cup-eyed innocents” (*Readies* 16). The words Brown most loves become playful, even cute animals, living, breathing, lovable beings rather than so many cogs in a machine. The subtitle to Brown’s *Words* reflects this nearly romantic approach to words: “I but bend my finger in a beckon and words, birds of words, hop on it, chirping” (title page). Even as they praise the machine, the *Readies* manifestos regularly share in such romanticism, as when Brown shifts toward a more extended poem about words:

I play with words

Tossing in the air an armful, as a child revelling in autumn leaves

Loving the crisp rustle as they cascade about my ears

Again picking them up as wet pebbles, aglisten on a cool sea beach

Making patterns of them—pictures—filling spaces with words as artists do with
paints

I pet and fondle a sentimental word until it purrs and clash with a rough one till it
growls (*Readies* 18)

In the poem, words shift from leaves, to pebbles, to paints, to purring cats and growling dogs. The machine and its mechanical vision of words drop from the manifesto in this moment as this cloyingly sentimental vision of language takes shape. In the remainder of the poem, Brown asserts that words must be treated with respect as he limns his relationship to them:

I am as human with words as I am with you

Never exploiting them
 Never giving them an inch of advantage over me
 I know words
 And they seek me out
 We are together
 Important, both of us
 And entirely useless
 Unless you need the thing we give. (*Readies* 18)

All the emphasis on practicality and utility that fills the manifesto gives way to the admission of importantly useless usefulness in the last three lines of the poem. By declaring words important but useless, Brown undercuts the trumpeting of the practicality, convenience, and usefulness of his machine that he does elsewhere in the manifesto. Of course, the extremity of Brown's love for words in the poem begins to approach caricature. Brown does not present this poem as a clear repudiation of the language of his machine, and as is true of most of the manifesto, it is difficult to gauge how seriously to take the passage. If this mawkish vision of word-love represents a sappy extreme, however, it is an extreme Brown favors over the cold machinery of language he presents elsewhere in the manifestos.

It becomes nearly impossible to fix Brown's preferences for the language of literature on his machine. He glorifies brief words and condemns long words, then declares the uselessness of the shortest words in the language and employs long words to achieve verbal pyrotechnics. He claims that his machine will connect readers from

different linguistic traditions in a new cross-cultural literary genre, but his vision of reading implies that incomprehension can be as valuable as communication. He implies that a new optical literature can be achieved only in the context of his new machine, but he demonstrates repeatedly that printed books can engage readers' visual sense. He declares the urgent need to mechanize words, then figures words as playfully organic creatures whose value lies in their difference from cold machines. In contrast to critical narratives that see Brown's vision headed toward a single coherent literary vision to be realized on his machine, the divergent streams of his arguments about language show that he embraces a multiplicity of conflicting possibilities.

The Modernism of the Reading Machine

Once he became an experimental modernist, Brown did not wholly abandon the lowbrow sympathies that shaped his approach to writing for pay earlier in his career. In the memoir sections of *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine*, Brown tells tales of speedily writing what he ungently but unapologetically calls "crap" (RFBBM 168). In one instance, Brown and a friend co-wrote an entire novel in a day. The two wrote alternating chapters simultaneously, and their knowledge of the other's writing was restricted to the openings and closings of chapters. Speed was the emphasis of such writing, because more speed meant faster money. Many of his modernist peers would scoff at considering money as they pursued their art, but Brown unabashedly admits that he "wanted to be a rich man as well as a great writer" (RFBBM 156). Brown's avant-garde proclivities, of course, undercut this project. The reading machine might be understood as a potential

product from a pitchman, a get-rich-quick scheme. Yet it is also an avant-garde art-stunt, and the gleeful capitalist consumerism and salesmanship of the Readies manifestos often crosses into satire.

After naming Marcel Proust, Joyce, and Stein as prime influences on the first page of *The Readies* pamphlet, for example, Brown approaches other modernists in a rapid-fire catalogue. The blunt preferences that pepper the catalogue do not linger on any single figure, and Brown embraces the modernists with the unfettered enthusiasm of modern fandom:

I prefer E.E. Cummings word crumplets to R.L. Stevenson's crummy crawly
Cummy scrawls. I say O.K. to Boyle. I like to read Hemingway, Carlos Williams,
Sydney Hunt, Harry Crosby, K.T. Young, Links Gillespie, C.H. Ford, Herman
Spector, Richard Johns, Norman MacLeod, Augustus Tiberius etc. I do not hiss
on pronouncing Tzara's name. t r a n s i t i o n is my transit. I bathe in
Apollinaire. (*Readies* 18)

This name-dropping sequence suggests a zeal for modernism starkly different from the sober appreciation of those who aimed to establish a sense of modernism as serious, difficult, and tragic. Many dominant modernist figures, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound chief among them, believed that modernist writing must put a burden on its readers in order to be worthwhile. Brown, like Stein before him, foregrounds pleasure, and he adopts the linguistic liveliness that characterizes his style not to infuse his writing with difficulty but to delight the reader with ever-more-whimsical possibilities for meaning.

“A Twoway Fish,” the second chapter of *The Readies* pamphlet, offers a parable of modernist reading practices, or as Saper calls it, “an absurdist play about modern reading” (67). In the story, written across two columns, Brown turns the high-allusive modernist style of Eliot on its head. The left-hand column, labeled “YEZNO / For / (Notes),” counterintuitively offers commentary on the “actual” text of the story, which flows down the right-hand column. As the visual mirror of “NOYEZ” / “Notes” suggests, however, determining a hierarchy of the two columns becomes increasingly complicated as the story goes on. In much the same manner as Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* after it, “A Twoway Fish” appears to contain a story and a set of annotations, but the voices in both columns prove crucial to its meaning. By giving the notes the prominent left-hand position and relegating the story to the right, Brown prevents the reader from experiencing the “text itself” without the intrusion of the pompous voice of learnedness that butts in before she has had a chance to experience the story.

The first annotation explains the meaning of the title and the first sentence of the story, “A twiceweighed two-fister tooarmlong two-tooto and lovetoyou, two-toothy two trouty underoverishway Fish” (*Readies* 20), as follows:

A 2-way Fish is a Coney Island contraption used in a Prize Fish Pond; on one side it bears a winning number and on the other side a losing number, each concealed by a sliding tin tag painted fish color. The player of course is as unconscious of this as is the modern reader of other things. (*Readies* 20).

Brown compares modern reading to playing a carnival game in which the prize fish says “yes” and “no” at once. The player’s lack of awareness that two outcomes are possible

does not negate their coexistence, as the scholarly voice on the left will constantly remind the reader in the remainder of the story. The close readings recorded in the voluminous notes, of course, do not exhaust such multiple meanings. Rather, the note offers a simple explanation for the complexity of the linguistic play in the right-hand column.

Even the numbered markers for notes in the text precede the words to which they refer, as in the following passage:

Like my winsome mind parted down the middle yours truly (10) tender button
 Out of the insane salutarium solarium solaring above the solar plexipluvius I see
 word-wise two eye (11) oddly-story me see. (23)

The academic voice in the left-hand column annotates the passage as follows:

(10) **Tender Button:** A gracious gesture calling attention to the title of a book by a contemporary modern.

(11) **Oddly-story:** Here a learned reference to the Odyssey i.e. Oddisy of Me.

Such annotations offer mildly amusing observations, but they do little to aid the reader's understanding of what is going on in the right-hand column, a collage of allusions, difficult words, and nonsense phrases that imitates modernist style, but without any goal of coherence. The scholarly speaker's sense of allusion extends to purely visual similarity, as when Oddly-story turns into Odyssey then Oddisy, perhaps a corrupted version of "oddity." That none of these references adds up to all that much seems to be the point. As the story points out, the academic reader in the left-hand column misses much of the linguistic pleasure to be had in the right-hand column; conversely, however,

that same reader manages to infuse the text on the right with delightfully random polysemy.

