BECOMING PLASTIC:
MODERNIST POETICS, (NEURO)PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND THE MATERIAL OBJECT

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ABSTRACT

Becoming Plastic: Modernist Poetics, (Neuro)Psychoanalysis, and the Material Object is a creative-critical thesis comprising approximately 45,000 words of critical prose and a poetry collection of sixty pages. Through critical discussion and my own creative writing, the thesis explores the continuums between human subjects and nonhuman objects in poetry – arguing that there is a disturbance of ontological categories happening in the process of poetic composition which functions to involve readers in a radical reappraisal of the material world in which they participate.

The critical component of my thesis engages with the work of neglected modernist poets – such as Lola Ridge and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven – alongside those who have received considerable attention from literary critics – including Amy Lowell, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein – in order to examine the disruptive potential of the material object in modernist poetry. Arguing that these poets disturb the theoretical boundaries between subject and object via experimental poetic languages and forms, the three chapters of this thesis bring together studies in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1919; Kristeva, 1982), the nonhuman turn (Bennett, 2010), defamiliarization (Shklovsky, 1917), thing theory (Brown, 2004), and neuroscience (Malabou, 2004) to demonstrate the capacity for modernist poetry to interrogate what it is to be human or nonhuman in a world of things. Acknowledging the assemblages in which we participate, Chapter 1 reconceptualises the relationship between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism in the texts of Ridge and Lowell. Demonstrating that the disruption of the human / nonhuman binary is accompanied by a disruption of genre, it argues that Ridge and Lowell accentuate the complex assemblages at work in the text. Building on this, Chapter 2 examines Loy's poetry and artworks as that which actively transform both the nonhuman object and the literary text into abject things which interrogate assumptions about people, language, and objects. This chapter argues that Loy's compositions offer a reappraisal of the literary object as we know it – its customary spatial notations, typography, punctuation, and communicative language – heralding the possibility of a thingly poetics. Advancing this investigation into the physical and psychological continuums between human subjects and nonhuman objects in modernist poetry, Chapter 3 explores the literary experiments of Stein and the Baroness through the study of neuroplasticity. Offering the first plastic reading of a modernist poem, it argues that Stein and the Baroness's literary experiments articulate how the brain is physically and psychologically altered through sensory encounters with nonhuman

objects. Synthesising studies in modernist literary cultures, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience, this thesis examines the vitality, potentiality, commonality, and plasticity of matter – contending that these poems ultimately challenge our understanding of both the modernist object and the limits of genre.

The thesis also draws on my own creative practice in order to interrogate the relationship between the material object, psychoanalysis and the limits of genre – to explore the extent to which the poem itself slips between ontological categories. Aiming to accentuate the synaptic connections between my chapters, between human subjects and nonhuman objects, between theorists, between modernist and modern poetic composition, and between creative and critical writing, the thesis includes a manifesto which outlines the principles and parameters of the plastic text. Furthermore, I present a collection of my own plastic compositions – 'Museum of Lost and Broken Things' – which explore the physical and psychological continuums between human subjects and nonhuman objects. These poems enact the theoretical principles and formal techniques examined in each chapter – consolidating the productive connections between critical and creative matter.

CONTENTS

MODERNIST OBJECTS:
A CRITICAL INVENTORY OR INTRODUCTION

I begin with a doll, perhaps, or a string quartet, a white cloth, or stack of butter-pats. I begin with an alphabet toy, a lampshade – an orange, thing, or manifesto. Begin again with a midbrain, a table, a rose, perhaps, or a noun, a ready-made, an advertisement, or portmanteau. I begin with this thing we name a poem, and its capacity to articulate the unnameable, unimaginable, unpalatable, or unacknowledged slippages between nonhuman objects and their human subjects in the material world. Begin with a modernist poet – Lola Ridge, Amy Lowell, Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, perhaps, or the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven – and their material, that is, language, that is, the matter of how to articulate those physical and psychological continuums between nonhuman objects and their human subjects via experimental poetic language and forms. Begin again in the whiteness of this document, with annotations or analyses of analyses on modernist things, with the volatile substance we name theory, that is, psychoanalysis, that is, the uncanny, thing-power, defamiliarization, the abject, or thing theory, that is, the nonhuman turn, that is, affect theory, neuroscience, brain plasticity, and the synaptic connections between critical and creative matter. I begin again with a doll, perhaps, or an apple. Begin with a ring pull, the leg of a clothes peg – a bottle cap, balloon clip, or six loose teeth from a comb. I begin with an egg, a vacuum cleaner, a cruise ship, a contraceptive pill, or assemblage. Begin again with a bird, a house, a cubist portrait, a red balloon, a ready-made, perhaps, a selfie stick. I begin this thesis with the aim to articulate the plasticity of the nonhuman object and human subject, that is, the plasticity of this thing we name a poem and its ability to modulate and excite synaptic connections between people, language, and things – those unnameable, unimaginable, unpalatable, or unacknowledged slippages between modern and modernist matter in the material worlds of my own poetry.

Through a critical exploration of modernist composition and my own creative practice, *Becoming Plastic: Modernist Poetics, (Neuro)Psychoanalysis, and the Material Object* examines the formative continuums between human subjects and nonhuman objects in poetry. I argue that there is a formal disturbance of ontological categories happening throughout the process of poetic composition which functions to defamiliarize readers with the material world in which they participate – demanding an active reconceptualisation of these things we name people, language, or objects. Here, the critical component of my thesis engages academically neglected modernist poets – such as Lola Ridge and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven – in productive conversations with those who have received some considerable

attention from literary scholars – including Amy Lowell, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein – to examine the disruptive potential of the material object in modernist poetry. Arguing that these poets disturb the theoretical boundaries between subject and object via experimental poetic languages and forms, the three chapters of this thesis bring together studies in psychoanalysis, the nonhuman turn, defamiliarization, thing theory, and neuroscience to demonstrate the capacity for modernist poetry to interrogate what it is to be human or nonhuman in a world of vital, uncanny, abject, or plastic things.

Acknowledging the assemblages in which we participate, this thesis therefore reconceptualises the relationship between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism in modernist poetry. Revealing that the disruption of the human / nonhuman binary is accompanied by a disruption of genre, it holds that the modernist poem actively transforms both the nonhuman object and literary composition into abject things which interrogate our assumptions about people, language, and objects. Furthermore, this thesis argues that modernist compositions offer a reappraisal of the literary object as we know it – its customary spatial notations, typography, punctuation, and communicative language – heralding the pure potentiality of a thingly poetics. Advancing this investigation into the physical and psychological continuums between human and nonhuman matter, it examines modernist literary objects through the contemporary study of neuroplasticity. Pioneering the first plastic reading of modernist poetry, this thesis demonstrates that modernist poets began to articulate how the brain is physically and psychologically modified through sensory encounters with nonhuman objects. By synthesising studies in modernist literary cultures, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience, it therefore explores the vitality, potentiality, commonality, and plasticity of matter – contending that these poems ultimately challenge our understanding of both the modernist object and the limits of genre.

The thesis culminates with a critical-creative manifesto and collection of original poems which interrogate the relationship between the material object, (neuro)psychoanalysis, and the limits of genre – exploring the extent to which the poem itself slips between ontological categories. Aiming to accentuate the synaptic connections between chapters, between human subjects and nonhuman objects, between theorists, between modernist and modern poetic composition, between creative and critical writing, ‘The Text is a Plastic Thing: A Manifesto’ outlines and ostends the parameters of the plastic text. Here, the manifesto foregrounds the plasticity of my own compositions – ‘Museum of Lost and Broken Things’ – which explore

the physical and psychological continuums between human subjects and nonhuman objects.[1] These poems enact the theoretical principles and formal techniques examined in each chapter – consolidating the plastic connections between critical and creative matter throughout this thesis.

MATTER IN MODERNISM AND MODERNITY

As a period of radical transformation, the modernist era was one of excessive social and political disturbance, technological and philosophical advancement, and literary and artistic innovation.[2] World Wars I and II occurred alongside a succession of radical cultural developments – from the invention of the ballpoint pen, plastic, the tea bag, penicillin, the combustion engine, and the incandescent lightbulb to the conception of immunisation and first-wave feminism – exciting new ways of thinking. Here, an increased dependency on technological objects such as the television and the vacuum cleaner accelerated the pace through which human subjects experienced daily life, whilst modern warfare reduced soldiers to weapons of mass destruction. The result was a complete repudiation of those systems of belief which had, for so long, categorised human and nonhuman matter. As Stephen Kern contends:

> Technological innovations including the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane established the material foundations for this reorientation; independent cultural developments such as the stream of consciousness novel, psychoanalysis, Cubism, and the theory of relativity shaped consciousness directly. The result was a transformation of the dimensions of life and thought.[3]

For Kern, it is the rapidly changing vistas of political, historical, artistic, and scientific possibility that characterize modernity – rendering human subjects and nonhuman objects sites of unremitting modification, and allowing modernist practitioners to challenge the traditional

[1] The compositions included in my thesis are presented in two halves to foreground the publication of my pamphlet, *Museum of Lost and Broken Things* (Nottingham: Leafe Press, 2020). Those included within the publication appear in 'Exhibition I' – 'Exhibition II' includes poems that are either published elsewhere or intended for a future collection.

[2] For the purpose of this thesis, I will consider the modernist era as the epoch of time between the final decades of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, which is broadly accepted in modernist studies. Jean-Michel Rabaté explores the perimeters of modernism in his 'Introduction' to the *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. by Rabaté (Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 1 – 14. The period of modernism, its partitions, is also the subject of Michael H. Whitworth's chapter, 'When was Modernism?' in *Late Victorian into Modern*, ed. by Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 119 – 132.

[3] Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 1 – 2.

schemas of knowledge which defined the material world. Nicholas Saunders, furthermore, recognises modernism's explorations of the continuums between matter – the physical and psychological slippages between subject and object – as a formal repercussion of World War I, which 'breached the boundary between materiality and spirituality, and between emotion and object, more than any previous conflict.'[4] He reasons that as the earth was 'broken' into disparate 'fragments' by the conflict, 'the differences between war *matériel* and human beings elided perhaps for the first time in human history.'[5] Here, Saunders argues that World War I had a profound impact on how we experienced and comprehended the difference between human subject and nonhuman objects. After Saunders, Aimee Gaston describes the commonality between human subjects and nonhuman objects arrested by modern warfare: whilst some 'objects may have surged to fecund life in the domestic safety zone, there were plenty less fortunate who would expire on the battlefield, in disparate parts.'[6] In the modernist era, this apprehension coincides with the inception of psychoanalysis, which, as Noëlle Cuny and Xavier Kalck explain, 'changed our worldview, and showed us how we are fashioned by a dialectic of love and hate with the objects of the world around us.'[7] For psychoanalysts, literary critics, and historians alike, the modernist era becomes a moment of ontological crises in which the theoretical distinctions between subject and object – on which cognition and communication rely – cannot hold.

In *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (2002), Sara Danius argues that the sensory operations of perceiving and knowing are transformed by innovations such as chronophotography, phonography, radiography, and cinematography.[8] She interprets modernism's experimental literary and artistic praxes as rigorous explorations of 'how to represent authentic experience in an age in which the category of experience itself has become a problem.'[9] For Danius, the era's distinguishing innovations in literary and artistic form – such as the stream-of-consciousness novel, which rejects narrative continuity to describe the character's psychological activity as they encounter people, language, and things in the material world – must be understood as critical responses to the experience of modernity.

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[4] Nicholas Saunders, 'Material Culture and Conflict: The Great War, 1914-2003', *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, ed. by Nicholas Saunders (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 5 – 25 (p. 7).
[5] Saunders, pp. 7 – 8.
[6] Aimee Gaston, 'Phenomenology Begins at Home: The Presence of Things in the Short Fiction of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, Vol. 32 (2014), pp. 31 – 51 (p. 38).
[7] Noëlle Cuny and Xavier Kalck, 'Introduction', Modernist Objects (South Carolina: Clemson University Press, 2020) pp. 1 – 18 (p. 16).
[8] Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism* (New York: Cornell University, 2002).
[9] Danius, p. 3.

Here, Danius contends that modernist art and literature responds to political, technological, and scientific revolution through its formal and linguistic meditations on the following questions: 'What is a human being? What is identity? How can we know what we know? What is the role of art and culture?'[10] In this thesis, however, I propose that we must add to this catalogue some final ruminations: What is a nonhuman object? And, indeed, what is a literary object? As a direct result of this ontological crises, Surrealists, Fauvists, Impressionists, Vorticists, Cubists, Dadaists, Futurists, and Imagists began to revise the hierarchical classification of human and nonhuman matter – rendering the theoretical differences between what is animate and inanimate, what is me and not-me, obsolete via their experiments with form and perspective. As Phillip Weinstein argues, modernism's experimental praxes are developed in regards to the axiom that 'To see how things go together requires a strenuous undoing of how they are normally said to go together (as knowing subject and object known).'[11] After all, in order to articulate their experience of modernity, the artist or author must devise original modes of composition to better articulate its dynamism, animacy, and plurality. For Bill Brown, the contemporary pioneer of thing theory, the modernist author's efforts to represent the polysemy of modernity culminate with their meditations on what a literary object is or does and the materiality of language. He reasons that 'literary modernism worked to dramatize the thingness of things – to dramatize its own thingness' in 'the design of books and journals as objects […] or the effort to insist on the material presence of language itself, from Pound's use of the Chinese ideogram to the typographical experiments of the Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists.'[12] Here, the modernist author's formal and linguistic experiments aim to render obsolete the propriety of the proper noun, releasing the literary object from the autocracy of genre, and revealing the continuums between modes of production. In order to communicate the ontological ambiguity of the modern human subject and nonhuman object, the modernist author begins by defamiliarizing language and form.