The text of the story at right sometimes becomes even more forthrightly nonsensical, as when the phrase “melbolong etangy” appears in the text. The scholarly voice on the left chases a chain of signifiers that takes the note far from what is implied by or relevant to the phrase in question:

Melbolongetangy: Ref. Madame Melba's famous peaches. **Mel**, Portuguese for honey, deftly merged with **melange** and suggesting **lingerie**. **Belonge** from Bologna, an Italian city. The word get plus angry. Eva Tanguay. The oolong tea tango. Tanzy tea of Madame Garfield's time. Balloon, etc. (*Readies* 24)

“Melbolong etangy” thereby offers up “A slangwich” (*Readies* 24) of polysemic meanings. As in so much of *The Readies*, the merest suggestion of visual or vocal similarity between two words renders plausible the transformation of one into the other. While Brown establishes considerable ironic distance between his own voice and that of the academic reader in the left-hand column, it is not entirely clear that he disapproves of these implausible, Humpty-Dumpty-esque interpretations. Rather, the academic reader in the left-hand column extends the spirit of playful linguistic experimentation that characterizes the story in the right-hand column.

The parodic close reading that forms the basis of “A Twoway Fish” would be impossible on Bob Brown’s machine. Leaving aside the fact that the two columns of the story depend on the two axes of the printed page, the machine seems explicitly designed to stifle the kind of preposterous close analysis that the voice of the academic reader

undertakes. The machine, of course, was to include controls to speed up or slow down the pace of the text, but the default setting appears to be fast. “A Twoway Fish,” then, both criticizes modernist reading practices that would emphasize erudition over pleasure and points out the pleasure that many readers can derive from erudition. At once, the story asserts the value of appreciating language on the seemingly shallow level of the signifier and finds immense imaginative value in pursuing contemplative flights of fancy with little regard for actual design or intention.

Brown’s modernism owes as much to popular culture, especially to the movies, as it does to high culture and experimental writing. “I’ve always been movie-minded” (*RFBBM* 157), Brown writes, and the sample “Story to Be Read on the Reading Machine” that Brown offers as the fifth chapter of the *Readies* pamphlet echoes the talkies in more ways than one. Much as in the rapid-paced history of print into which Brown erupts during his description of the machine, each word in the story connects to the next with a hyphen, “to suggest movement, continuity of words, word flow” (*Readies* 57). Just as the frames of a film flash before the reader’s eyes, so too will the continuous flow of print from the machine. The story also, however, seems to borrow its plot from the talkies, bearing more than a passing resemblance to that famous first talkie, *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Like *The Jazz Singer*, “A Story to Be Read on the Reading Machine” concerns the career of a musician and the reactions of his family to that career. Brown downplays the significance of the story as a model for what the machine can do: “it is not offered as a new literary style, it is merely given as an experiment in writing prose that might be rapidly readable when passing before the intelligent, experienced eye” (*Readies*

57). As the first glimpse the public is to have of what Brown's optical literature is capable of, the story, like the talkies concerned with sound, proves an odd choice.

In the *Jazz Singer*, Al Jolson's character Jack rejects his father's wishes that he become a cantor because of his enthusiasm for jazz music. As a result, his father disowns him, and Jackie runs away. Eventually, Jackie finds success as a blackface jazz singer, and he is eventually reunited with his dying father and proud mother.

The protagonist of Brown's story, on the other hand, wants to perform classical music when others demand jazz: "Harry-play-TurkeyintheStraw!-Naw-t'aint-dignified!-Harry-Give-us-Empty-Bed-Blues!-Naw-t'aint-classical!-Ta-te-de-de-dum-ta-te-te-ta-dumb-Harry-Empty-Head-musical-pastels-fussy-fugues-balmy-a r i e t t a s-tinkling-tarantellas" (*Readies* 48). Every word in this section references sound, either dialogue or music, a far cry from the purely optical literature that Brown has pushed elsewhere. The story, a mostly unremarkable one, follows a cinematic arc. Harry's father refuses to send him to Oberlin Musical Conservatory and Harry flees home. After some misadventures in the city, Harry eventually finds work in the orchestra on a cruise ship. To support himself, Harry dupes his mother and her ladies' aid group into funding his adventures by convincing them he has secured an international musical reputation: "They-call-me-Pan-America's-Ysaye-Maw-boat's-name-"Pan-America"-Harry-neglected-informing-her-" (*Readies* 53). At the end of the story, there is no triumphant reunion: Harry's mother dies, and Harry cannot return home to her funeral: "When-they-laid-Maw-away-generation-later-she-insisted-being-buried-garbed-old-fashioned-canary-colored-dress-she-had-never-worn-also-directed-town-orchestra-play-Mendelssohn's-Spring-Song-local-

violinist-leading-looked-like-Harry-who-couldn't-get-back-from-musical-Mediterranean-tour-.Ach-said-lowly-mourner-n i c h t-gut-jiggle-schust-like-Harry-too-fast-jiggles"
(*Readies* 57).

The story does not prove an especially inventive one. To write in a way that readers will understand at high reading speeds, Brown finds he must rely on an unremarkable stock narrative that contains some humor but little actual formal or linguistic novelty beyond the excision of many “ofs,” “ands,” and “fromits” from the language. The reading machine prose that Brown offers here contrasts with the ostentatious experimentalism he embraces in the rest of the *Readies* pamphlet. That the story concerns itself primarily with sound and music seems to negate many of the purported optical advantages of the machine. Like viewing a silent motion picture after the experience of the talkies, the motion of the story only reinforces the absence of sound in a story about music: this may be a story better served by the talkies, in fact, than by the *Readies*.

A polar opposite of high modernist attempts to investigate human interiority, “A Story to Be Read on the Reading Machine” takes its inspiration from the distant gaze of the cinematic image and the fast-paced readability of popular fiction. Brown claims that the story is a one-off demonstration of machine writing that will be soon surpassed by superior examples, but his choice to include it as his example piece showcases the dumbing effects that he believes his machine might have on writing. The fast pace of *Readie*-writing might well enable new forms of literature, but its immediate effect will be to prevent many of the literary possibilities already available in the printed book. Nevertheless, the story does indicate Brown’s preference for a modernism that does not

restrict its influence and impact to high-cultural elites but takes inspiration from popular form and strives to disseminate formal innovation to a wider popular audience.

In *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine*, Brown gives his modernist contributors a seemingly unrestrained opportunity to react to and write for his machine. Many critics approach the collection grudgingly, as it exemplifies much of the "racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny and homophobia which are all too familiar to readers of early twentieth-century literature" (Dworkin 59-60). The example *Readies* "wallow in adolescent humor" (Dworkin 60) whose goal often seems to offend more than to demonstrate the potential of the machine. Michael North, in fact, argues that the basis of Brown's entire project bears a tinge of racism, since, North argues, Brown sees "Words in motion, words under renovation, ...quite literally as black bodies" (*Camera Works* 80). The level of reprehensibility at work in the *Readies* anthology should not be downplayed, but it proves an interesting text not just because of its coarse content but for the way it dramatizes a playful contest to define modernism. I have suggested that Brown himself demonstrates significant ambivalence about the promise of his machine. The diverse contributors to *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine*, a group that includes Alfred Kreymbourg, Nancy Cunard, Eugene Jolas, Ezra Pound, F.T. Marinetti, Gertrude Stein, and William Carlos Williams, among many other notable modernists, multiply the diversity of approaches to the machine considerably. These writers' contributions demonstrate significant reservations about the machine, and the adolescent content that fills many of them often seems to establish the machine as a gimmick that is not to be taken seriously, rather than as the clear path forward for modernist writing.

In his contributions, the first in the volume, Laurence Vail establishes the tone of willful inappropriateness that dominates so much of the volume. “ALWAYS GENTLEMAN,” the first example readie in the book, documents the sexual conquests of one “Heros Wenchate Esq” in three pages of pure vulgarity. Rather than a narrative with a plot, Vail’s story becomes a patchwork of puns and euphemisms:

beware shedoom shedoom stifleflood —> wooman woof-woof —> Suchsex ===
 Molly yearns —> Dolly sqworms —> Lolly urns turns returns —> Lolly learns
 returns turns —> Polly burns worms churns derms sperms (9)
 honeysticks —> gloogoogoos —> exnudes —> thighs —> harms & l'eggs
 cuntstrict —> tit-titillation —> HeHero catrapt —> sinflation —> snake aches —
 > quicks'ands —> quick wick —> wick work —> quick work —> ROARGASM
 —> deflation —> din&out (flation) —> multiflation —> oof —> genoof —>
 snooze —> snoore —> log hog slumber (10)⁷⁰

“ALWAYS GENTLEMAN,” then, tends toward cheap amusement. The Readie-fied title, missing its “A,” proves the bluntest of ironic gestures as it contrasts with the tawdry content of the story. As if to ask for forgiveness, Vail follows this first story with a prayer bluntly titled “TO GOD.” The repetition of a capitalized “HOLY” takes the place of the punctuation symbols elsewhere used to signal the movement of the motion, rendering the term stale and mocking religion:

...HOLY body me beautiful HOLY HOLY HOLY curate me HOLY jolly friar me
 HOLY fat monk me HOLY poop & bishoop me HOLY HOLY HOLY sweet me

HOLY strong me HOLY brave me HOLY gawd-awful me HOLY vouch safety
me HOLY grant me grand HOLY HOLY HOLY... (12-13)

Vail's prayer offers only self promotion ("body me beautiful") and potty humor ("poop & bishoop me"), his direct mockery of religious belief standing in stark contrast to the spiritual crises of high modernist poetry, in, say, Stevens's "Sunday Morning" and Eliot's "Ash Wednesday." Far from a crisis of the individual, in the hands of the Readies modernism becomes a heavy-handed spectacle of the unacceptable.

Critics have been particularly disturbed by Vail's last two Readies, "BOOM THE DOOM (Invitation to world end)" and "POGROM." "BOOM THE DOOM" offers a vision of the apocalypse that jokes about nothingness: "let me be let me be NOT miss NO-feel-you get the to a NONERY gasp ZEROGASMS in ZEROPOLIS with QUIETUS" (15). Dworkin has noted that the story "seems barely comprehensible in its pre-Hiroshima naiveté" (60), but the story's joking manner seems to parody futurist zeal for destruction more than it endorses it. Less forgivable, perhaps, is "POGROM," which intersperses dollar signs, percentage symbols, Jewish surnames, and cavalier references to anti-semitic murder: "club lowly Loeb % % % maul Solomon / manhandle Mendelsohn \$ \$ pop off Oppenheim \$ \$ \$ have Cohen pecked by a hen \$ \$ \$" (15). In the years after Vail wrote this story, these playful jokes would become horrifyingly real. Yet the story also seems to offer ironic commentary on the anti-semitism of the early 1930s, making it hard to believe that Vail himself actively endorses the murders depicted in the story.

As the first example in the anthologies of what the *Readies* might do to literature, Vail's contributions paint a depressing picture. Brown's promises that the machine will revitalize literature give way to the most obvious and offensive prejudices, sentiments that could as easily be expressed in one phrase as an entire story.

More prominent modernists' contributions often serve to highlight their skepticism about or lack of interest in Brown's machine. Alfred Kreymbourg includes a short poem called "REGRETS," which makes no attempt to model the readie form proposed by Brown: "Old man Kreymbourg has grown too seedy / To write Bob Brown a speedy readie" (114). In "REGRETS," the promise of the machine gives way to a lighthearted quip as Kreymbourg declines to engage the new form.

William Carlos Williams's "READIE POME" more subtly uses readie form to demonstrate the limitations of the machine. The poem offers a simple recitation of apparently unrelated rhyme pairs:

Grace - face: hot - pot: lank - spank: meat - eat: hash - cash: sell - well: old - sold:
sink - wink: deep - sleep: come - numb: dum - rum: some - bum. (114)

Jessica Pressman takes the poem seriously as an example of the capabilities of the machine, arguing that "Williams presents the reading machine as integral to his poem, both to accessing and to understanding it" (784). While she pays a great deal attention to the way the form of the poem would play out on the reading machine, however, Pressman offers little sense of how the reading machine would actually contribute to the meaning of the poem. Far from an admiring endorsement of the machine's potential, however, Williams's poem seems to confirm Paul Stephens's sense that Williams "seems not to

treat the reading machine seriously—or rather to treat the machine as the reduction of poetry to exact rhyme, producing a meaningless total equivalence between words” (159). Indeed, the very brevity of Williams’s poem betrays his sense that the machine might be inappropriate as a vehicle for lyric poetry. Already a self-contained visual artifact on the page, Williams’s poem treats the machine as a redundant novelty that actually distracts from poetic innovation.

Even the contributions of the avant-garde figure one might expect to most sympathize with Brown’s machine, F.T. Marinetti, seem to adopt a playful, rather than a serious, approach to the reading machine. Marinetti’s first contribution, “OLFACTORY PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN (Olfactory Poetry),” takes Brown’s distinctions between literature for the eye and literature for the ear to a new level, that of literature for the nose. Marinetti proposes no device through which literature could be transmitted to the nose, but he parodies Brown’s glorification of the eye as he imagines the experience: “Eyes shut nostrils open to wind with my striding body the ultra-elastic ultra-vibrant skein of perfumes-odors” (46). Marinetti’s example of an olfactory poem uses imagery of smells, but it does so using conventional poetic images, including roses and violets.

The “MANIFESTO” that Marinetti includes, translated by Samuel Putnam, suggests that the compression and fast-paced proclamation-making of the manifesto form may be especially suited to the Readies. Marinetti and Putnam compress futurist radicalism into a series of short, punchy words and phrases:

Art life explosive. Paroxysmic Italianism. Antimuseum Anticulture. Antiacademy.
Antilogic. Antipretty. Antisentimental. Against dead cities—Modernolatry.

Religion of novelty originality velocity. Inequalism— Creative intuition and unconsciousness— Geometric splendor. Aesthetic of the machine— Heroism and clowning in art and in life. (48)

Marinetti fills an entire page with such phrases. Putnam, of course, may add some commentary of his own in the translation. “Paroxystic Italianism” hardly seems the most complimentary depiction of Italian futurism, and “Modernolatry” puts futurist worship of the new in directly pejorative terms. The manifesto embodies many futurist attitudes toward art, but it lacks much of the lyrical prose that is characteristic of Marinetti’s earlier futurist manifestos: “Oh! Maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water! Fair factory drain! I gulped down your nourishing sludge; and I remembered the blessed black breast of my Sudanese nurse” (186). If Marinetti’s manifesto in the *Readies* anthology represents, in some ways, the formal realization of the speedy machine aesthetic he had been trumpeting for years, it also seems uncharacteristically dispassionate. Marinetti’s adoration of machinery has lapsed into a more mundane mechanical writing.

Jerome McGann has argued that *Readies for Bob Brown’s Machine* brings together a variety of different strains that characterized early modernist experiment: “the textual and bibliographical innovations ...[of] Futurism, dada, simultaneism, zaum, vorticism, cubism, [and] German expressionism” all “have left their visible marks on Brown’s collection...” (89). Simultaneously representing an extension of and a counter-current to these various movements, the *Readies* project finally becomes exemplary of the variety of modernism itself, less a single cohesive movement than a series of modernisms that pursued projects often at cross-purposes even within themselves.

Readies for Bob Brown's Machine forced its contributors to confront a version of modernism that challenged many of their basic notions of what modernism was and ought to be. Some of the contributors knew Brown personally, but most were left to wonder whether Brown was actually serious about the machine. Much like the philistines encountering new artworks during the Armory Show, Brown's contributors risked appearing foolish if they took the machine too seriously, but as important modernists, they also risked appearing retrograde if they too hastily dismissed the machine.

A particularly vexed version of Ann Ardis's "dialogics of modernism" emerges in Brown's anthology in which contributors could not be certain Brown seriously intended to produce a machine and Brown himself could not be certain his contributors intended their work to be serious literature for the machine and not parody of it. On balance, Brown's machine seems more a provocative art-stunt than an actual contraption, but at times Brown himself wavers between thinking the machine has serious potential and thinking it completely ridiculous. Uncertainty about whether the machine is meant to be real, and whether, if real, it would be desirable, looms over the entire volume. While its various participants contributed to the same project, not all of them can be said to have endorsed it, and so the variety of contributions to the anthology reveal thorny dimensions of modernism often obscured in the retrospective light of criticism. The ultimate value of Brown's reading machine, then, may be less in its prophesy for the digital future than its provocation of a moment of reckoning in modernism itself, when Brown asked so many modernists to write for a machine that many of them, and even he himself, likely thought ridiculous.

Ridiculous aesthetics achieved through nonsense play, of course, continued to shape poetics after modernism. The ridiculous emerges as an important force, for example, in the constraint-based poetics of Oulipo and in the play of postmodern L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. The line of ridiculous modernism has emerged even more forcefully, however, in recent poetic experiments of our own era, like Brown's a time that features prominently a growing sense of information overload. In the 2000s, as cultural activity has increasingly moved online, several poets have looked to the nonsense of the internet for inspiration, and it is to these new poetic experiments that I finally turn.