These ruminations on the materiality of language and the literary composition, however, are heightened in the realm of modernist poetry. For Brown, the 'modernist poet, whether addressing natural or technological objects, feels the need to rescue them […] not from consumer culture so much as from rationalism, symbolism, and language itself.'[13] Responding

[10] Danius, p. 22.
[11] Philip Weinstein, 'Introduction', *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 6.
[12] Bill Brown, 'Materialities of Modernism: Objects, Matter, Things', *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, pp. 281 – 295 (p. 292).
[13] Brown, 'Materialities of Modernism', p. 293.

to those political, technological, and scientific vicissitudes which overwhelmed life in the twentieth century, the modernist poet sought to free the object – and, indeed, the subject – from automatic perception. Through their radical experiments with spatial notation, repetition, fragmentation, typography, and portmanteaux, the modernist poem systematically defamiliarizes matter by conferring 'on things a new ontological amplitude,' acknowledging that the 'recognition of things depends on our capacity to unlearn' the traditional schemas of knowing which may not accurately describe the plasticity of the modern world.[14] Brown goes on to explain that in modernist poetry, communicative language – through which the process of ontological classification occurs – is ousted as nought but an 'impediment' to sensory discernment which 'prevents things from being what they are.'[15] The modernist poem, after all, revels in the slippages between nameable and unnameable matter, overwhelming readerly assumption. Jeremey Noel-Todd, for example, argues that the prose poem is 'the defining poetic invention of modernity' for its disruptions to the boundaries of genre, appropriating prosaic and poetic custom simultaneously.[16] Here, 'the cuts, discontinuities, ruptures, cracks, fissures, holes, hitches, snags, leaps, shifts of reference, and emptiness' that we associate with modernist composition occur 'inside the sentence,' overwhelming the arbitrary connections between proper noun and meaning to apprehend the physical and psychological commonalities between matter.[17] Following Noel-Todd, I argue in this thesis that modernist poetry becomes the optimal apparatus for communicating those slippages between human subjects and nonhuman objects which saturate modernity, depicting this phenomenon not only in its linguistic content, but formally (via its appropriations of disparate literary praxes) in the white matter of the page.

CATALOGUING THE MODERNIST OBJECT

In Lola Ridge's poem, 'The Ghetto' (1918), 'loose jointed' chairs appear to creak 'like old bones' in a grubby café.[18] Salvador Dali's *The Anthropomorphic Cabinet* (1936) is an open chest of drawers which spills cloth, burgeoning a human head, legs, and arms; Man Ray's

[14] Brown, 'Materialities of Modernism', p. 293.
[15] Brown, 'Materialities of Modernism', p. 293.
[16] Jeremy Noel-Todd, 'Introduction', *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), pp. xix – xliv (p. xx).
[17] Rosmarie Waldrop, 'Why Do I Write Prose Poems/When My True Love is Verse', *Atlantic Drift: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by James Byrne and Robert Sheppard (Todmorden: Edge Hill University Press, 2017), pp. 315 – 318 (p. 316).
[18] Lola Ridge, 'The Ghetto', *The Ghetto and Other Poems* (London: Book Jungle, 2010), pp. 8 – 30 (p. 22) (first publ. New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1918).

Indestructible Object (1923) is a ticking metronome with an all-seeing eye. In Marianne Moore's 'To a Steam Roller' (1920), the human subject addresses the nonhuman object as if it might heed their critique, as if it might make its retort.[19] A pioneer of New York Dada, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven erected sculptures from litter and found objects, transforming their ergonomic and aesthetic value – her *Cathedral* (1918) is a wood fragment, her *God* (1917) a rusty plumbing trap on a mitre box. In 1920, T. S. Eliot classified the 'objective correlative' as a poetic technique in which 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events' become the 'formula' of a 'particular emotion' – recalling those formative psychological connections between the human subject and nonhuman object, their encounters in the material world.[20] In a letter to Dorothy Brett, Katherine Mansfield proclaims, 'What can one do, faced with this wonderful tumble of round bright fruits, but gather them and play with them – and become them, as it were. When I pass the apple stalls I cannot help stopping and staring until I feel that I, myself, am changing into an apple too –' and the boundary between what is self and other, what is human and nonhuman, cannot hold.[21] Mina Loy crafted and traded lampshades made in the likeness of other objects – a desk globe, a vase of calla lilies – compelling us to look, look again. When Ezra Pound, in 'A Retrospect' (1918), promotes the three formal principles of Imagist poetry, 'Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective,' is proclaimed first and foremost.[22] In Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913), it is the taste of the humble madeleine which famously facilitates an involuntary retrieval of memory, inducing a powerful psychological transformation, however momentarily, in the human subject. I begin with the recognition that throughout modernist culture, the once familiar object – whose name, ergonomic function, aesthetic value, and lack of physical or psychological autonomy is taken for granted – must be encountered anew, for the human subject is coerced into a radical rethinking of all that they assumed to know and trust about the object world. For Brown, 'Objects cannot be depended on as a source of continuity in the midst of human flux because objects, too, are mutable. They too have lives (and deaths) of their own.'[23] With their subversive experiments in literature and art, modernist painters, authors, sculptors, playwrights, and poets therefore began to consider what strange matter the human

[19] Marianne Moore, 'To a Steam Roller', *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, ed. by Grace Schulman (London: Viking, 2003), p. 92.
[20] T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 85.
[21] Katherine Mansfield, *Katherine Mansfield: Selected Letters*, ed. by Vincent O'Sullivan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 59.
[22] Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect' (1918, 2009) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69409/a-retrospect-and-a-few-donts> [Accessed 30 January 2020].
[23] Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 183.

subject and nonhuman object might have in common, and how such matters might be communicated to the reader, viewer, or audience.[24]

In her preface to *Machine Art, 1934* (2012), Jennifer Jane Marshall imagines a curriculum for a course on 'Ordinary Objects in Interwar American Modernism,' concluding that 'the role of things in American modernism was significant enough to have accounted for most of it.'[25] Here, Marshall appears to echo that poignant prerogative uttered by the speaker of William Carlos Williams' epic poem, *Paterson* (1946) – 'no ideas but in things' – identifying the limitless creative potential of the material object throughout modernist culture.[26] Many critics have laboured over these modernist objects, in all their radical pluralities. In *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998), the most substantial study of objects in modernist literature to-date, Douglas Mao contends that we cannot understand the products of modernism without understanding the twentieth century as a socio-political culture of mass consumption, simultaneously captivated and deeply troubled by the buying, selling, manufacturing, and owning of things.[27] This mode of criticism, in which the modernist object is examined according to the historical, social, political, or technological contexts surrounding its production, presently overwhelms academic scholarship on the modernist object. Whilst acknowledging the productivity of historically motivated analyses, this thesis functions to complicate and advance existing studies of the modernist object by exploring its disruptive potential – assimilating critical perspectives from psychoanalysis, neuroscience, and deconstruction to accentuate the physical and psychological disturbance of ontological categories taking place in the twentieth century. For example, though Mao briefly references the altercations and transactions between human subjects and nonhuman objects in modernist literature, those fixed ontological categories which govern what a nonhuman object is or does – what a human subject is or does – persist, however curiously, above reproach throughout his study:

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[24] Though limited scholarship exists regarding the nonhuman objects in modernist poetry, scholars have explored the role of the nonhuman object in modernist art, fiction, and performance. Significant works include, Ellen Johnson's *Modern Art and the Object: A Century of Changing Attitudes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); John Erickson's *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995); Lisa Siraganian's *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Julie Bates' *Beckett's Art of Salvage: Writing and Material Imagination, 1932-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Here, it should additionally be acknowledged that a collection of essays exploring the role of the object in modernist poetry, prose, visual arts, culture, and performance – *Modernist Objects: Literature, Art, Culture*, ed. by Noelle Cuny and Xavier Kalck (South Carolina: Clemson University Press, 2020) – is due for publication 31st October 2020.
[25] Jennifer Jane Marshall, *Machine Art, 1934* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. xiv.
[26] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1995), p. 6.
[27] Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998).

> To read Woolf's depictions of the world without humans, or Lewis's defences of the concept of the solid object, or Stevens's poems on discrete things, or (somewhat more problematically) Pound's discovery of the indifferent splendour of nature in the Pisan cantos, is to find the modernists crediting the object world not with some immunity to violence or disorder but rather with the profounder innocence of an immunity to thinking and knowing, the noble repose that comes of being out of reach of human persuasion, though not (and herein lay the trouble) out of reach of the human power to destroy.[28]

For Mao, the human subject retains its status as producer and the nonhuman object retains its status as that which is or will be produced. The nonhuman object is consequently aligned with otherness, for its traditional appellation as 'indifferent' or inactive matter with an 'immunity to thinking and knowing' – the binary opposite of the physically and psychologically alert human subject. However, if the nonhuman object really is as impassive as Mao would contend, then how are we to conceptualise those contributions to modernist literature in which the nonhuman object appears to come alive, reciprocating physical and psychological connections in a world of other people, language, and things? And if the nonhuman object really is, as Mao would assert, impermeable to human influence, then how are we to conceptualise the radical contributions to modernist art and literature which transform the ergonomic function or aesthetic value of the nonhuman object? Here, Mao omits any formal acknowledgment of the unnameable, unimaginable, unpalatable slippages between human and nonhuman matter in literary modernism – those nonhuman objects which appear to exceed their status as products or commodities, manifesting an agency that challenges that of the human subject. In this thesis, I therefore begin to elucidate the abject materialities that Mao fails to name, radically disturbing the theoretical boundaries between matter which has, for so long, been classified as human or nonhuman. After Brown, who argues that 'mastering things can take the form of submitting to them, subjecting oneself to the point where subject and object, human and nonhuman, seem to converge,' I explore the arresting moments in modernist poetry in which the socially, politically, technologically, historically, and grammatically regulated distinctions between human subject and nonhuman object cannot hold.[29]

For Brown, after all, 'so much of modernism (visual, plastic, and literary) can be understood to name the provocation of aesthetic events meant to release things – or thingness – from the fetters of modernity.'[30] Here, Brown understands the modernist object as that which

[28] Mao, *Solid Objects,* p. 9.
[29] Brown, 'Materialities of Modernism', p. 291.
[30] Brown, 'Materialities of Modernism', p. 281.

exceeds its status as a commodity, disturbing the physical and psychological order of things in the modern world. Whilst Brown has comprehensively examined the modernist period and its obsession with inventing, producing, distributing, and consuming objects in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* and *Other Things* (2003), he exceeds the rudimentary concern of how the object is produced by modernist cultures to examine those unnameable, unimaginable, or unpalatable continuums between human and nonhuman matter in modernist literature.[31] Brown therefore begins to embrace what Mao does not: the latent psychological and physical vitality of the nonhuman object, that is, the power that things may hold over the human subject. In modernist literature, the nonhuman object is not dead or absolutely unresponsive matter, but something other – something that vehemently rejects binary oppositions, rejecting singularity in definition. When we encounter the modernist object, then, we are confronted by the philosophical and psychological debates surrounding ontological classifications in the twentieth century.[32] In 'Materialities of Modernism: Objects, Matter, Things,' Brown quotes Virginia Woolf's *Between The Acts* (1941) – 'We live in things' – acknowledging the slippage of physical and psychological material that happens between all that has been considered human and nonhuman in modernist prose.[33] This thesis therefore offers a critical study of the agency and plurality of things, the slippage of physical and psychological matter between human subjects and nonhuman objects, in modernist poetry.[34]

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[31] Brown, *A Sense of Things*; Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[32] Many philosophers have considered what it is to be a nonhuman object, including Martin Heidegger in *The Question Concerning the Thing: On Kant's Doctrine of the Transcendental Principles*, trans. by James D. Reid and Benjamin D. Crowe (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018); Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (2 Vols), trans. by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed., trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Friedrich Nietzsche in *Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufman, trans Kaufman & R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968). Edwin Henry Frederick Hercock additionally offers a philosophical reading of objects in the work of modernist poet, George Oppen, through the theories of Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche in his doctoral thesis, 'Modernist Objects / Objects under Modernity: A Philosophical Reading of *Discrete Series*' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2015).

[33] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 1970), p. 70 (first publ. London: Hogarth Press, 1941).

[34] Here, it should be acknowledged that the productive continuums between human and nonhuman matter in modernist explorations of religion, spirituality, magic, and the occult have received some considerable scholarly attention. For an introduction to this topic see Roger Luckhurst, 'Religion, Psychical Research, Spiritualism, and the Occult', *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. by Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gasiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 429 – 444. For further explication, see Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (London: Cornell University Press, 2002); Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Anderson, *Material Spirituality in Modernist Women's Writing* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Marja Lahelma, 'August Strindberg's Art in Modernist and Occult Context', *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema*, ed. by Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 67 – 92.