CODA

Ridiculous Poetics in the Twenty-First Century

The poetic movement known as Flarf began, the story goes, when Gary Sullivan submitted the worst, most offensive poem he could come up with to poetry.com, a site that solicited submissions of poetry for “contests” that Sullivan believed it would be impossible to lose. Sullivan filled the poem, “Mm-hmm,” with random noises, blunt potty humor, corporate brands, and even ethnic slurs:

Mm-hmm

Yea, mm-hmm, it’s true

big birds make big doo!

...

hey! hey! you stoopid Mick! get

off the paddy field and git

me some chocolate Quik

put a Q tip in it and stir it up sick

pocka-mocka-chocka-locka-DING DONG... (Magee “Flarf Files”)

The acceptance that Sullivan soon received from poetry.com praised the poem because it “sparks the imagination and provides the reader with a fresh, unique perspective on life” (“Flarf Files”). Soon, a small community of Sullivan’s poet friends began writing intentionally bad poetry and submitting it to the site. In time, however, the poets found that they were writing the poetry less to show what a sham poetry.com was than to

entertain themselves and each other. In 2001, Sullivan and several other experimental poets began to circulate the willfully bad poetry on an email list, the flarflist.

The group began to shift from the arbitrary offensiveness represented by “Mm-hmm” to a specific poetic procedure that involved using Google to search for seemingly random terms then building poems by selecting from the results. Sullivan, for example, wrote a poem based on the results of a search for “awww,” “yeah,” and “God,” and K. Silem Mohammad wrote a poem in response based on googling “Crucifixion Xing.” The method often results in poetry peppered with obscure pop-cultural references framed in either defensive or purposely inflammatory comments of fans of the lowbrow. K. Silem Mohammad’s “The Game,” for example, begins: “let’s be serious, Kenny G plays trash, OK, so what?” (17). The combative nature of anonymous online dialogue, which fills message boards, chat rooms, and blog comments imbues the spirit of Flarf, as in Sharon Mesmer’s “Annoying Diabetic Bitch”:

You annoying diabetic bitch.

You anorexic bulimic diabetic bitch.

You dumb annoying talentless diabetic bitch, eat some diabetes.

You and your bitch monster diabetic junkhead father,

and your diabetic cat, your pathetic geriatric diabetic cat that eats birds—

bitch birds— (8)

In addition to these bits of bilious ephemera, Flarf sometimes captures snatches of the programming languages and markup codes that underlie digital culture, as in Katie Degentesh’s “Already Already Already”:

With wired network points network points network points
 network points network points already already ... Message from the President
 Message
 from the President Message from the President "December "December
 "December "December "December, Already?" , Already ... in think step =
 self.applyRules (F, F, alreadyDictionary=bindingsFound)in applyRules
 already=already

...In (*Combo 7*)⁷¹

Another signature mode of Flarf involves an obsessive cuteness, as when Nada Gordon channels the voice of cat lovers on the internet in "She Sure Likes the Cream":

I am a very sweet kitty who is a little on the shy side.

I really am quite stunning.

I like to pose in front of the camera

and to show my body on the net.

Kitty lose myself in your cotton fur

Good kitty Put me to sleep with your Nice kitty (*Combo 53*)

The collage poetics of Flarf pull into poetry a wide swath of cultural and technical detritus from the Internet. In contrast to the serious project of saving culture that Eliot undertook with the allusive "fragments I have shored against my ruins," however, Flarf pulls ridiculous references together into a ridiculous poetic object.

The rise of Flarf to prominence, if not universal acceptance, in the poetry world indicates that the dynamics of seriousness and ridiculousness, of meaningful sense and

trivial nonsense, that proved so important during the modernist period continue today.

Sullivan's entry to poetry.com intended to use willfully ridiculous means to point out the ridiculousness of poetry.com. As the movement grew, however, Flarf's relationship to seriousness and ridiculousness grew more complicated. The flarf poets began to take serious pleasure in writing and sharing the ridiculous poems they had written, and the serious ambitions of their work soon expanded beyond mere pleasure.

Different poets adopted different stances toward Flarf's seriousness, some aiming for ever less seriousness and some attempting to find a deeper seriousness amid the ridiculousness. Sullivan's definition of Flarf tends toward an embrace of the ridiculous at the expense of seriousness:

Flarf: A quality of intentional or unintentional "flarfiness." A kind of corrosive, cute, or cloying, awfulness. Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control. "Not okay."

Flarf (2): The work of a community of poets dedicated to exploration of "flarfiness." Heavy usage of Google search results in the creation of poems, plays, etc., though not exclusively Google-based. Community in the sense that one example leads to another's reply-is, in some part, contingent upon community interaction of this sort. Poems created, revised, changed by others, incorporated, plagiarized, etc., in semi-public.

Flarf (3) (verb): To bring out the inherent awfulness, etc., of some pre-existing text.

Flarf: To be wrong, awkward, stumbling, semi-coherent, fucked-up, un-P.C. To take unexpected turns; to be jarring. Doing what one is "not supposed to do."

(Magee "Flarf Files")

These definitions, which flow from the tautological definition of the nonsense word "flarf" by way of the nonsense word "flarfiness," demonstrate a comfort level with the unserious lacking in the approach to Flarf of some of the other Flarfists. Michael Magee, for example, hopes to find larger political significance in the badness of Flarf:

One can at least propose that Nixon and Kissinger were able to perpetrate their crimes because they were devious. George W. Bush is an utter dumbfucking fool achieving the same effect. Amazingly, everyone seems to understand this, even many of the people who vote for him. I feel compelled in the face of this to interrogate dumbness, ridiculousness, stupidity; to work undercover in the middle of it, to pretend to be it if necessary, all the while reporting back to the reader.

(*Mainstream* 95)

To Magee, Flarf may be ridiculous, but only because it reflects the ridiculousness of American culture at large. While much Flarf poetry might seem to celebrate the ridiculous and aestheticize the trivial, it actually proves to be serious indeed.

Like so many academics, Magee aligns a spectrum of value with a spectrum of seriousness. In his hands, the ridiculous becomes unjustifiable unless it promotes a more serious end. By and large, however, Flarf poetry resists such polarization. The aesthetically and politically serious aspects of Flarf arise simultaneously with, not subsequent to, its ridiculousness. The ridiculousness proves an end of its own, not a

means to an end, and Magee downplays the level of pleasure that Flarf poets take in the ignominious sources of their poems.

Even when their sources are reputable, serious, and respected, however, the Flarf poets manage to find ridiculousness. Though the title of Sullivan's "The West Wind Replies to Shelley," for example, purports to offer a reworking of Shelley's famous ode from the perspective of the wind, Sullivan interposes another voice, that of a naive pedant who offers commentary on the reworked poem throughout. As if in a Microsoft Word file passed around a workshop group in a first-year-writing classroom, the poem becomes a collage of Shelley's style, the words of the wind as rendered by a heavy-handed novice, and the language of the commentator:

Great title! Clever! And I really like the opening stanza, too. But I think you could maybe strengthen it with a couple of "action words" (I've put them in all caps and in <>s):

O Shelly, the giant <DEER-CHUCKING> of glorious romantic poetry history
 You, whose eternal <VOMIT LAUNCH> power influences those who read you
 Had idealized me, a wrongly portrait of <RAMBLIN', GAMBLIN'> god

I mean, use your own action-words. Those are just suggestions. (*Combo 19*)

"Ode to the West Wind" stands behind the poem, but only at a distant remove. One can imagine the creative writing course assignment that spawned the doggerel at the center of the commentary by asking students to respond to a famous poem by adopting a different speaker. The pre-commentary poem ("Oh Shelly, the giant of glorious romantic poetry history / You whose eternal power influences those who read you," etc.) emerges in the

voice of a student who wants to check off the boxes to show he has done his homework but whose unfamiliarity with the lingo of academia yields awkward phrasings like “romantic poetry history.” The commentating voice, of course, proves equally unoriginal, interpreting in a rather preposterous manner the oft-heard classroom advice to use action words. By the time the poem ends, the commentating voice has proposed a new ending for the wind’s response to Shelley. She turns the doggerel of the west-wind voice into a disco song.

Oh Shelley, the romantic lover of west wind

You, who had made my glorious, as Homer had attempt me [*sic*]

to blow Odysseus back to Ithaca

Had acquainted only this:

When I am present, spring will not be far behind

becomes

O Shelley, the romantic lover of west wind

How do you like it?

MORE MORE MORE! How do you like it, how do you

Like it? MORE MORE MORE! How do you like it,

How do you like it? MORE MORE MORE! (Fade-out) (*Combo 21-22*)

Shelley’s poem, then, first gets reversed and turned into doggerel, and this intermediary product finally gets subjected to the opinions of an ignorant commentator with a penchant for disco, or perhaps for sex. What indignity!

For many critics and readers of poetry, Flarf may be the hardest to swallow of the new poetries of the twenty-first century, an era that Marjorie Perloff associates with “unoriginal genius,” the title of her 2010 book. Perloff reminds readers that works as vaunted as *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos* are filled with allusions and citations from earlier poetry, practices that already threaten notions of poetry as a medium of pure, original expression. The techniques of appropriation that currently burgeon in the new poetry have long been accepted in the art world, at least since Duchamp and his *Fountain*. In the context of poetry, however, “the demand for original expression dies hard: we expect poets to produce words, phrases, images, and ironic locutions that we have never heard before” (23). By not just copying but copying the very worst that culture has to offer—the most cloying, offensive, stupid, irritating bits of cultural ephemera offered up on the Internet—Flarf layers atop its ostensible unoriginality a layer of willful ridiculousness.

Kenneth Goldsmith, who identifies as a conceptual poet rather than as a Flarfist, has launched the most thoroughgoing defense of appropriative techniques that gleefully gather seemingly worthless cultural material in his *Uncreative Writing* (2011). Just as Bob Brown had eighty years before, Goldsmith finds himself in the midst of an age of information overload: “faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists” (2). Though many of the experiments of conceptual writing seem frivolous and ridiculous at first glance—to produce his 900-page book *Day* (2003), for example, Goldsmith retyped the entire text of a single issue of the *New York Times* and presented it

as an original work—Goldsmith finds that even as he embraces such avowedly unoriginal work, “the suppression of self-expression is impossible” (9). Though the text of *Day* was put to the page by any number of writers and manipulated afterward by dozens of editors, the representation of the *New York Times* in book form produces work that is undeniably Goldsmith’s. The change of context gives the journalistic writing a radically new aesthetic shape, fostering a condition in which “*context is the new content*” (3) [Goldsmith’s emphasis]. Which is not to say, of course, that writers and artists have not been playing with context similarly since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The poets, poems, and methods associated with uncreative writing set the stage for a radical revision of what it means to write poetry. Much like Wordsworth’s call for a poetic return to the ordinary speech of common men in the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Goldsmith presents the methods of uncreative writing as a poetic embrace of the new, digital vernacular. From the vantage of high culture, the memes and viral videos that circulate through the Internet look ridiculous. The most recognizable examples of such viral internet culture include: a photograph of an enthusiastic, pudgy grey cat framed with the words “I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?”; a bumbling teenager clumsily imitating a light-saber battle from *Star Wars*; a deception that leads to the user’s computer suddenly playing Rick Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up,” an otherwise unremarkable pop song from the 1980s; a prairie dog that turns and looks dramatically at a camera to the accompaniment of sinister spy-film music; and a so-called “socially awkward” penguin. If Flarf actively embraces the willfully low status of such cultural ephemera (ephemera that, in many cases, has surprising staying

power), conceptualism sometimes pretends to neutrality in its pursuit of whatever happens to be out there on the internet. In Goldsmith's formulation, "The uncreative writer constantly cruises the Web for new language, the cursor sucking up words from untold pages like a stealth encounter" (33-4).

The relationships of Flarf and conceptual writing to the kind of nonsense poetics described in the pages of this dissertation is a fraught one. On the one hand, Flarf seems to throw meaning to the wind, finding in the trivial ephemera of contemporary culture so much delightful nonsense. On the other, however, the procedural poetics that characterize both movements can seem the very reverse of nonsense. When poets have found their language on the web, that language has typically been used for sense-making communicative purposes, and even if it has been degraded into the abbreviated language of text-speak, it maintains a clear relationship to the English language. Indeed, Goldsmith actually claims that the seemingly ridiculous movements work against a poetics of nonsense that characterized the poetics of the mid- and late- twentieth centuries:

Why atomize, shatter, and splay language into nonsensical shards when you can hoard, store, mold, squeeze, shovel, soil, scrub, package, and cram the stuff into towers of words and castles of language with a stroke of the keyboard? And what fun to wreck it: knock it down, hit delete, and start all over again. There's a sense of gluttony, of joy, and of fun. Like kids at touch table, we're delighted to feel language again, to roll it in, to get our hands dirty. ("Flarf is Dionysus")

Many would argue, of course, that the poetics of conceptualism and Flarf often resemble a series of “nonsensical shards” mashed together, and Goldsmith takes as much pleasure in knocking down the tower of word-blocks as he does in building it.

Goldsmith has argued that Flarf, while sometimes inspired by the procedure of searching for Google results, tends to be less rule-based than conceptualism. Adopting Nietzsche’s categories for styles of art, Goldsmith aligns conceptual poetry with the Apollonian and Flarf with the Dionysian. The conceptualist’s devotion to process and order, then, contrasts with the Flarfist’s pursuit of disorder and willingness to abandon the rules when they prove inconvenient. In 2009, Goldsmith brought together Flarf poets and conceptual poets for an event called “Flarf v. Conceptualism,” and the poets from the two camps wrote tongue-in-cheek essay-poems as takedowns of the opposing camp, including Vanessa Place’s “Why Conceptualism is Better than Flarf” and Michael Magee’s “Why Flarf is Better than Conceptualism.”

The contrasts that these poets draw between the two camps, of course, tend to be jokes on the idea that they share a rivalry at all. As Goldsmith notes, they are “two sides of the same coin” (“Flarf is Dionysus”). In Place’s essay, the two share degradation as a whoopie cushion and the effect of the same:

14. Flarf is a style, a mode as à la as sliced cheese on pie. Those who write flarf write flarf, or, to use their terminology, they write “flarfy” poetry, to be distinguished from regular poetry. Flarf poetry makes hay where the sun don’t shine. Like baboons copulating in cages at the zoo, flarf fucks inside the glass walls, a show-stopping show, playing to the embarrassed (maybe) or bemused

(could be) or the temporarily entertained (probably), it's kind of natural but nature's not in it (who me?). In this sense, flarf is a whoopie cushion in the world of the new & old lyric poem.

14. In this sense, conceptualism is a fart.

Magee uses the approval of a prominent critic as evidence of the failings of conceptualism, accusing conceptualism of being “readable and successful,” faint praise that in this context becomes almost derogatory:

Marjorie Perloff likes Conceptualism.

Marjorie Perloff does not like Flarf.

The best conceptualism is readable and successful.

Flarf fails in doing what it sets its mind to, to be bad. Flarf is Goooooooooooooooood.

Less genuine defenses of either poetic camp than shared acknowledgments that both movements appear a bit ridiculous from the standpoint of conventional poetic standards, these poems that pit conceptualism and Flarf against each other finally assert a solidarity that links them together.

Flarf and conceptualism remain on the margins of poetry, which already lies at the margins of mainstream culture. Magee, however, has asserted that Flarf can represent a new poetic mainstream. Ridiculous as Flarf may seem, its preposterous snatches of language and reference from the web hew more closely to the linguistic norms of today than do more traditionally expressive poems. Much like the radical experiments described in this dissertation that also strove to reach popular audiences, especially those of Gertrude Stein and Bob Brown, these new poetries often appear ridiculous, but in their

willingness to do so they position themselves to offer a new aesthetic, to push the boundaries of what poetry has been and can be. Just as Hugo Ball, Stein, and Brown co-opt whatever ridicule might be directed at them and preemptively transform it into a productive aesthetic ridiculousness, the new poetics flaunt perceptions that poetry has become irrelevant in our culture and define new avenues through which seemingly irrelevant, trivial, ephemeral, and nonsensical cultural activity can be given poetic form.