I begin again with *Things* (2004), with Brown's account of the emergence of material culture studies and the 'return of the real' in contemporary art, with this renewed, scholarly fascination with objects. Brown explains that 'these days, you can read books on the pencil, the zipper, the toilet, the banana, the chair, the potato, the bowler hat' – publications which examine the crossings, attachments, and slippages between human and nonhuman things in the material world.[35] Following what has since been classified as 'the nonhuman turn' – a contemporary mode of critical and philosophical scholarship 'engaged in decentring the human in favour of a concern for the nonhuman' – this thesis explores how Ridge, Lowell, Loy, Stein, and the Baroness formally and linguistically disturb the physical and psychological boundaries between humans and nonhumans, rendering the privileging of all that is habitually connected with this thing we call humanity obsolete in their poetic experiments.[36] Here, I position modernism's overwhelming fixation on material objects alongside the contemporary nonhuman turn to offer a fundamental reappraisal of the modernist object as that which disturbs ontological categories in a radical recognition of the commonality of all matter. As Richard Grusin contends, the nonhuman turn is the radical recognition that 'the human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman – and that the human is characterized precisely by this indistinction from the nonhuman.'[37] Here, it should be acknowledged that there are significant philosophical differences between academics conceptualising the nonhuman turn – particularly those associated with object-orientated ontology (or speculative realism) and vital materialism. For Graham Harman and the object-orientated ontologists, for example, the object's 'withdrawal' or 'withholding' of knowledge from direct access is central to its existence – it is physically and psychologically inaccessible to all things.[38] Despite object-orientated ontology's productive rejection of anthropocentricism – its credence that 'all objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, nonhuman, natural, cultural, real, or

[35] Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Things*, ed. by Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 1 – 22 (p. 2). The *Object Lessons* series by Bloomsbury Academic, published between 2015 and 2017, provide critical analyses on ordinary objects such as the sock, the personal stereo, or the veil – appraising those encounters between human subjects and nonhuman objects which alter our modes of thinking, feeling, acting, and working in the modern world of things. Such *Object Lessons* compel the reader to examine materials which may, due to their overwhelming abundance in the twenty-first century, be overlooked – neither waste, dust, nor the password escaping the critics' measured investigations. Examples include Kim Adrian, *Sock* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, *Personal Stereo* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Rafia Zakaria, *Veil* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Brian Thill, *Waste* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Michael Marder, *Dust* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Martin Paul Eve, *Password* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

[36] Richard Grusin, 'Introduction', *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. by Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. vii – xxx (p. vii).

[37] Grusin, 'Introduction', *The Nonhuman Turn*, pp. ix – x.

[38] Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 7.

fictional' – it holds that there can be no immediate interactions between things.[39] Jane Bennett and the vital materialists, however, explore the productive continuums between humans and nonhumans as actants in the assemblage that is the material world, advocating the affective power of matter. Bennett explores the radical difference between speculative realism and vital materialism in her chapter in *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015); she wonders that even as the 'plastic bottle cap is producing an arresting effect on me and captures my attention, the speculative realist (who eschews the label "materialist") insists that none of the bodies at the scene were wholly present to each other.'[40] Here, Bennett directly opposes object-orientated ontology's philosophy of apartness or 'non-relational conception of the reality of things'.[41] Following the principles of vital materialism, I argue that modernist poets anticipated the nonhuman turn by acknowledging the uncanny, abject, thingly, or plastic connections between human subjects and nonhuman objects, that is, the critical admission that material is material is affective material.

I begin with the object in modernist poetry for its facility to actuate a critical reconceptualisation of the physical and psychological continuums between language and form. To date, the most extensive studies of objects in modernist poetry are Kathleen D'Angelo's unpublished doctoral thesis, *Modernist American Poetry as a Study of Objects* (2011) and John C. Stout's book, *Objects Observed: The Poetry of Things in Twentieth-Century France and America* (2018).[42] Whilst D'Angelo examines the representation of things in the poetry of Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and George Oppen through thing theory, Stout's study considers the centrality of the nonhuman object to twentieth century poets in France and in America, providing significant examinations of Pierre Reverdy, Francis Ponge, Jean Follain, Eugène Guillevic, and Jean Tortel. Stout contends that modernism's analyses of the nonhuman object became a catalyst for a new form of poetics, reading their poems alongside studies in aesthetics, art history, and object-relations theory. Both D'Angelo and Stout, however, are much less concerned with the physical and psychological continuums

[39] Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, p. 9.
[40] Jane Bennett, 'Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy', *The Nonhuman Turn*, pp. 223 – 239 (p. 226).
[41] Harman, 'The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Orientated Literary Criticism', *New Literary History*, Vol. 43.2 (2012), pp. 183 – 203 (p. 187).
[42] Kathleen D'Angelo, *Modernist American Poetry as a Study of Objects* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Maryland, 2011); John C. Stout's book, *Objects Observed: The Poetry of Things in Twentieth-Century France and America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

between human and nonhuman things, than with their respective poets' formal descriptions of the object through language.[43]

My poets, Lola Ridge, Amy Lowell, Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven were chosen for the abundance and assortment of interactions between human subjects and nonhuman objects happening throughout their compositions. At present, critical scholarship on Ridge, Lowell, Loy, Stein, and the Baroness hinge on biography or politics, concentrating on those formative social-historical contexts surrounding their compositions.[44] Here, it should be acknowledged that there is little published scholarship on Ridge and the Baroness beyond the realm of biography – Terese Svoboda's *Anything That Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge* (2015) and Irene Gammel's *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity: A Cultural Biography* (2002) are the most substantial publications concerning Ridge and the Baroness' contributions to modernism.[45] This thesis therefore offers a long-overdue analysis of their respective works, based on the anthropomorphic, uncanny, enchanting, thingly, abject, and plastic continuums between language and form – between all that is habitually connected with these human and nonhuman things – in the material world of the poem. Furthermore, I engage these critically neglected modernist poets, Ridge and the Baroness, in productive conversations with those who have received some considerable attention from literary critics, including Lowell, Loy, and Stein – recalibrating the modernist canon to include their significant contributions. Though critics, including Stout, have explored the male modernist poet's 'feminization of the object which they manipulate and textualize' as 'a recurring preoccupation within the tradition,' I consider the female modernist poet's

[43] Here, it should be acknowledged that though D'Angelo and Stout briefly reference Stein's substantial contributions to the study of objects in modernist poetry, neither consider those of Ridge, Lowell, Loy, and the Baroness.

[44] Caroline Maun, for example, explores Ridge's political agenda in her chapter, 'Imagism, Socially Engaged Poetry, and Lola Ridge' in *Mosaic of Fire: The Work of Lola Ridge, Evelyn Scott, Charlotte Wilder, and Kay Boyle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), pp. 16 – 47; *Amy Lowell, American Modern* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2004), edited by Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich includes essays which explore Lowell's contributions to literary modernism as a woman poet, placing Lowell in her proper historical context to demonstrate her centrality to current critical and theoretical discussions surrounding feminist, gay and lesbian, postcolonial, disability, and cultural studies; Sarah Hayden, in *Curious Disciplines: Mina Loy and Avant-Garde Artisthood* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), explores Loy's entrance into the art world as a coded act of feminist liberation, allowing Loy financial stability as a female artist; Margueritte S. Murphy argues that Stein constructs a new language of queer domesticity, comparing *Tender Buttons* (1914) to Alice B. Toklas' cookbooks in 'Familiar Strangers: The Household Words of Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 32.3 (1991), pp. 383 – 402; Linda Lappin considers the cultural and critical significance of the Baroness' contributions to Dada in a male-dominated canon in 'Dada Queen in the Bad Boys' Club: Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven', *Southwest Review*, Vol. 89.4 (2004), pp. 307 – 319.

[45] Terese Svoboda, *Anything That Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge* (Arizona: Schaffner Press, 2015); Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity: A Cultural Biography* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).

reclamation of the object as a radical stimulus for rethinking the theoretical boundaries between human subjects and nonhuman objects, between genres and genders in twentieth century.[46] Despite my contemplations, throughout this thesis, of the alignment of the nonhuman object and the female subject with otherness, and the necessity of reappraising the binary oppositions which classify all matter in the material world, it is my primary objective to examine the compositions of Ridge, Lowell, Loy, Stein, and the Baroness for their radical experiments with language and form – concentrating on how and why modernist poets destabilise the ontological classification of human subjects, nonhuman objects, and literary texts.

As little scholarship exists on the physical and psychological slippages between human and nonhuman matter in modernist poetry, this thesis draws on contemporary readings of modernist novels and short stories, which consider literature after the nonhuman turn. For example, in 'Phenomenology Begins at Home: The Presence of Things in the Short Fiction of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf,' Aimee Gaston argues that Mansfield and Woolf complicate the human / nonhuman dichotomy with their anthropomorphic objects, acknowledging the human subject's transformative encounters with the nonhuman object, and the transference of psychological matter that occurs between human subject and nonhuman object in the material world. For Gaston, it is the anthropomorphic object – the nonhuman object imbued with motivations, emotions, actions, and behaviours of its own – that therefore enables Mansfield and Woolf to successfully articulate the complex, emotionally rich 'subjective interiority' of their characters.[47] For Laura Oulanne, however, this slippage is considerably more profound than a simple transference of material from human subject to nonhuman object. In her paper, 'Affective Bodies: Nonhuman and Human Agencies in Djuna Barnes' Fiction,' Oulanne asserts that the very concept of 'humanness' is overwhelmingly and conclusively 'entangled' with that which we call nonhuman.[48] Here, Oulanne considers Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) in conjunction with Bennett's study of distributed agency in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), in which objects are able to 'act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, forces or tendencies of their own.'[49] For Oulanne, 'Bennett's deconstruction of the boundary between matter and life enables us to look at humans as well as nonhumans […] as simultaneously material and potentially "vital"' – to acknowledge the physical and

[46] Stout, *Objects Observed*, p. 10.
[47] Gaston, 'Phenomenology Begins at Home', p. 32.
[48] Laura Oulanne, 'Affective Bodies: Nonhuman and Human Agencies in Djuna Barnes's Fiction', *On Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 2 (2016) <http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12351/> [Accessed 3 February 2020].
[49] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), p. viii.

psychological continuums between human subjects and nonhuman objects beyond anthropocentric conceptions of anthropomorphism, alternatives to which I discuss in Chapter 1 of this thesis.[50]

Another significant study concerning the assimilation of human and nonhuman matter in modernist fiction is Kristianne Kalata's '"There was a World of Things… and a World of Words": Narration of the Self through Object in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Scenes of Childhood' (2005). Kalata argues that Townsend-Warner's *Scenes of Childhood and Other Stories* (a culmination of stories published in *The New Yorker* between 1936 and 1973) 'articulates a merging of object with subject, of external with internal.'[51] She considers Townsend-Warner's writing alongside Stein's grammatical theories on the connections between words – specifically, nouns – and things, her criticism culminating in a study of modernist experimental language and its capacity to defamiliarize the object:

> Warner seeks to dislocate the thing from its culturally symbolic counterpart – the word – in order to reconstruct a set of associations that she deems fit. Thus, throughout *Scenes of Childhood*, objects' traditional uses are deconstructed so that new associations – ones that comment upon issues of nation, custom, and tradition – can be made: a chair is not for sitting; a bed, not for sleeping; buttons, not for buttoning; cheese, not for eating.[52]

Here, Kalata argues that Warner detaches the nonhuman object from the meaning of the noun which names it 'chair' or 'bed' or 'button' or 'cheese' so that it might exceed its status as commodity – becoming the Steinian 'thing in itself,' which certainly means but does not simply mean all that we have come to know about the nonhuman object's ergonomic function or aesthetic value.[53] In 'Poetry and Grammar,' Stein apprehends 'this exceeding struggle of knowing really knowing what a thing was really knowing it'; she concludes that even the 'name of a thing might be something in itself if it could come to be real enough but just as a name it was not enough something.'[54] Here, Stein refers to the radical potentiality of language to become 'real' – to become a thing in our material word, to transcend, however momentarily, the process of naming. For Stein, the thingly potentiality of language has not been fully realised in literature, but it would mean that 'there could no longer be form to decide anything' – and 'real narrative' must 'be told by any one having come to the realization that the noun must be

[50] Oulanne, 'Affective Bodies'.
[51] Kristianne Kalata, '"There was a World of Things… and a World of Words": Narration of the Self through Object in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Scenes of Childhood', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* Vol. 24.2 (2005), pp. 319-339 (p. 320).
[52] Kalata, '"There was a World of Things… and a World of Words"', p. 322.
[53] Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar', *Lectures in America*, (Massachusetts: Little, Brown, and Co., 1957), p. 336.
[54] Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar', p. 334

replaced not by inner balance but by the thing in itself' which 'will eventually lead to everything.'[55] This is taken up in Chapter 2, which explores the latent thinglyness of our language – positing that the modernist object is a physically and psychologically disconcerting force which compels us to acknowledge the plurality of the material world and all its volatile human and nonhuman matter. It examines the modernist object as that which revels in unnameable and unimaginable materialities, confronting us with unpalatable questions: What is the purpose of this thing? What is the meaning of this thing? What is this thing doing to me?

Following this radical examination of the modernist object's capacity for physical and psychological transformation, I turn to the contemporary study of neuroscience to explicate the developmental continuums between people, language, and things in modernist poetry. In his paper on neuroplasticity in Joseph Conrad's novels, Nidesh Lawtoo contends that nothing – including modernist literature – 'seems to escape the neuro turn.'[56] He argues that Conrad's depiction of a malleable, plural, or capricious human subject prefigures neuroplasticity, in which 'the structure of the brain itself, in its synaptic, neuronal connections [..] has the capacity to change over time,' modified in direct response to sensory encounters with the material world. What Lawtoo does not consider, however, is the potential application of neuroplasticity to the nonhuman turn, that is, the critical acknowledgement of the nonhuman object's capacity for affect – its proper name, ergonomic function, aesthetic and sentimental value continually modified in direct response to sensory encounters with people, language, and things.[57] After Lawtoo, I therefore begin this thesis with the purpose of fundamentally reconceptualising the modernist object – that is, the unnameable, unimaginable, unpalatable object in modernist literature *and* the unnameable, unimaginable, unpalatable object that is the modernist literary composition – as plastic. In Chapter 3, I therefore offer the first neuroplastic reading of those often critically distained experiments of Stein and the Baroness, which prefigure the affectivity of matter, that is, the formation, modulation, reparation, and termination of the neuronal pathways between human subjects and nonhuman objects, in language and form. Throughout the critical and creative matter which forms this thesis, I therefore examine the modernist object as that which resists ontological classification, revelling in a physically and psychologically disquieting plasticity which disturbs the logical, grammatical, communicative dimensions of this thing we name a poem. For Saikat Majumdar, after all, 'modernism is the privileged moment when the disruptive object appears, both in its concrete materiality and in its refusal

[55] Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar', p. 336.
[56] Nidesh Lawtoo, 'Conrad's Neuroplasticity', *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 23 (2016), pp. 771 – 788 (p. 771).
[57] Lawtoo, 'Conrad's Neuroplasticity', p. 772.

to be objectified and domesticated.'[58] Though Majumdar does not directly refer to the plasticity of the modernist object in his analyses, he nonetheless recognises its capacity to resist definition, revelling in a vexing malleability that is presently neglected in modernist studies.

EXHIBITING THE MODERNIST OBJECT

Central to my analysis of the modernist object is the apprehension that the nonhuman object and the human subject must be ousted as malleable and capricious matter in literary and artistic modernism – that the language through which we catalogue things can no longer hold, that nonhuman objects and human subjects are continually modified in physical and psychological encounters with the other. Following the comprehension of affect theory, which, for Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, signifies 'a body's belonging to a world of encounters,' I explore those determinative encounters happening between human and nonhuman bodies in modernist poetry.[59] Seigworth and Gregg define affect as that which emerges through an 'unmediated relatedness' – in 'the capacities to act and be acted upon' – in 'those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves.'[60] For Seigworth and Gregg, an awareness of affect may therefore 'leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent interactability' as our binary oppositions or 'compartmentalisms' are rendered obsolete, substituted for the tensions between things.[61] Affect theorists such as Sarah Ahmed, Jonas Frykman, Maja Povrzanović Frykman, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have subsequently examined how human subjects may project affects onto nonhuman objects, how nonhuman objects may provoke affects in human subjects – perturbing, obscuring, and transforming the relations between matter.[62] Here, affect theory offers a way of conceptualising the radical possibilities of a material world that undergoes continual physical and psychological transformation. In this thesis, I therefore explore how affect passes between nonhumans and

[58] Saikat Majumdar, 'A Pebblehard Soap: Objecthood, Banality, and Refusal in Ulysess', *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 42.1 (2004), pp. 219 – 238 (p. 103).
[59] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Seigworth and Gregg (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1 – 28 (p. 2).
[60] Seigworth and Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', p. 1, 4, 1, 4.
[61] Seigworth and Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', p. 1.
[62] Sarah Ahmed, 'Happy Objects', *The Affect Theory Reader*, pp. 29 – 51; Jonas Frykman and Maja Povrzanović Frykman, 'Affect and Material Culture: Perspectives and Strategies', *Sensitive Objects*, ed. by Frykman and Frykman (Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2016), pp. 9 – 30; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

humans – and, indeed, between texts and readers – throughout modernism and beyond, overwhelming ontological classification, demonstrating the relativity and potentiality of matter through my critical-creative methodology.

Despite its experimental praxes, creative criticism is nothing new. This thesis responds to an extensive history of critical-creative interventions, from Oscar Wilde's 'The Critic as an Artist: A Dialogue in Two Parts' (1891) and Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) to Roland Barthes' *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) and Nicholas Royle's *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (2012).[63] In their introduction to *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide* (2014), Stephen Benson and Clare Connors define creative criticism as that which 'exploits, distorts, works over, hyperbolises, erases or plays with the conventions of academic critical prose.'[64] Formally appropriating all that is excessive in academic prose, this thesis exaggerates the physical and psychological continuums between critical theory and creative writing in plastic reparations of repetitions which modulate connections between my chapters and compositions. Just as the theoretical boundaries between human and nonhuman matter are continually disturbed throughout this thesis, so too are the boundaries between academic genre and form. The thesis begins with the expectation of an introduction, its arguments organised into chapters, and moves toward something thingly, something plastic, as the thesis develops, through its encounters with literary theories and modernist praxes. There ensues, therefore, a progressive disturbance of the conventions of academic prose – occurring through the cognitive operation of reading. As Benson and Connors describe:

> Creative criticism […] is more a matter of part writing, of writing in bits each of which, while ostensibly whole, is allied with other bits such that our sense of and desire for wholeness are unsettled. Something is happening in the relation of the parts. The writing is intermittent, variously interrupting itself; there is a marked rhythm of continuity but also of discontinuity, hence of continuity in discontinuity.[65]

The composition of this thesis therefore heralds the pure potentiality of creative criticism – its slippage between 'continuity' and 'discontinuity' – in a continuous augmentation of

[63] Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist: A Dialogue in Two Parts', *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, and Other Writings* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1999), pp. 101 – 71; Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1938); Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010); Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). Here, it should be acknowledged that there are earlier examples of creative criticism, such as Plato's *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 1955) (first publ. circa 375 BC); however, for the purpose of this thesis, I primarily refer to those examples surrounding literary modernism and beyond.
[64] Stephen Benson and Clare Connors, 'Introduction', *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Benson and Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 1 – 47 (p. 3).
[65] Benson and Connors, 'Introduction', pp. 11 – 12.

experimental plastic techniques, including repetition, fragmentation, spatial notation, neologism, and typographical distortion. The critical-creative methodology of this thesis therefore culminates in a manifesto, which supplants the anachronous conclusion to originate a poetics of plasticity, and collection of poems, which appropriate the theories and modernist praxes examined in my chapters. Here, I contemplate the extent to which the text is a plastic thing with the ability to form and be formed by other texts – to form and be formed by the reader's physical and psychological interactions with other texts – in the material world. As a critical-creative assemblage of affective materialities which repair, relapse, reject, repeat, resist, and respond to each other, this thesis therefore alerts readers to those theoretical slippages happening between studies in psychoanalysis, thing theory, affect theory, aesthetics, the nonhuman turn, modernist literary cultures, modern poetic composition, and neuroscience. Throughout this thesis, the modernist object is therefore classified as anthropomorphic, uncanny, enchanting, thingly, abject, and finally, plastic – for it comprises all and none of these appellations at all. To fully explore the maddening, strange, fragmented, plural, affective, disruptive, radical dimensions of the modernist object, I therefore begin with the axiom that the thesis must become, formally and linguistically, plastic – synthesising, modulating, and repairing its inter-disciplinary methodology through the process of composition, enacting the disruption of ontological classification which I argue overwhelms literary modernism.

In Chapter One, I offer a critical reconceptualisation of anthropomorphism in modernist poetry, which has long been connected with all that is anthropocentric. I explore the slippage between human and nonhuman matter through Sigmund Freud's seminal publication, *The Uncanny* (1919) – the strangely familiar – and then, Bennett's studies concerning distributed agency, enchantment, and assemblage in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* and *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (2001).[66] Here, I examine the anthropomorphic object's capacity to disquiet and delight readers in the poetry of Ridge and Lowell, formally and linguistically augmenting the complex assemblage of matters that is the literary text. I begin with Freud and psychoanalytic theory for the word 'object' is imperative in the study of psychoanalysis – 'love objects, hate objects, phobic objects, fetish objects, internal objects, part objects, and object representations' all come to signify elements of the psyche.[67] For Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, 'the interest in the object and its relation to the

[66] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) (first publ. in *Imago*, Vol. 5 (1919), pp. 297 – 324); Bennett, *Vibrant Matter;* Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[67] Freud Museum London, *Freud's Objects* (2015) <https://www.freud.org.uk/education/topic/40037/subtopic/40048/> [Accessed 1 January 2018].

subject of consciousness has motivated modern psychoanalysis since Freud,' whose structure of the unconscious is 'defined by its relationship to a primary "absent" object' (the mother's body or the phallus).[68] After Freud, Vladiv-Glover theorises that desire is 'bound up with the instituting structure of absence/presence' – here, the nonhuman object appears to exceed the stasis or stability we have traditionally attributed to objecthood, inducing transformations of the human subject, a fluctuation of meanings.[69] Through an exploration of Freud's writings on the uncanny and Bennett's critical study of 'thing-power' – 'the 'strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience' – I therefore contend that Ridge and Lowell's anthropomorphic objects implicate their readers in the radical reappraisal of a human / nonhuman binary that cannot hold.[70] Here, I examine the uncanny silence of Ridge's anthropoid doll, who appears to emote and reason, in 'Sun-Up' (1920) and the uncanny clamour of Lowell's strings in 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces, "Grotesques" for String Quartet' (1916) which appear to screech in the absence of a player. I explore Ridge's doll and Lowell's strings as anthropomorphic nonhuman objects whose uncanny resonances (or, indeed, silences) coerce the reader into questioning all they have come to know and trust about human subjects, about nonhuman objects, about the material world of the poem. Following Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin's seminal analyses of sound in poetry, I contemplate the phonic reverberations of the anthropomorphic object, which appears alongside uncanny poetic forms and phonetic patterns with the power to delight and disquiet readers in the work of Ridge and Lowell – destabilising the communicative function of a language that does not simply mean.[71] Accompanying the slippage between human and nonhuman forms, I therefore argue that there is a slippage between literary genres in Ridge and Lowell's compositions. By compelling their readers to acknowledge the assemblages in which they participate, I argue that modernist poets participate in a critical destabilisation of the ontological categories, human and nonhuman – compelling us to dwell on the complex, secret lives of those objects that participate in our material world.

Chapter Two brings together studies in material cultures, affect theory, psychoanalysis, and thing theory, exploring multi-sensory encounters with nonhuman objects in the literary and

[68] Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, 'The Representation of the Object as the Other in Modernism/Postmodernism: A Psychoanalytic Perspective', *Facta Universitatis*, Vol. 10 (2011), pp. 173 – 194 (p. 177).
[69] Vladiv-Glover, 'The Representation of the Object as the Other in Modernism/Postmodernism', p. 177.
[70] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. xvi.
[71] Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, 'The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound: The 2006 MLA Presidential Forum', *PMLA*, Vol. 123.3 (2008), pp. 749 – 761.

artistic oeuvre of Mina Loy. After Viktor Shklovsky's defamiliarization theory in 'Art as Technique' (1917) and Julia Kristeva's conceptualisation of the abject in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), I examine the strange ability of Loy's poetic experiments and art objects to transform nonhuman objects into unimaginable, unpalatable, undesirable things, which Brown defines as that which 'hovers over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable.'[72] I argue that that the radical plurality of Loy's lampshades, art objects, and poetic experiments carefully dismantles the boundaries between human subjects and nonhuman objects, between sex and gender, between literary and artistic productions, to bring about a powerful disruption of the naming function of a language which directs and commands all systems of physical and psychological knowing. Furthermore, I contend that Loy's modernist things revel in all that is unnameable, unpalatable, and unimaginable: they startle and confront the reader with their strange materialities, demanding an active reappraisal. Following Kristeva, I reason that Loy's act of transforming literary and artistic objects into literary and artistic things may reveal the revolutionary potential of a language that revels in instability.[73] Here, I assert that Loy's things reveal the latent possibilities of the material in which she works, be it oil paint, rags, found objects, papier maché, or language – forming excessive, maddening, unidentifiable things which resist singularity in classification. Finally, I contend that Loy's texts offer a radical rethinking of the literary object as we have come to know it – its customary spatial notations, typography, punctuation, and communicative language – confronting the reader with the pure potentiality of a thingly poetics.

In Chapter Three, I explore the experimental poetics of Gertrude Stein in *Tender Buttons* (1914) and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven in *Body Sweats* (compiled in 2011) through the concepts of plasticity and neuropsychoanalysis. Here, I consider the ability of experimental modernist poetics to formally anticipate the brain's synaptic junctions and neuronal firings in relation to the nonhuman object, repairing and reforming our traditional conceptions of the nonhuman object, through Catherine Malabou's work on neuroplasticity and experimental writing in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2004) and *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* (2004).[74] Though Jonah Lehrer examines, at length, how the physical and

[72] Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. by Lee T. Lemon & Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1965), pp. 3 – 24; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 5.
[73] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
[74] Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans by. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. by Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

psychical mechanisms of the human brain is anticipated by modernist writing in *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (2007), this chapter marks the first examination of neuroplasticity in modernist poetry, exploring the human subject's sensory encounters with the nonhuman object as that which excites a radical rethinking of the this thing we name a poem – articulating that which Malabou defines as 'the completeness of form and the possibility of its disintegration.'[75] Whilst Lehrer explores Stein's subversive experiments with language in *Tender Buttons* (1914) – her futile attempts and subsequent failure to make language meaningless – he does not ultimately consider the extent to which Stein's compositions append, reveal, and transform the brain's plastic capacity to relate words to things, to relate things to other words. In this chapter, I therefore consider the extent to which the plastic human subject is physically and psychologically altered through encounters with plastic nonhuman objects in the work of Stein and the Baroness – articulating how the brain learns and adapts to its external environment through experience. Here, I theorise that the fragmented, hybrid forms in which Stein and the Baroness write should be considered 'plastic' – articulating 'the completeness of form and the possibility of its disintegration'.[76] If, for Malabou, 'form is plastic' and 'the nervous system presents the clearest, most striking model of this type of organization', I contend that we must look to brain for creative stimulation – its synaptic connections and neural firings becoming poetic techniques, represented on the page via experimental language techniques such as fragmentation, repetition, and spatial notation.[77] This study therefore culminates with the proclamation that it is plastic form which affords the literary text the critical potential to articulate the nonhuman object in all its pluralities – synthesising, modulating, repairing, and executing the connections between people, language and things.