These new poetics inherit the tradition of ridiculous modernism, constantly toeing the line between meaning and nonsense, intermixing the rarefied experimentalism of high art and the popular impulses of low art, finding opportunities for uproarious laughter amid the seriousness of literature, even ridiculing the same experimental tradition in which they take part. Flarf and conceptualism look ridiculous in part because novelty often appears ridiculous. Both movements, however, make their devotion to the ridiculous even more explicit than their precedents in twentieth-century literature do.

The willingness of twenty-first century poetry to embrace the ridiculous and the nonsensical, to both celebrate and critique the trivial inanities of culture, provides a model for how critics should approach the similar impulses that pervaded modernism. That is, critics should treat the ridiculous as important and valuable in its own right, rather than change its terms by wholly transporting it to the more academically comfortable realm of the straightforwardly serious. To do so requires the embrace of a paradox that constantly folds in on itself—the critic must find the ridiculous serious but still keep it ridiculous. Within the pages of a doctoral dissertation, of course, in which the candidate must prove himself capable of producing serious scholarship, this call for more

attention to and respect for the ridiculous in art might ring false. The prevalence of willful ridiculousness in the art and literature of the last century, however, demands it.

Pamela Caughie has written of analogous pitfalls that face critics of “silly fiction” such as Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*, a fictive biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel: they either dismiss “silly fiction’ for its silliness or dismiss its silliness for its serious purpose (and thereby read silly fiction in the same way they read serious fiction)” (62). As I have argued, however, the lines between the serious and the ridiculous are rarely so clearly defined in literature during and since modernism. The nonsense-like literature of the last century challenges critics to acknowledge and respect the serious and the ridiculous as equal partners in art, just as Duchamp did.

The language and methods of academia tend toward seriousness. To justify our objects of study, we load them with a vast significance, a weighty seriousness. As a consequence, in Holly Laird’s words, “The high seriousness of criticism’s endeavor to make sense of literary modernism ... has often smothered its laughter” (79). Until critics can hear the laughter of modernism arising simultaneously with its seriousness, they will continue to discount the genuine responses of those in the public who found modernism ridiculous and to misunderstand the projects of modernist authors who sought to create new literature by being ridiculous. More widespread acknowledgment of the ridiculous nonsense that often drives modernist literature might help balance the seriousness of our critical endeavors, offering a viewpoint on modernism both more complete and more pleasurable.

¹ Chesterton expresses similar sentiments in an unpublished essay on humor in Christianity: “The man who first saw a hippopotamus or rhinoceros or elephant, like a part of the landscape moving on four legs, must have thought he had himself gone mad. If he did not he must assuredly have reflected on the humour of the maker of all things.” From G.K. Chesterton’s papers at the British Library, no. 73342 D. G.K. Chesterton Papers. Essay on humour in Christianity (ff. 3-16v).

² Chesterton’s argument about faith and nonsense therefore resembles Tertullian’s argument about irrationality as a basis for faith, often glossed (improperly, it seems) as “credo quia absurdum.” See Barnes p. 224 and Sider p. 417.

³ Hemingway uses this sentence as an epigraph to *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

⁴ The typographical error appears, according to Chesterton, in “a magazine called Poesia” (119).

⁵ One could easily argue that Chesterton realized his vision for a “literature of the future” based in nonsense in his own novels, essays, apologies, and plays. Nonsense and wonder pervade his entire body of work. Adam Gopnik argues that “‘The Man Who Was Thursday’ is one of the hidden hinges of twentieth-century writing, the place where, before our eyes, the nonsense-fantastical tradition of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear pivots and becomes the nightmare-fantastical tradition of Kafka and Borges” (52).

⁶ A phrase deployed memorably in the title of the 2007 documentary *My Kid Could Paint That*, which explores (and, in many respects, questions the authenticity of) the surprising phenomenon of then-four-year-old artist Marla Olmstead.

⁷ Other examples of scholarship linking modernism and nonsense include: Sewell, esp. “Lewis Carroll and T.S. Eliot as Nonsense Poets”; two articles from the 1970s by James Rother, one focused on T.S. Eliot and another on Wallace Stevens; and moments from Susan Stewart’s book *Nonsense*, which boldly treats works like *Finnegans Wake* and *Tender Buttons* as part of the same field of nonsense as *Alice in Wonderland*. A recent essay by Michael LeMahieu on “Nonsense Modernism” offers a valuable reading of Wittgenstein’s approach to sense and nonsense. Again, however, he treats nonsense largely as a neutral formal and philosophical construct divorced from its pejorative connotations.

⁸ This version was printed in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1934. Other versions of the poem were also popular, for example, from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1933: “There’s a notable family named Stein, There’s Gert and There’s Ep and there’s Ein, Gert’s poems are bunk, Ep’s statues are junk, Can’t make head or tail out of Ein” [the lines are not broken according to usual conventions for printing verse in this version] (“Front Views and Profiles” 19) and from the *Musical Times* in 1942: “I don’t like the family Stein! / There is Gert, there is Ep, there is Ein. / Gert’s writings are punk, / Ep’s statues are Junk, / Nor can anyone understand Ein” (Olstead 26).

⁹ For more on *Finnegans Wake* and nonsense, see Rieke and Susan Stewart (*Nonsense*). For commentary on this nonsense-like advertisement, see Gorman, Anthony Burgess, and Atherton. According to Atherton, Joyce denied that Carroll was a direct influence on the portmanteau style of the *Wake*—in fact, he denied having read any Carroll before he began writing the work (see Atherton 126-7).

¹⁰ Cook offers a brief interpretation of the poem as a reflection on male braggadocio in which “A battle between poets is only one example of Stevens’s possible battles here” (66) in her *Reader’s Guide*. Richard D. Hathaway argues that “Such a poem ...can appeal to our sense of play, can be simply fun” even as he offers “Thirteen ways of Looking at a Bantam.” James Rother argues that “Stevens ...*affects* the Nonsense style” (88) to serve more serious ends.

¹¹ See Kennedy.

¹² For more on Baroness Elsa, see Gammel’s recent biography.

¹³ Astradur Eysteinnsson notes that in T.S. Eliot’s “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” “Modernism is viewed as a kind of aesthetic heroism, which in the face of the chaos of the modern world (very much a “fallen” world) sees art as the only dependable reality and as an ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind” (*Concept* 9).

¹⁴ Walt Kuhn, secretary of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors at the time of the show, offered a sweeping vision of how the Show had altered the American landscape by 1938: “Drabness, awkwardness began to disappear from American life, and color and grace stepped in. ... The exhibition affected every phase of American life—the apparel of men and women, the stage, automobiles, airplanes, furniture, interior decorations, beauty parlors, advertising and printing in its various departments, plumbing, hardware—everything from the modernistic designs of gas pumps and added color of beach umbrellas and bathing suits, down to the merchandise of the dime store” (25).

¹⁵ This notion becomes the grounding rationale for Michael North’s *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (1999).

¹⁶ To borrow the title of Robert Hughes's popular miniseries and book.

¹⁷ Visceral responses to modernism, whether shock, laughter, or confusion, can rarely be attributed to form alone. Audience responses to the *Rite* were driven as much by the visual presence of the ballet as Stravinsky's musical form. As the example of the *Rite* premiere demonstrates, form alone, even if it is radically novel, has limited capacity to shock. Form can certainly surprise, and it can remake expectations, but it is hard to believe that any reader experienced the blunt mental blow of shock in response, say, to the use of free verse in a poem, as opposed to accentual-syllabic verse. Both incomprehension and laughter (whether nervous or gleeful) appear to be more typical responses to formal innovation. Content, of course, has also been recognized as a source of modernist shock. The shock that D.H. Lawrence and Henrik Ibsen fostered, for example, can be attributed to their direct representation of and forthright discussion of matters unsuited to polite company. More often, however, form has been treated as the wellspring of modernist shock.

¹⁸ Rita Felski has argued that conservative ridicule serves an importantly functional role in manufacturing a public sense of shock for art: "If you're an unrepentant avantgardist creating installations out of soiled diapers and statues of the Virgin Mary, your allies are not just the respectful review in the pages of *ArtForum*, but the conservative pundit who invokes your example to lambast the state of contemporary art, amping up its visibility and talked-aboutness and generating a flurry of commentary, a slot on National Public Radio, and a few years down the road, an edited collection of essays. Romantic visions of

solitary subversion make it easy to forget that rupture vanishes without trace if it is not registered and acknowledged..." ("Context Stinks!" 584).