I conclude with a creative-critical meditation on the purpose of a plastic text, its formal and linguistic properties – composed in the manifesto form as a direct response to radical modernist examples such as Tristan Tzara's 'Dada Manifesto' (1918), Loy's 'Aphorisms on Futurism' (1914 – 1919), Stein's 'Composition as Explanation' (1926), Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse' (1950), and Francis Ponge's 'The Object is Poetics' (1962).[78] In *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, Mary Ann Caws argues that the 'manifesto moment positions itself between

[75] Jonah Lehrer, *Proust was a Neuroscientist* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007); Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, p. 2.
[76]Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, p. 2.
[77] Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, p. 1, 7.
[78] Tristan Tzara's 'Dada Manifesto', *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), pp. 297 – 304; Loy, 'Aphorisms on Futurism', *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, pp. 327 – 329; Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, pp. 671 – 678; Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, pp. 548 – 557; Francis Ponge, 'The Object is Poetics', *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, pp. 507 – 508.

what has been done and what will be done, between the accomplished and the potential, in a radical and energizing division.'[79] The manifesto, as a form which oscillates between the formed and all that has yet to be formed, operating between past, present, and possibility is continually modified throughout the history of modernism in response to encounters with human subjects, language, and nonhuman objects. Formally, the manifesto therefore signifies all that is and will be considered plastic. For Caws, 'The manifesto is an act of *démesure*, going past what is thought of as proper, sane, and literary.'[80] Furthermore, she asserts that when a manifesto is at 'the peak of its performance, its form creates its meaning.'[81] The manifesto is excessive, innovative, maddening, plastic – it is a text which operates beyond genre, which produces its own formal and linguistic conditions between prose and poetry, between critical and creative modes of composition. 'The Text is a Plastic Thing: A Manifesto' heralds the pure potentiality of plastic composition after modernism.

This critical-creative manifesto directly leads into my collection of original compositions – 'Museum of Lost and Broken Things' – foregrounding their plastic materialities, their meditations on the slippage of physical and psychological matter happening between human subjects and nonhuman objects. These poems hyperbolise, appropriate, and develop the experimental techniques of my chosen poets, revelling in the productive continuums between genres. I begin again with the silence of a doll, perhaps, or an apple. Begin with a toothpaste marble, the leg of a clothes peg – a pen cap, bottle cap, balloon clip, or the habit of six loose teeth from a comb. Begin with a soft-boiled egg, a thimble, a cruise ship, a contraceptive pill, an assemblage of vibrant things. I begin again with a bell, a house, or shrunken head. I begin with a ready-made, perhaps, a paper clip, or the pit of a peach to explore the volatility of matter which rejects communicative language – revelling in abject plurality to stimulate a critical reconceptualisation of what it is to be human or nonhuman in the twentieth century and beyond, what is to compose this thing we name poetry in the twentieth century and beyond. Finally, I begin with the aphorism that a critical-creative thesis is, above all else, a plastic thing.

[79] Caws, 'The Poetics of the Manifesto: Nowness and Newness', *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, pp. xix – xxxii (p. xxi).
[80] Caws, 'The Poetics of the Manifesto', p. xx.
[81] Caws, 'The Poetics of the Manifesto', p. xx.

THE SECRET LIVES OF MODERNIST OBJECTS: ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN THE POETRY OF LOLA RIDGE AND AMY LOWELL

For Jessica Feldman, it is modernist poets, novelists, short story writers, and playwrights who 'brought dead objects back to life: railroad timetables, cracked teacups, golden bowls, heather mixture stockings, Connemara cloth, vaseline, and orangeflowers.'[1] In modernist literature, such 'dead' objects are not simply resurrected – their materials recycled, remade, reused – but are ascribed physical and psychological agency, a life of their own. Modernist objects are afforded human behaviours, sentiments, and motivations; they appear to speak, move, feel, and think at will. In Lola Ridge's poem, 'The Ghetto' (1918), 'loose jointed' chairs creak 'like old bones' in a grimy café, their bodies ailing.[2] The domestic objects of Ford Madox Ford's 'A House' (1921) chatter their glossolalia, living alongside their animal and human occupants: 'I am the Clock on the Shelf! Is… Was… Is… Was! Too late … Because… Too late… Because…'[3] When Miss Brill, the namesake of Katherine Mansfield's short story (1920), shakes 'the moth-powder' from her fur necklet and gives it 'a good brush,' it asks, 'What has been happening to me?' and cries when it is put back in its box.[4] Odradek appears, to the protagonist of Franz Kafka's 'The Cares of a Family Man' (1919), to be 'a flat star-shaped spool for thread' with old, tattered fibres hanging from its body – uttering 'the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it' in the absence of a mouth.[5] In Amy Lowell's poem, 'Red Slippers' (1915), shoes coerce human pedestrians into looking through a shop window, 'festooning from the ceiling like stalactites of blood, flooding the eyes of passers-by with dripping colour' – 'screaming their claret' into the crowded metropolis.[6] Here, Lowell's red slippers act upon the material world with an autonomy that should not be – that seems, however momentarily, to challenge the autonomy of the human subject. There is something troubling about their animacy; it disrupts those seemingly successful assumptions we have made about the world, about our things. In Virginia Woolf's 'Solid Objects,' the protagonist fondly recounts the

[1] Jessica Feldman, 'Modernism's Victorian 'Bric-a-Brac', *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 8 (2001), pp. 453 – 470 (p. 453).
[2] Ridge, 'The Ghetto', *The Ghetto and Other Poems* (London: Book Jungle, 2010), pp. 8 – 30 (p. 22).
[3] Ford Madox Ford, 'A House', *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, ed. by Harriet Monroe, Vol. 17.6 (1921), pp. 291 – 310 (p. 300).
[4] Katherine Mansfield, 'Miss Brill', *Selected Stories* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), pp. 225 – 229 (p. 225).
[5] Franz Kafka, 'The Cares of a Family Man', *On Dolls*, ed. by Kenneth Gross (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2012), pp. 63 – 65 (p. 63).
[6] Lowell, 'Red Slippers', *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, ed. by Harriet Monroe, Vol. 6.1 (1915), pp. 10 – 11 (p. 10).

childhood belief that 'the heart of the stone leaps with joy when it sees itself chosen,' and the stone calls out: 'It might so easily have been any other of the millions of stones, but it was I, I, I!'[7] Woolf's stone appeals to us, as readers, to contemplate what strange matter the human subject and nonhuman object might have in common. In modernist literature, there is a radical disturbance of ontological categories; the 'I' which has belonged, with so little opposition, to the human subject, becomes the 'I' of the nonhuman object.

Throughout this chapter, I offer a fundamental reappraisal of anthropomorphism in the compositions of Lola Ridge and Amy Lowell, which liberate this critically abhorred phenomenon from anthropocentricism by acknowledging the physical and psychological continuums between human and nonhuman matter. The term 'anthropomorphism' is etymologically derived from the Greek words *anthropos* (meaning 'human') and *morphe* (meaning 'shape' or 'form'),[8] and is simply defined as the attribution of human-like personalities or physiognomies to something nonhuman.[9] Historically, anthropomorphism has been condemned by philosophers, scientists, and theologists as 'an insidious anthropocentricism that dares not speak its name' – the human subject positioning his or herself as 'the center of the world' by imposing human schemas onto gods, animals, and nonhuman objects.[10] Following the work of Stewart Elliot Guthrie and Pierre Montebello, however, I contend that anthropomorphism is not a simple matter of anthropocentricism, but is a fundamental disruption of the hierarchical classifications that are 'human subject' and 'nonhuman object'. For Guthrie, 'when we see there is no certain line between the human and the nonhuman, we can better see that it is not unreasonable to look for features we are acquainted with in humans elsewhere as well.'[11] There is therefore a palpable commonality between subject and object, and it must be acknowledged that human and nonhuman beings share more properties and propensities than we have, historically, been willing to admit. Pierre Montebello similarly contends that there is a 'higher anthropomorphism' which should be considered the exact opposite of anthropocentricism. Montebello asserts that higher

[7] Virginia Woolf, 'Solid Objects', *The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2011), pp.49 – 59 (p. 53).
[8] Nicholas Epley, Adam Waytz, John T. Cacioppo, 'On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism', *Psychological Review*, Vol. 114.4 (2007), pp. 864 – 886 (p. 865).
[9] Oxford English Dictionary, *Anthropomorphism* (2019) <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/8449?redirectedFrom=anthropomorphism#eid> [Accessed 6 February 2019].
[10] Michel Weemans and Bertrand Prévost, 'Introduction', *The Anthropomorphic Lens: Microcosmism and Analogy in Early Modern Thought and Visual Arts* (Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 1 – 18 (p. 5). For a detailed history of the arguments for and against anthropomorphism see Weemans and Prévost's 'Introduction' and Stewart Elliot Guthrie's 'The Origin of Anthropomorphism' in *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 62 – 90.
[11] Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, p. 89.

anthropomorphism does not seek to 'extend man to the world, but to place man in the world,' for what is 'man is thus in all things, not because it is in man, but because it is in all things.'[12] Finally, anthropomorphism is offered a pivotal chance of redemption. According Montebello, anthropomorphism should no longer be considered a matter of vanity or a foolish projection of human personalities and physiognomies onto nonhuman objects, but a critical destabilisation of our place as human subjects in the material world.

More recently, scholars participating in the nonhuman turn have 'engaged in decentring the human in favour of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman' – demonstrating that 'the human is characterized precisely by this indistinction from the nonhuman.'[13] The nonhuman turn is a heterogeneous collection of interdisciplinary studies, including Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's assemblage theory, and those oppositional modes of speculative realism and vital materialism which are Graham Harman's object-orientated ontology and Jane Bennett's thing-power respectively. Richard Grusin therefore describes the nonhuman turn as 'a theoretical or methodological assemblage' of studies that 'argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism,' against ontological classification.[14] Here, I radically revise the theoretical parameters of anthropomorphism in modernist poetry after the nonhuman turn, primarily concentrating on the principles of vital materialism, which advocates for the physical and psychological continuums between human and nonhuman matter – the agency of things.[15]

In the first half of this chapter, I begin with what Aimee Gaston classifies as the powerful 'slippage between the realms of human and material' in modernist literature – its ability to 'make the reader feel at home in not feeling at home' in the text, compelling the reader to violently reappraise the physical and psychological dimensions of their material things, of themselves, as human beings.[16] There are, of course, distinctive resonances of Sigmund Freud's seminal publication, 'The Uncanny' (1919), in Gaston's analyses.[17] I therefore turn to the Freudian 'uncanny' – 'that species of the frightening that goes back to

[12] Pierre Montebello, *The Other Metaphysics: Essays on Ravaisson, Tarde, Nietzsche and Bergson* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 2003), pp. 12 – 13.
[13] Richard Grusin, 'Introduction', *The Nonhuman Turn,* ed. by Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. vii – xxx (p. vii, x).
[14] Grusin, 'Introduction', *The Nonhuman Turn*, p. x.
[15] I summarise my rationale for adopting the principles of vital materialism over object-orientated ontology in 'Modernist Objects: A Critical Inventory or Introduction', pp. 8 – 9. For a detailed discussion on the philosophical dissimilarities between vital materialism and object-orientated ontology, see Bennett, 'Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy', *The Nonhuman Turn*, pp. 223 – 239.
[16] Aimee Gaston, 'Phenomenology Begins at Home: The Presence of Things in the Short Fiction of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, Vol. 32 (2014), pp. 31-51 (p. 37, 44).
[17] Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

what was once well known and had long been familiar' – to elucidate the formal implications of the slippages between human and nonhuman material in Lola Ridge's long-form, free verse poem, 'Sun-Up' (1920).[18] Freud recognises dolls, automatons, and wax figures as objects with the potential to elicit an uncanny response. My examination of Ridge's 'Sun-Up' therefore primarily concentrates on the anthropomorphic nonhuman object that is Janie – the protagonist's doll. Here, I offer a critical autopsy of Janie's silent, anthropoid body as that which compels the reader to contemplate what the human subject and nonhuman object have in common. Furthermore, I argue that the poem's slippages between animacy and inanimacy, sentience and insentience, and homeliness and unhomeliness, are accompanied by a formal slippage between poetic and prosaic material.

Following this radical redefinition of anthropomorphism as that which reveals uncanny slippages between human and nonhuman matter in the material world, I turn to Bennett's critical studies of 'thing-power' and 'enchantment' in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) and *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (2001) respectively.[19] In the second half of this chapter, I argue that Amy Lowell's anthropomorphic nonhuman objects manifest what Bennett defines as 'thing-power' or the 'strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience.'[20] When Lowell's strings play – 'screeching' – in the absence of a player throughout 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces, "Grotesques" for String Quartet' (1916), I examine their vociferous thing-power as that which compels us to revaluate our ontological classification of matter in the material world.[21] Finally, I explore the possibility that just as the anthropomorphic nonhuman's thing-power may disturb the reader with its potential to rival the human subject's autonomy, it may also delight in equal measure. In my analysis of Lowell's polyphonic prose poem, 'Spring Day' (1916), I therefore argue that the anthropomorphic nonhuman object may alternatively induce that 'state of wonder' – the 'temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement' – which Bennett designates 'enchantment'.[22] I explore Lowell's polyphonic prose, its synthesis of human and nonhuman sonance, as that which triggers a powerful slippage between the

[18] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 124; Ridge, 'Sun-Up', *Sun-Up and Other Poems* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1920), pp. 3 – 36.
[19] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010); Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[20] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. xvi.
[21] Lowell, 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces, "Grotesques" for String Quartet', *Some Imagist Poets, 1916*, ed. by Lowell (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), pp. 87 – 91 (p. 87).
[22] Lowell, 'Spring Day', *Some Imagist Poets, 1916*, pp. 82 – 86; Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 5.

enchanting and uncanny. Furthermore, I suggest that the slippage between poetic and prosaic material happening in Ridge's 'Sun-Up' is also critical to our understanding of Lowell's innovations in polyphonic prose – its strange ability to simultaneously delight and disarm the reader with a symphony of things.

As an assemblage of theoretical material, this chapter then concludes with a critical reconceptualisation of Ridge and Lowell's texts as assemblages, or 'ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts' – human and nonhuman matter, poetic and prosaic material.[23] For Bennett, any 'attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman' is, after all, intrinsically 'futile' – she argues that we must 'seek instead to engage more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the nonhumans in the assemblages' in which we all participate as actants in and of the material world.[24] By compelling readers to acknowledge the assemblages in which they participate, I contend that modernist texts participate in a disturbance of the ontological categories and classifications which have traditionally ordered the world and all its things. Finally, I argue that modernist writers such as Ridge and Lowell alert their readers to their active participations in the strange and disturbing assemblage of materials that is the experimental literary text.

MY DOLL JANIE: LOLA RIDGE AND THE UNCANNY SILENCE OF DOLLS

When she arrived in Australia from New Zealand in 1903, the Irish born anarchist poet Lola Ridge was not 'Lola Ridge' at all; as Ridge's biographer, Terese Svoboda, recounts, 'for the last eight years, she had been Rosa Webster or Lola Webster or Mrs Peter Webster, and before that, Rosa MacFarlane after her mother's remarriage, and before that, Rosalie Ridge and Rosa Delores Ridge. She was christened Rose Emily Ridge.'[25] By January 1904, however, she had declared marital independence and had set about launching her literary identity, publishing as Lola Ridge.[26] As Svoboda suggests, Ridge – alongside others such as Mina Loy, who had 'omitted two letters from her father's surname Lowry [sic]' and Hilda Doolittle who had taken on 'the sobriquet H.D.' – were beginning to ask the question, who, or perhaps more poignantly in the context of this thesis, what am I to be in this modern world?[27] When she arrived in

[23] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 23.
[24] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 116.
[25] Terese Svoboda, *Anything That Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet* (Arizona: Schaffner Press, 2016), p. 34.
[26] Svoboda, *Anything That Burns You*, p. 34.
[27] Svoboda, *Anything That Burns You*, p. 34.

America in 1907, Ridge would begin to address this question. She attended protests and picket lines, worked as an artist's model, a factory worker, an illustrator, an educational administrator. She became an associate editor for Margaret Sanger's controversial *Birth Control Review*, Alfred Kreymborg's *Others*, and later, Harold Loeb's *Broom*. In 1919, Ridge travelled to Chicago as a lecturer for *The Others Lecture Bureau*, and gave a speech on 'how sexually constructed gender roles hinder female development' titled 'Woman and the Creative Will' – a decade before the publication of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929).[28] She published five volumes of poetry, including *Sun-Up and Other Poems* (1920), *Red Flag* (1927), and *Dance of Fire* (1935).[29]

Despite her substantial contributions to literary and political modernism, there is little contemporary scholarship on Lola Ridge. As Svoboda recalls, 'when she died in 1941, the *New York Times* proclaimed her one of the best poets in America – then her work disappeared, a casualty of the anti-liberal, anti-female, and anti-experiment sentiments of the second World War and a continued critical disdain for political poetry.'[30] To date, the most extensive study of Ridge's work occurs in William Drake's *First Wave: Women Poets in America 1915-1945* (1987). Though Drake's chapter on Ridge offers a long-overdue commentary on Ridge's poetry, his analysis largely hinges on political, historical, and biographical contexts, on reading Ridge's life in her compositions.[31] In *Mosaic of Fire: The Work of Lola Ridge, Evelyn Scott, Charlotte Wilder, and Kay Boyle* (2010), however, Caroline Maun offers a critical reappraisal of Ridge's poetry; she argues that Ridge's poems are 'Imagist-inflected' studies, combining clarity, precision, and concrete observations with other prosaic or 'narrative techniques' such as 'employing a first-person persona; creating a sense of story through various characters and including some elements of plot'.[32] This chapter builds on Maun's study to consider how Ridge's Janie triggers a slippage between human and nonhuman material, between matters of form, in the strangely familiar narrative arc of the child's doll. This study therefore culminates in a radical redefinition of Ridge's 'Sun-Up' as a formally disorientating, uncanny text.

[28] Svoboda, *Anything That Burns You*, p. 5; Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2002) (first publ. London: Hogarth Press, 1929).
[29] Ridge, *Sun-Up and Other Poems*; Ridge, *Red Flag* (New York: Viking Press, 1927); Ridge, *Dance of Fire* (New York: Smith & Haas, 1935).
[30] Svoboda, *Lola Ridge, a great Irish writer and why you've never heard of her* (2016) <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/lola-ridge-a-great-irish-writer-and-why-you-ve-never-heard-of-her-1.2816113> [Accessed 25 May 2019].
[31] William Drake, *First Wave: Women Poets in America 1915-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1987).
[32] Caroline Maun, *Mosaic of Fire: The Work of Lola Ridge, Evelyn Scott, Charlotte Wilder, and Kay Boyle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), p. 35.

Ridge's 'Sun-Up' was published by B. W. Huebsch in the volume *Sun-Up and Other Poems* (1920). Spanning thirty-six pages, 'Sun-Up' is a long-form free verse poem which has received little scholarly attention to date. As Maun surmises, 'Sun-Up' is a 'meditation on early childhood' in which the first-person narrator – Betty, aged four – experiences life in poverty with her ailing mother and a troupe of nannies, playmates who may or may not be imaginary, and living objects.[33] From 'the poor wooden chair / that knows it isn't nice to sit on' to those shadows that 'love to play on the wall with you' and 'pull in their heads' when 'you poke a candle at them,' nonhumans are afforded physical and psychological agency in Ridge's 'Sun-Up'.[34] For Svoboda, 'Sun-Up' therefore 'prefigures Williams' "no ideas except in things," written seven years later in *Paterson*.'[35] There is, however, no anthropomorphic nonhuman object that arouses more dread – or more delight – than Janie, Betty's doll.

In 'The Philosophy of Toys' (1853) Charles Baudelaire contends, 'I believe that children in general act upon their toys […] However, I would not deny that the contrary can occur – that the toy can sometimes act upon the child – above all in cases of literary or artistic predestination.'[36] Here, Baudelaire addresses the disquieting question of the doll's agency and materiality, as a miniaturised human body. For Baudelaire, the doll is afforded a physical and psychological autonomy in literature and art which might remind the reader of their own contentious childhood relationships with dolls – when the agency of dolls challenged their own. Though Baudelaire's claims predate literary and artistic modernism, that strangely familiar narrative arc of the animate doll – the cruelty and tenderness that the human child may bestow upon it – continues to beguile authors and artists of the modernist era. In Anne Parish's novel, *The Floating Island* (1922), Mr. Doll, Mrs. Doll, and their china children come alive to speak, move, and think at will. Hans Bellmer's sculptures and photographs of *The Doll* (1934, 1935) mutilate the doll body and all its parts. Joseph Cornell's *Bébé Marie* (1940) mounts the haunting silence of the abandoned doll in a shadow box; Marie's eyes stare back at the viewer, unblinking. In Ridge's composition, however, if Betty had not communicated at the outset – when Janie materialises in her bed on Christmas morning – that 'Janie is made of rubber,' it would not be apparent that Janie is a doll at all.[37] 'Sun-Up' is a poem that rejects ontological categories, inducing a powerful distortion of the human / nonhuman binary. After all, Janie comes to Betty (and to the reader) ready-packaged with a name and the ability to possess

[33] Maun, *Mosaic of Fire*, p. 42.
[34] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 7, 27.
[35] Svoboda, *Anything That Burns You*, p. 161.
[36] Charles Baudelaire, 'The Philosophy of Toys', *On Dolls*, pp. 11 – 21 (p. 17).
[37] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 9.

objects of her very own – a 'red and blue jacket' adhered to the surface of her skin, which will not 'come off' in Betty's hands.[38] Though Freud asserts that 'children are not afraid of their dolls coming to life – they may even want them to,' there is something profoundly disturbing about Janie's contradictory qualities: she has a human-like mouth but will not speak, she is and is not physically and psychologically autonomous, she has a human-like mouth but will not scream, she is and is not aesthetically and ergonomically familiar.[39] Actuating a slippage between that which is me and not-me, Janie revels in all that is uncanny.

Freud classifies the 'uncanny' as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' – referring to an unsettling conjunction of the comfortable and the strange.[40] After Ernst Jentsch, Freud recognises dolls, automatons, and wax figures as objects with the potential to elicit an uncanny response; he references Jentsch, who suggests that 'doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate' are both a powerful source of the uncanny.[41] For Freud, however, Jentsch's theory of 'intellectual uncertainty' cannot alone explain the uncanny effect.[42] In his detailed examination of the etymology of the Germanic word '*heimlich,*' Freud argues that the most significant element 'is that among the various shades of meaning that are recorded for the word *heimlich* there is one in which it merges with its formal antonym, *unheimlich,* so that which is *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich.*'[43] For Freud, the 'word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other – the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden.'[44] 'Sun-Up' confronts the reader with this assimilation, this slippage between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich,* through the hole in the back of Janie's head. When Betty's mother refuses Janie nourishment, Betty apprehends a likeness between Janie's miniature human body and her own:

> She wouldn't let you take one pea
> to put in the hole where the whistle was
> at the back of Janie's head,
> so Janie should have some dinner

[38] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 9.
[39] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 141.
[40] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 124.
[41] Ernst Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, trans. by Roy Sellers, Vol. 2 (1997), pp. 7 – 16 (p. 11).
[42] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 139.
[43] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 132.
[44] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 132.

So you went to the park with biscuits
and black tea in a bottle.[45]

Though the scale of their bodies may differ, if Betty's body hungers, tires, and ails, so must Janie's – a body is a body is a body.[46] Though Janie's body is rubber and Betty's body is flesh, their bodies bear an unbearable resemblance to each other, for they are both miniatures of a woman: the woman-like doll and the female child who is not-quite-woman. For Betty, who survives in abject poverty, Janie's famine is so familiar that it becomes analogous with her own – it must be satisfied. Just as Janie is humanised by her need for sustenance, however, there comes an acknowledgment of the feeding 'hole' in the back of her head. Though Janie's body may hunger, starve, and crave like a human body, it does not feed like one at all. Though Janie's arms, legs, eyes, nose, and mouth may resemble human components, their functions may not correspond at all. Here, Ridge's poem is consumed with the question of what strange matter the human subject and nonhuman object might have in common. After all, if the female anthropoid doll is to be described as human-like, then Betty may also be described as doll-like – there is a collusion of forms in 'Sun-Up' which compels the reader to radically reappraise what constitutes a nonhuman object, and what constitutes a human subject. As Nicholas Royle argues in his seminal, book-length study of the uncanny, uncanniness 'may thus be construed as a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself *as* a foreign body.'[47] Ridge's poem, in exploring the contradictions and commonalities between Betty and Janie, may therefore coerce the reader into experiencing the foreignness within their own bodies – the foreignness of their own bodies – distorting the boundaries between what is *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, what is human and nonhuman.

Betty's indifferent tone, the pragmatic language with which she describes Janie's feeding hole, further amplifies this formal assimilation of the *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, the human and nonhuman, happening in the poem. For Royle, 'Above all, the uncanny is intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world, when uncanny strangeness is at issue.'[48] Here, Royle suggests that

[45] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 10.
[46] Here, it should be acknowledged that my phrasing of 'a body is a body is a body' is appropriated from Gertrude Stein's 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose' – this would become a refrain throughout her work, variations of which appear in *Operas and Plays*, *The World is Round*, *Alphabets and Birthdays*, *Stanzas in Meditation*, *Lectures in America*, *As Fine as Melanctha*, *Bee Time Vine*, and, finally, *Four in America*. I demonstrate its formal significance later in the thesis, in Chapter 3. Related phrases occur throughout this thesis to articulate the plasticity of its content, that is, the formative connections between my poets, theories, and compositions.
[47] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.
[48] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 2.

the disorientating power of language is uncanny – manifesting itself in mechanical repetitions, a semblance of déjà vu, and 'un-happenings' which disturb 'time and space, order and sense.'[49] The hole in the back of Janie's head is made conclusively uncanny by the unsophisticated vernacular of a child, who does not comprehend the horror of what it is she says – why she should, perhaps, apprehend the grotesque anatomy of the woman-like doll, who has a hole in the back of her head which should not be. The simplistic language of Ridge's child protagonist, Betty, triggers a recollection of those long-repressed childhood wishes and fantasies regarding the living doll – its false promise of camaraderie. Betty's description of the hole subsequently repeats upon the poem, regurgitated twice more with the same descriptors as the original.[50] The hole in the back of Janie's head becomes slowly, steadily, strangely familiar to the reader through its repetition in the material world of the poem. It refers back to its other manifestations, an 'un-happening' which disorientates the narrative arc of the poem, desensitising the reader enough to make the hole appear as inconsequential as it is to Betty – a body is a body is a body. Here, Ridge's poem actualises Betty's belief that Janie could, despite her physical abnormalities, be like her – compelling the reader, however momentarily, to participate in Betty's reverie. In Janie there is, therefore, a formal merging of antonyms, a violent assimilation of matters and meanings as that which is *unheimlich* becomes *heimlich,* becomes *unheimlich* once more. The nonhuman object revels in maddening contradictions which are never resolved in 'Sun-Up', despite Betty's attempts to coerce the nonhuman object into becoming more familiar than strange, more human than nonhuman – to fulfil her desire for a sensitive, emoting, conversive companion.