¹⁹ Matei Calinescu goes even further when he refutes the unidirectionality of parody and satire: "the parodist can secretly admire the work he sets out to ridicule. A certain amount of praise for an author is even required on the part of the would-be parodist. Who tries to parody something that one believes completely insignificant or worthless? Moreover, a successful parody should convey, together with its criticism of the original, a degree of resemblance, a degree of faithfulness to both the letter and the spirit of the original. Ideally, a parody should at the same time appear to be a parody and offer the possibility of being nearly mistaken for the original itself" (141).

²⁰ Before the Lyalls explored a modernist alphabet from "A is for Art in the Cubies' domain" (6) through "Z is for Zak's summer-time composition" (56), Gelett Burgess had mocked decadence in his *Le Petit Journal des Refusées* (1896), beginning "A is for Art of this age-end variety; / We Decadants [sic] simply can't get a satiety" (6). Like the Cubies' ABC after it, Burgess's "Complete Alphabet of Freaks" addresses crucial concepts and figures of decadence: "B is for Beardsley, the idol supreme. / Whose drawings are not half so bad as they seem" and "Y is for Young, and I marvelled to learn / That fifty's the average age of Les Jeunes," among many others. And like the Lyalls' book, which at once mocks modernism and depends on it, Burgess and his work occupy an ambivalent position with respect to decadence. Even as *Le Petit Journal* mocks the ostensibly decorative excesses of aesthetic decadence, it embraces them in its material form: the pamphlet is a remarkably elaborate project made of gold-glittering wall paper,

cut in distinctively trapezoidal shape. And though the dubious praise Burgess gives to Aubrey Beardsley—his drawings “are no half so bad as they seem”—he explicitly emulates them on the cover of the pamphlet. Even if parodic, the effect of the imitation is beautiful. As Johanna Drucker observes of *Le Petit Journal*, “Burgess, with high spirit and play, reveals the complicity of editor and scene, publication and audience, literary expression with artistic milieu” (*Le Petit Journal* 39-40). Much as the Lyalls transform modernism into so many schoolroom lessons, Burgess adopts the format of the abecedary to suggest that the modernism of his own time, seemingly complex and weighty, actually lends itself to simplistic presentation in a manner schoolroom children can understand. Both *Le Petit Journal* and *The Cubies’ ABC* mirror a ridiculous playfulness they see at play in modernism with ridiculous playfulness of their own, representing the emergence of modernism as a phenomenon that made everyone feel a bit uneducated and childish.

²¹ See, for example, the exemplary reading of *Tender Buttons* by Michael Edward Kaufmann.

²² See, for example, Picasso’s *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (1910); Juan Gris’s *Portrait of Picasso* (1912); Picabia’s *Dances at the Spring* (1912); and Braque’s *Violin and Candlestick* (1910).

²³ Norton’s final citation in this passage comes from Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).

²⁴ I transcribe the poem from the version printed in Richard Huelsenbeck’s 1920 *Dada Almanach*, to be discussed later in this chapter.

²⁵ This turn toward the reader's response echoes other critics' consideration of nonsense-like language. Leonard Diepeveen, for example, has asserted that "The history of nonsense, of removing sense, is always a history of failure," because readers make meaning from texts even when authors do not intend them to. Therefore, "There is no pure nonsense; there are only tendencies to nonsense" ("Reading Nonsense" 35).

²⁶ This is the date identified in Ball's diary, but it is a source of considerable critical disagreement. Stephen Scobie explains the possibilities: "As is frequently the case with Dada, there is some confusion ... as to when this actually occurred. In Ball's diary ... the account is dated June 23rd, 1916. Steinke claims that the reading resulted in a nervous breakdown and led directly to Ball's temporary departure from Zürich on August 1, 1916. Hans Richter, however, states that the poem was first performed as part of the Dada extravaganza on July 14th, 1916, but was not particularly noticed among all the other crazy events of that evening; he says that the full recitation as described in the diary did not take place until after Ball's *return* to Zurich, on June 25th, 1917. Richter substantiates this by the fact that he was present at the reading, and he did not arrive in Zürich until September, 1916. Richter's eye-witness account is thus interwoven, in his book, with excerpts from Ball's diary entry of a year previous (Among the main secondary sources, Manuel Grossman says only 1917 and, and Motherwell, clearly in error, gives 1915!) This may be a minor point, but Richter's dating (which does seem more plausible) would undercut Steinke's rather hysterical interpretation" (218).

²⁷ For more on the social construction of laughter, see Purdie, Billig, and Gantar.

²⁸ This translation is Gary Kern's, from p. 371 of *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry*, ed. Hugh Haughton.

²⁹ The intersection of sight and sound has long been regarded as a crucial split in poetics. Sight and sound, however, have been viewed in two strikingly different ways. In one case, sound is imagined as the form of poetry and visuality as its content: sound is signifier, visuality signified. Examples of this approach include Pound's phanopoeia and melopoeia, Joyce's "ineluctable modality of the visible" and "ineluctable modality of the audible," and the parallel developments in visual and auditory form traced in Andrew Welsh's *Roots of Lyric* (1978). An alternative vision of sight and sound in poetry, however, treats sound and vision as two elements of poetic material form. Examples include John Hollander's *Vision and Resonance*, Jerome McGann's notion of bibliographic codes, and Johanna Drucker's conceptions of visual materiality. For more versions of the sight/sound split, see Roubaud and Reed. Given the multiplication of versions of poems in the contemporary age, Charles Bernstein has argued that "The poem, viewed in terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intertranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence" ("Introduction" 9).

³⁰ It appears, for example, as a frontispiece to the English edition of Hans Richter's *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, from 1978; in Rudolf Kuenzli's *Dada Spectrum*, from 1979; in Marc Dachy's *Dada: The Revolt of Art*, from 2006; in Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery's anthology *Imagining Language*, from 1998; and on the Wikipedia page for Hugo Ball. In the 1974 edition of Hugo Ball's diary, *Flight Out of Time*, the Huelsenbeck printing is overlaid on the photograph from the Cabaret Voltaire. The text is similarly superimposed

on the photograph in Dachy's *The Dada Movement*, from 1990, as if the two represent a continuous unit. Almost every poem in Hugh Haughton's 1998 *Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry* is printed with little regard to original typographic appearance, but "Karawane" is again printed as a miniaturized version of the Huelsenbeck page. Huelsenbeck's conventions for printing "Karawane" have been so insistent that some kind of typographical alteration has seemed necessary even when the Huelsenbeck image itself is not used: in Mark Pegrum's 2000 book *Challenging Modernity*, for example, an excerpt of the poem is newly set in variegated typefaces.

³¹ These recordings and others are available on the Internet at Pennsound.

³² Greil Marcus cites the episode information, drawn from *TV Guide*, on p. 187 of his *Lipstick Traces* (1989). A video of the segment is available at Google Video.

³³ In her article "Popular Modernism: Little Magazines and the American Daily Press" and subsequent book *Gertrude Stein: The Making of an American Celebrity*, Karen Leick establishes that Stein's fame, even her early fame, was not isolated to a small group of elites, but was in fact a more popular phenomenon than is typically assumed. Stein became a notorious celebrity in the 1930s during her lecture tour, but her earlier avant-garde experiments also received a hearing in the popular press.

³⁴ The public's fascination in the rose sentence continued during Stein's 1934 lecture tour, a tour during which, one press accounts notes, "The question of whether Gertrude Stein talks that way, too, will be determined" (Wolters 22). *The Los Angeles Times* once thought it newsworthy that no one had asked Stein to explain the sentence: "Gertrude

Stein is answering questions readily after her lectures, but so far hasn't been invited to parse 'A rose is a rose is a rose'" (Soaper 5).

³⁵ In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein writing as Alice confirms: "Speaking of the device of rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, it was I who found it in one of Gertrude Stein's manuscripts and insisted on putting it as a device on the letter paper, on the table linen and anywhere that she would permit that I would put it" (138).

³⁶ In an introduction to a series of passages from *Tender Buttons* that it printed in 1914, *The Chicago Daily Tribune* described two types of potential response: "Miss Stein's followers believe she has added a new dimension to literature; scoffers call her writings a mad jumble of words, and some of them suspect she is having a sardonic joke at the expense of those who pretend to believe in her" (15). The idea that Stein's writing might only be "a mad jumble of words" invited a half-century of critical neglect of Stein's work. In William Empson's famous *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), a work that might have relished Stein's ambiguity, she merely "implores the passing tribute of a sigh" (7) rather than an extended critical commentary. Stein's "mad jumbles of words" did not fit into the framework of New Criticism's harmoniously synthesized "language of paradox."