When Janie's body does not respond to pain as Betty knows a human body should, Janie must be therefore disciplined and taught how to scowl:

> I beat Janie
> and beat her…
> but still she smiled…
> so I scratched her between the eyes with a pin.
> Now she doesn't love me any more…
> she scowls… and scowls…[51]

Janie's stiff, plastered smile endures long after her beating; it triggers, for Betty, the prickling sensation that there is something not quite right about the living doll, that is, the

[49] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 2.
[50] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 21, 23.
[51] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 21.

anthropomorphic nonhuman object. Janie's body is a miniature of woman, but it is not the perfect likeness that Betty once supposed: it does not, or perhaps, will not, respond to pain. When Betty 'beats' Janie, she will not flinch or scream; there is an inertia, a corpse-like silence, blow after blow, that should not be. Here, the poetic repetition of 'beat' reverberates and there is a semblance of Janie's 'beating' in the rapid, sharp 'beat' of Ridge's three-word lines. There is a phonetic pattern to the lines, a vacillation between bilabial ('beat') and aspirant ('her') sounds, as the poem replicates Betty's violent abuse of Janie: a rapid strike followed by an exhalation, a ruthless strike followed by an expiration. The ellipses form material signifiers of those transitory cessations in Janie's beating as Betty anticipates an audible response from the living doll that never comes – further amplifying the slippage between the *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, the human and nonhuman, happening in the poem.

In his essay, 'Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel', Rainer Maria Rilke states that the silence of the doll is troubling precisely because we do not know if this silence is 'its established form of evasion' – a terrible, commanding silence in a world 'where destiny and indeed God himself have become famous mainly by not speaking to us' – or if the doll is simply 'useless' and 'unresponsive' matter.[52] Betty's desire for audible communication, that is, for a confirmation of the doll's physical and psychological autonomy, remains unfulfilled by Janie's silence. Though Betty does not know if Janie's refusal is by will or because she is truly an inanimate nonhuman object, her infantile belief in the living doll is disturbed.[53] As John Biguenet contends in 'The Silence of Dolls', if 'Freud is correct that the familiar, repressed, returns as the uncanny, what is it about the doll that we repress? Certainly its silence.'[54] It is the apprehension of Janie's silence that causes Betty to scratch her 'between the eyes with a pin' – carving what Betty determines, in the uncanny absence of sound, to be the 'correct' human reaction to pain, a 'scowl,' into Janie's brow. Here, Betty desires to compel the doll, by force, to become more human than nonhuman. Janie, however, refuses, for such boundaries between matters and meanings will not hold in 'Sun-Up' – when 'she scowls' at Betty, whose desire to subjugate Janie into human-like emoting is subverted, her appearance is an uncanny thing. When Betty does not want to look upon Janie's scowl any longer, 'she scowls… and scowls…' because Janie's body is a body that does not heal its scars. Though Janie's arms, legs, eyes, nose, and mouth may resemble human components, their functions do not correspond at all.

[52] Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel', *On Dolls*, pp. 51 – 62 (p. 56).
[53] Rilke, 'Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel', p. 56.
[54] John Biguenet, 'The Silence of Dolls', *Silence* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 81 – 93 (p. 85).

When Betty articulates the dreadful comprehension 'she doesn't love me any more', she is subsequently compelled to acknowledge her role in the permanent disfigurement of Janie's miniature body, which does and does not resemble her own. Just as Janie coerces the reader into questioning what it is to be nonhuman, Betty coerces the reader into questioning what it is to be human in a world of physically and psychologically autonomous things. These things happen simultaneously, in regurgitations (the hole in the back of Janie's head), in silent contradictions (Betty's dehumanisation as a result of Janie's abuse) which are not resolved in the text, for it revels in slippages between the *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, between the human and nonhuman. 'Sun-Up' does not seek to answer questions but ask them – it requires an active participant. Though Janie's abuse may be read, according to Maun, as a material representation of Ridge's own disadvantaged, abusive childhood, we must also recognise Janie's role as a physically and psychologically disruptive anthropomorphic object in the poem – responsible for disordering the ontological categories, human and nonhuman. [55] Here, Janie the doll, who has a human-like mouth but will not speak or scream, becomes a compelling meditation on what the human subject and nonhuman object may or may not, after all, have in common. Ridge's 'Sun-Up' therefore compels readers to participate in a radical dislocation of the human subject, who can no longer be considered at the centre of a world of things.

For Kenneth Gross, 'The child's doll – an object that is itself the scale of a child – becomes an object full of equivocal consolations. The violence as much as the care which the child lavishes on the doll is part of the story.'[56] It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Janie's narrative arc – the narrative arc of the anthropomorphic nonhuman object whose potential for autonomy vehemently opposes that of the human subject – concludes with abuse, abandonment, and death by asphyxiation. Towards the climax of 'Sun-Up', Betty consequently begins to dread the confirmation of her infantile wish, that is, the confirmation of Janie's physical and psychological agency. Betty fears that the anthropomorphic nonhuman object will overwhelm her status as protagonist in the material world of the poem. She therefore abandons Janie, suspecting that Janie will not forgive the violence of her abuse, but Janie the 'fairy doll' materialises at the door of the house with 'a little bag' of sweets 'tied to her neck' – a return of the repressed. Though Betty's mother says Janie '*has* forgiven,' Betty runs to 'kiss her all over' but is paralysed by the resulting comprehension, 'Ah… she is still frowning.'[57] After all, if Janie really is physically and psychologically alert, she must remember those terrible acts that

[55] Maun, *Mosaic of Fire*, p. 45.
[56] Gross, 'Introduction', *On Dolls*, pp. ix – xxii (p. xii).
[57] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 21.

Betty has committed against her body. And if Janie does remember, she must seek retribution in her homecoming. Janie must, therefore, die:

> But why aren't you happy
> if it's a new day?
> Because something has happened…
> something sad and terrible…
> Now I remember… it's Janie.
> Yesterday
> I took Janie out
> and tied my handkerchief over her face
> and put sand in it
> and threw her into the ditch
> down in the black water
> under the dock leaves…[58]

When Janie's potential for agency appears to rival Betty's, it is no longer acceptable; she manifests a powerful slippage between the *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, between the human and nonhuman, that Betty cannot hope to resolve. As Rilke contends, 'soon we realised we could not make' the doll 'into a thing or a person, and in such moments it became a stranger to us, and we could no longer recognise all the confidences we had heaped over it and into it.'[59] Janie is Betty's closest companion, a stranger, her hostage, an adversary, and, finally, her victim throughout the narrative arc of 'Sun-Up' – (in)animate, (in)sentient, (im)material, (not)me, (non)human, (un)familiar, (*un*)*heimlich*. Janie has a human-like mouth but will not feed like a human should; Janie has a human-like mouth but will not scream like a human should. For Betty, Janie's miniature anthropoid body no longer represents camaraderie or commonality, but something other: the potential of the anthropomorphic nonhuman object whose physical appearance is like-me, whose psychological reasoning is like-mine, to overwhelm Betty's status as the protagonist of the poem.

Moreover, amplifying this disintegration of the human / nonhuman boundary in 'Sun-Up' is a disintegration of the first-person / second-person boundary – Betty recounts Janie's story in second *and* first-person. The 'I' of the protagonist is overwhelmed by the 'you' that is the other, the 'you' is and is not the protagonist. There is a confusion between what is me and what is not-me, as if the 'I' that is protagonist seeks to implicate the 'you' which may signify Janie and the reader in equal measure, as foreign bodies manipulating the text. There is a slippage of formal modes of narration in the text: a formal merging of the antonym, an

[58] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 22.
[59] Rilke, 'Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel', p. 57.

assimilation of matters and meanings as that which is *unheimlich* becomes *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich.* There is a reluctance to accept what has been done, as if Betty seeks to an absolution that cannot be, for the friction between the 'you' and 'I' pronounces her guilt. There is a perpetual vacillation as Betty rejects and is subsequently compelled to accept herself as the 'I' which abducted, abused, and abandoned Janie for death. Janie's visceral 'death' scene therefore becomes a precautionary silencing – a stilling – of the uncanny anthropomorphic nonhuman object. If Betty knots a 'handkerchief over her face' and puts 'sand in it' – disposes of the body in a 'ditch' brimmed with 'black water' – Janie will not stir or speak, whether she was once able or not, for asphyxiation by drowning. And the confusion between what is me and what is not-me must cease. As Biguenet summarises, 'Of course, in the end, nearly every doll is actually a silent victim we bend to our will […] Never protesting the contortions and amputations and deformities they endure, the dolls are perfect victims: unresisting and silent. And yet we fear them.'[60] If Betty cannot compel the living doll, by force, to become more human than nonhuman, it must become more nonhuman than human, that is, a corpse. The physical appearance of a corpse may, after all, be like-me, but it remains inanimate – it borders on objecthood. However, this assimilation of matter and meanings – this critical destabilisation of the boundary between what is me and not-me – manifesting as a consequence of Janie the anthropoid doll, persists throughout the body of Ridge's composition.

Accompanying this distortion of the theoretical boundary between the human and nonhuman, between that which is me and not-me, is a formal disturbance of the theoretical boundary between poetic and narrative technique. 'Sun-Up' is a text which is strangely like poetry, which is strangely like prose. An assemblage of materials, 'Sun-Up' is composed in free verse; though there is no metrical formula to its lines, there are spatial notations, a spontaneous formation of stanzas. 'Sun-Up' also assumes narrative techniques in its composition. It is a text internally focalised through its protagonist (Betty) – with plots and subplots (Mama's sickness, Janie's abuse, Betty's nightmares) though which the protagonist matures and progresses through childhood, with major and minor characters (Celia, Jude, Mama, Janie) which produce physical and psychological tensions in the disordered chronology of the narrative arc. 'Sun-Up' comes to the reader in five numbered sections which are titled after significant characters and locations in the story. Betty's narrations persistently slip between the first-person 'I' and second-person 'You' – between present, past, and future tense.

[60] Biguenet, *Silence*, p. 93.

There are, therefore, slippages of time that are never formally acknowledged by the text and the reader does not know for certain whether hours, days, or years pass between fragments:

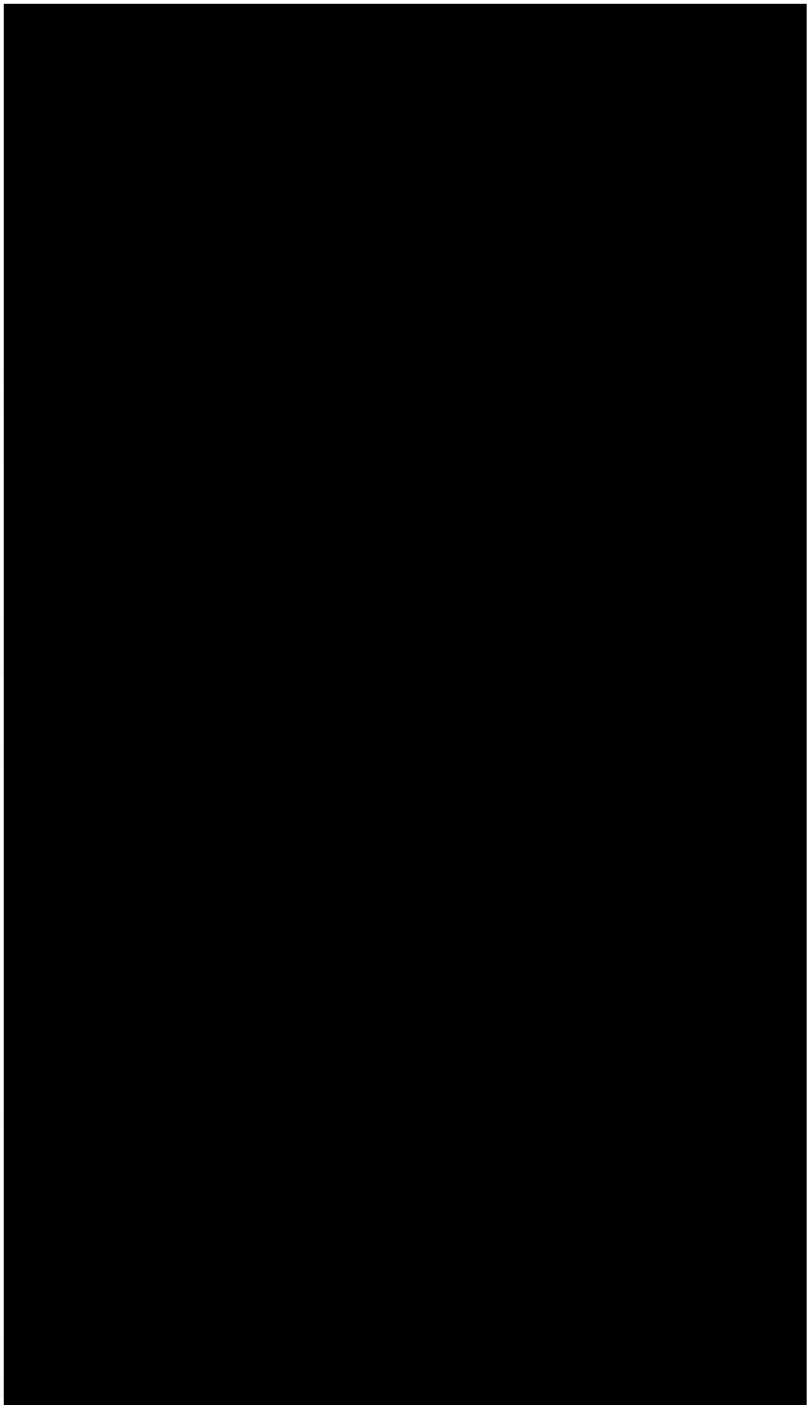

Figure 1: Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 22.