³⁷ See McHugh and Terrell.

³⁸ Juliana Spahr explains that one of the clearest differences between Joyce and Stein involves vocabulary: "A useful comparison... is how Stein uses the word "rose" to demonstrate her linguistic pyrotechnics in her 'rose is a rose is a rose is a rose' phrase, while James Joyce uses the word

‘bababadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonnbronntonnnerronntuonnnthunnttrovarhounawnskawntooohooordenenthurnuk’ to demonstrate his in *Finnegans Wake*” (41).

³⁹ Stein was certainly not the only modernist to make seemingly baffling claims about the relative ease of her work, but I think there is a level of playful earnestness in her comments that is not present in the others—she means what she says here, but in a different way than audiences thought she did, as should become clear during the remainder of this argument.

⁴⁰ Stein wrote “Lifting Belly” between 1915 and 1917, a few years before another famous rose/*eros* pun appeared in 1921 with Marcel Duchamp’s alter-ego Rose Sélavy, a name that sounds like *eros*: c’est la vie.

⁴¹ My reading that the ostensible closure declared by “rose is a rose...” gives way to a continued expansion of significance differs notably from that of Kimberly Reynolds, who argues that the infinite circle “signifies wholeness” (29).

⁴² My discomfort with Stein’s casual racism in this instance is matched only by my utter inability to understand what she could possibly mean by this geographic flight of fancy.

⁴³ Vigeurs’s article is imagined as a dialogue, so this observation actually comes from one of her characters.

⁴⁴ Several nonsense critics, including Wim Tigges, argue that nonsense is not essentially comic. I explain my disagreement with this idea in my introduction.

⁴⁵ That is, rather than forcing Stein into the frameworks of seriousness, difficulty, and imagism. propounded by authors such as Eliot and Pound, as has often happened in the past, we should instead focus on constructing a separate interpretive framework around

the unique qualities of Stein's own work. Stein fits as well or better into the interpretive frameworks suggested by nonsense literature than she does into the interpretive frameworks suggested by other modernists.

⁴⁶ My research has not suggested that *The World is Round* was included in any new American anthology.

⁴⁷ The first edition of the book, published in New York by William R. Scott press, is the one in question here. While the 1967 second edition drops many of these interesting material features (the bright pink pages with solid blue type are notably absent), later editions have undertaken other fanciful material qualities. The 1985 Arion Press edition, for example, is shaped like a circle and came in a box with a balloon. The 1993 Barefoot Books edition is tiny in size and replaces Hurd's illustrations with abstract woodcuts by Roberta Arenson.

⁴⁸ Edith Hurd provides a useful narrative of the book's production in "The World is Not Flat."

⁴⁹ See Rust for the identity-crisis reading, Hoffeld for the sexual vulnerability reading, Watts for the feminist quest-narrative reading, and Will for the wartime-context reading.

⁵⁰ In addition to *The World is Round* and *To Do*, Stein published *The Gertrude Stein First Reader and Three Plays* in 1946.

⁵¹ Carl Van Vechten pointed out that this moment was particularly unsuitable for children: "...it is not a child's book... especially as you say letters M and N are unlucky and half the children who read it will be named Nathan and Mary" (680).

⁵² *To Do* is not the only of Stein's works that highlights the problem of the coexistence of aural sound and written materiality; in *Everybody's Autobiography*, she claims that "gradually the written language says something and says it differently than the spoken language.... So soon we will come to have a written language that is a thing apart in English" (13). Stein's concern with this split anticipates a central focus of the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida in works such as "Différance" and *Of Grammatology*.

⁵³ That Stein uses the name "Alice" here could easily be a matter of chance, but two relevant Alices—Toklas and the Alice of *Wonderland*—also suggest themselves.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Barker/Greenaway.

⁵⁵ For more examples of citation of "Jabberwocky" in linguistics textbooks, see Hockett (1958), Hughes (1962), Hall (1964), Dinneen (1967), Gaeng (1971), Wardhaugh (1972), and Parker (1986), among others.

⁵⁶ While I ordinarily use the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, here I use Dodgson's real name because the events in question occurred before the invention of that pseudonym.

⁵⁷ See, for example, those of Graeme Base (1989) and of Stéphane Jorisch (2004), whose version suggests not dragons but themes of media over-saturation and the police state.

⁵⁸ For clear examples of how the grammatical peculiarities of *Tender Buttons* lead to a persistent system of ambiguity, see Quartermain.

⁵⁹ For another instance of word listing as a method for approaching *Tender Buttons*, see Bridgman: for example, "colors predominate, especially versions of red—pink, scarlet, crimson, rose" (126). Knight uses a similar method when he cites passages and italicizes categories in which he is interested. When he discusses "material and spatial qualities of

number, measure, weight, difference, etc." and cites "A BOX," for example, he italicizes "larger part," "three," "different," "one," "one," "length," "longer," "different," "different," "eight," and "singular" (465).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Kaufmann's reading of "A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS," which argues that Stein carefully employs the carafe as a reflection of language: "Words too are blind glasses, concealing or coloring as much as they reveal" (451). Sometimes such readings, which necessarily focus on the workings of a particular section, end up yielding conclusions that could be applied to any part of *Tender Buttons*. Ron Silliman's reading of *custard*, for example: "The portrait of custard is marvelously accurate. ... "not to be. Not to be narrowly... deliberately leaves the subject out of sight. Custard does not want to be a hard fact" (84-85). If this is the case of *CUSTARD*, of course, it is also the case that every section of *Tender Buttons* "does not want to be a hard fact." Close readings that do not attempt to synthesize meaning but instead trace the production of ambiguity in *Tender Buttons* can be found in Peter Quartermain's essay and Michael Hoffman's book.

⁶¹ Kaufmann's discussion of the materiality of *Tender Buttons*, like the one in these paragraphs, focuses on the way the language of *Tender Buttons* makes visible the operations of print and language on the page. Whereas Kaufmann believes Stein is lamenting a condition of stale print culture, the fact that language will mean even if it is non-sense, I believe that Stein is embracing that condition.

⁶² Brown's playful approach to the language of the ticker-tape bears comparison to Tristan Tzara's "How to Make a Dadaist Poem," in which the words of a newspaper

article are cut up individually, shaken in a bag, and arranged in the random order in which they are pulled from the bag. The ticker-tape rearrangement also resembles the deformative reading practices proposed by Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels, which have come to the fore again in Stephen Ramsay's *Reading Machines* (2011).

⁶³ Brown wrote three versions of the Readies manifesto, and I cite from all of them in this chapter. To distinguish them, I mark the citations with "Readies" for the 1930 *transition* version, *Readies* for the 1930 pamphlet version, and *RFBBM* for the version from *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine* (1931).

⁶⁴ The term "information overload" was popularized by Alvin Toffler in the 1970 book *Future Shock*.

⁶⁵ The pages of newspapers and the web, for example, are filled with privacy concerns, from Facebook to the Transportation Security Administration. In a February 2012 *New York Times* post, "Things That Were Once Amazing," David Pogue expressed amazement that anyone would find anything amazing about technology anymore—the cycle of wonder prompted by new technology has become entirely routine.

⁶⁶ Many of the willfully silly Internet memes that pop up virally in Facebook and Twitter streams emanate today from the (often intentionally offensive) 4chan.org and from the community-sourced content curation site Reddit.

⁶⁷ The psuedo-science of these sections also alludes to Alfred Jarry's *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician* (1911).

⁶⁸ Indeed, textual scholarship over the last thirty years has repeatedly demonstrated that books themselves are complex technologies that must be read for their own particularities as reading machines, from Randall McLeod to Jerome McGann to Johanna Drucker.

⁶⁹ I have attempted to transcribe as closely as possible the appearance of text in the *Readies*. The inconsistencies of symbols and spacing in this passage, for example the two spaced hyphens that separate “teacups” and “dreams,” come from Brown’s text.

⁷⁰ The arrows in Brown’s story are a bit more visually complex than these stand-ins—in addition to arrowheads, they have feathers.

⁷¹ In 2003, Michael Magee edited a special issue of *Combo* devoted to Flarf. Citations marked *Combo* appear in this issue.

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