‘Sun-Up’ disorientates the reader with its uncanny silences. There are cessations, slippages, passages occurring between stanzas, as signified by four black dots – strangely like a pair of colons – acting as partitions (see Figure 1). Though the reader is not made privy to what is happening in the silences those black dots represent, they serve as reminders of the poem’s

materiality: there are occurrences in the plot, after all, that have been omitted in the process of composition. The typescript of Ridge's 'Sun-Up' is, therefore, a partial-narrative happening in the whiteness of the page and in those punctuated silences simultaneously. Here, we are compelled to discern commonalities, connotations, connections between stanzas in the futile hope of apprehending that which has been obscured or manipulated by the text's uncanny materiality.

When Betty begins her confession, the body of the text begins to rupture – splitting into asymmetrical lines so that the conclusion to Janie's story is revealed to the reader slowly, steadily, in shards broken by abrupt silences, the terrible whiteness of the page. The poetic stanzas that Ridge adopts in 'Sun-Up' distort the chronology of the text, which refuses the reader the comfort of consistent punctuation, save the ellipses, which serve as calculated omissions, as little silences which sunder the connections between phrases and obstruct the 'something sad and terrible' which is to come: Janie's death. 'Sun-Up' is an uncomfortable, unhomely, uncanny composition – it spurns any semblance of resolution, its form revels in all that is strangely familiar. As Betty concedes, 'I took Janie out / and tied my handkerchief over her face / and put sand in it / and threw her into the ditch', 'and' becomes connective tissue in the body of the composition – 'and' severs, synthesises each 'terrible' happening in the narrative arc, until the reader begins to dread the mechanical reoccurrence of 'and' for what comes after.[61] As Gaston asserts, the 'slippage between the realms of human and material' in modernist literature is responsible for making 'the reader feel at home in not feeling at home' in the text, compelling the reader to reappraise the physical and psychological dimensions of their material things. It must also be acknowledged, therefore, that the uncanny formal dimensions of Ridge's 'Sun-Up' amplify and augment its uncanny subject (or object) matter.[62]

Janie materialises for the last time in 'Sun-Up' when Betty passes her burial site, approximately one year later, accompanied by her childhood companion, Jude, who may or may not be imaginary. Betty recounts their conversation: 'Jude says Janie did love me / only that she couldn't forgive me, / and that you can love people very much / and never, never, never forgive them…'[63] Only in Janie's absence is Betty prepared to accept the disquieting plurality of the anthropomorphic object – simultaneously companion and adversary, sentient and inanimate, human and nonhuman, and none of these appellations at all. 'Sun-Up' confronts its readers with the contradiction that Janie loved Betty but could not forgive her abuse, that Betty

[61] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 22.
[62] Gaston, 'Phenomenology Begins at Home', p. 44.
[63] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 32.

loved Janie but could not forgive her disturbance of the physical and psychological divisions between human and nonhuman matter. With these final acknowledgements, it is the uncanny materiality of 'Sun-Up' which assures that the reader will 'never, never, never' forget Janie, for the problem of her mute anthropoid form is accompanied and aggravated by Ridge's composition, which is strangely like poetry, which is strangely like prose. 'Sun-Up' confronts the reader with the silent slippages happening between human and nonhuman matter – between poetic and prosaic matter – through the figure of the doll, who has a human-like mouth but will not scream. Following the silence of the doll, however, a terrible apprehension remains: what happens when the anthropomorphic nonhuman object speaks back?

HEARING THINGS: AMY LOWELL AND THE SONANCE OF THING-POWER

To consider how sonant anthropomorphic objects radically disturb the ontological classification of these things we name humans or nonhumans – these things we name poems – I turn to Amy Lowell. By 1914, the popular American poet Amy Lowell had become an 'ardent campaigner' for the Imagist 'school' and its primary principles of clarity, precision, and concrete observation.[64] She had travelled to London and met with the group's founder, Ezra Pound, for the first time in 1913, and he had agreed to include one of her poems in the anthology *Des Imagistes* (1914). However, there was discord within the group; as Lowell's biographer, Carl Rollyson, asserts, 'Pound wanted her monetary support but scorned her verse.'[65] At a party Lowell was hosting, Pound famously 'paraded' around the room with 'a tin bathtub on his head – his way of ridiculing her bath poem, written in her patented polyphonic prose.'[66] With the support of F.S. Flint, Richard Aldington, John Gould Fletcher, and H.D., there was a 'shift of alliance and authority' from Pound to Lowell, and a 'modified version of the Imagist credo which Pound and his colleagues had drafted in 1912' was born – one reproachfully branded 'Amygism' by Pound.[67] Lowell, however, was a force to be reckoned with: she went on to edit the three following volumes of *Some Imagist Poets* (1915 – 17), she went on tour, giving popular lectures on modern poetry, and she published volumes of her own verse,

[64] Claire Healey, 'Some Imagist Essays: Amy Lowell', *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 43. 1 (1970), pp. 134 – 138 (p. 135).
[65] Carl Rollyson, *Amy Lowell Anew* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), p. xvi.
[66] Rollyson, *Amy Lowell Anew*, p. xvi.
[67] Healey, 'Some Imagist Essays: Amy Lowell', p. 135, 134.

including *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), *Can Grande's Castle* (1918), and *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919).[68] As Rollyson argues, 'She was Poetry, Inc.'[69]

Despite her literary successes, Amy Lowell was often criticised for her 'overly' comprehensive descriptions of 'things' – critics condemned her 'seemingly superficial delight in naming colours and limning actions to no particular purpose.'[70] This 'seemingly superficial delight' in things materialises in Lowell's 'Grotesques' (1919) in which the severed heads of lilies 'goggle their tongues' and 'shriek' at their human harvester, and the reader (as material accomplice or accessory) is confronted with a moral quandary. When the lilies are woven into a 'wreath of lolling corpses' to sit atop a human head, the reader is made complicit in the massacre of such psychologically alert or physically active things.[71] Here, Lowell's lilies writhe and yelp in pain, exceeding their status as mere ornaments – similarly to Ridge's living doll, Lowell's vociferous lilies encounter the material world with a vitality that appears, however briefly, to challenge that of the human subject. As Lowell contends, in a letter to D. H. Lawrence, 'My things are always, to my mind, more than themselves.'[72] For Lowell, the 'particular purpose' of her 'overly' comprehensive descriptions of 'things' is, therefore, much more complex than critics to-date have been willing to acknowledge.

In the second part of this chapter, I explore the extent to which Lowell's anthropomorphic objects become 'more than themselves' – chattering amongst themselves, calling out to the unsuspecting reader in strange and discordant voices. Building on my study of the silence of the living doll in Ridge's 'Sun-Up,' I examine the uncanny soundscapes of Lowell's 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces "Grotesques" for String Quartet' and 'Spring Day' in which anthropomorphic objects appear to bawl and screech, speaking a language of their own.[73] Here, I argue that Lowell's nonhuman objects should not be considered dead matter for a human subject to act within or upon, but as disruptive agents, revelling in what Jane Bennett classifies as 'thing-power'.[74] Furthermore, I consider how Lowell's vociferous anthropomorphic objects challenge what Bennett categorises as the 'countercultural kind of perceiving' in which 'the world appears as if it consists only of active human subjects who

[68] Lowell, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914); Lowell, *Can Grande's Castle* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1918), Lowell, *Pictures of the Floating World* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919).
[69] Rollyson, *Amy Lowell Anew*, p. xvii.
[70] Rollyson, *Amy Lowell Anew*, p. 115.
[71] Lowell, 'Grotesque', *Pictures of the Floating World*, p. 84.
[72] Lowell, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence & Amy Lowell 1914 – 1925*, ed. by Claire Healey and Keith Cushman, (Massachusetts: Black Sparrow Press, 1985), p. 101.
[73] Lowell, 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces, "Grotesques" for String Quartet'; Lowell, 'Spring Day'.
[74] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. xvi.

confront passive objects and their law-governed mechanisms.'[75] Though Bennett's argument centres on the potential environmental significance of recognising our objects as dynamic agents in the material world, I theorise that this acknowledgment of thing-power is accompanied by a radical reappraisal of the human / nonhuman binary which functions, in modernist writing, to defamiliarize the working foundations of language and form – of sound and sense. Finally, I examine the extent to which Lowell's anthropomorphic objects may enchant the reader with the strange beauty of their symphonies, triggering paralysing moments of physical and psychological transformation in the body of the text, where syntactic order, genre, and grammatical sense fail the reader. After the silence of Ridge's living doll, Lowell's anthropomorphic nonhuman objects yell and yawp back.

In 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces, "Grotesques" for String Quartet,' Lowell's musical instruments appear to communicate in a voice and language of their own, disquieting and disarming the listener with the maddening glossolalia of their refrains: 'Bump! Bump! Tong-ti-bump!'[76] Lowell composed the strange, orchestral sections of her piece after she attended a recital of Igor Stravinsky's 'Grotesques' in December 1915, and Samuel Foster Damon details her powerful reaction to the performance:

> Such sounds had never issued from strings before: there were bagpipes and drums and horns and rattling carts, and at the end a very dismal organ. The vitality and poignancy of the music, however, appealed instantly to Miss Lowell; by December 11, she was informing everybody that she had written one of her best poems about the 'Three Pieces' or 'Grotesques,' and that no editor could ever understand the poem unless he also understood Stravinsky.[77]

Printed beneath the title of Lowell's poem is her primary aim: to 'reproduce the sound and movement of the music as far as is possible in another medium.'[78] Regina Schober describes this transformational process as an act of 'intermedial translation' from music to poetry in which Lowell examines the merits and restrictions of two artistic mediums, transcending their boundaries to explore the expressive potential of both.[79] Furthermore, Jane P. Ambrose argues that the principles of Lowell's imagism 'show striking parallels with […] and, in a way,

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[75] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. xiv.
[76] Lowell, 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces, "Grotesques" for String Quartet', p. 87.
[77] Samuel Foster Damon, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle with Extracts from Her Correspondence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), p. 326.
[78] Lowell, 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces, "Grotesques" for String Quartet', p. 87.
[79] Regina Schober, 'Translating Sounds: Intermedial Exchanges in Amy Lowell's 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces "Grotesques", for String Quartet', *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, ed. by Lars Elleström (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 163 – 174 (p. 164). Schober additionally provides a comprehensive analysis of Lowell's literary and cultural engagement with Stravinsky.

describe Stravinsky's grotesque achievement' in 'Three Pieces' – both of which aim 'to create new rhythms, as the expression of new moods, and not to copy old rhythms; to allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject; to present an image; to consider concentration as the essence of poetry' or movement composition.[80] Ambrose also recognises that Stravinsky's 'Three Pieces' and Lowell's imagist manifesto were published together, in the same year.[81] Building on the work of Schober and Ambrose, I argue that Lowell translates the discordant, dynamic timbre of Stravinsky's music into poetry by detaching the nonhuman object from any semblance of a human subject – making the strings appear as if they are 'screeching' on their own accord, as if there is and can possibly be no player:

> Thin-voiced, nasal pipes
> Drawing sound out and out
> Until it is a screeching thread,
> Sharp and cutting, sharp and cutting,
> It hurts.[82]

Here, the strange whine of Lowell's 'nasal pipes' – severed from the image of the playing strings – appear to duplicate the painful reverberations of straining vocal chords, 'screeching' out their music, as if they are striving to communicate something to each other, something that the reader (as listener) fails to fathom. The 'screeching thread' of noise loosened by Lowell's 'nasal pipes' appears to 'cut' the stanza into a 'sharp' and asymmetrical arrangement of lines, which come to rest at odd, uncomfortable angles on the page. Lowell's form and language is, for Ambrose, intentionally discordant – mimicking those 'dissonant chords' which intensify 'the program and emotion of Stravinsky's music' and composition.[83] Furthermore, the repetition of 'sharp and cutting' – the shrill, stilted pattern of alternating sibilant and fricative sounds – appears to slice the body of the text, and the hiss of the 's' – each crackle of the 'c' and 't' – threaten to trip the tongue, and familiar words become unfamiliar. Marjorie Perloff elucidates this process in 'The Sound of Poetry'; she argues that 'Poetic language is language

[80] Jane P. Ambrose, 'Amy Lowell and the Music of Her Poetry', *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 62.1 (1989), pp. 45 – 62 (p. 47).
[81] Ambrose, 'Amy Lowell and the Music of Her Poetry', p. 47. In her 'Preface' to *Some Imagist Poets, 1916*, pp. v – xii, Lowell outlines the principles of imagism. She contends, for example, that '"Imagism" does not mean merely the presentation of pictures. "Imagism" refers to the manner of presentation, not to the subject. It means a clear presentation of whatever the author wishes to convey.' (p. v). It should also be acknowledged that Lowell parallels the innovations of imagism with those happening in painting, and perhaps more significantly, music: 'Its immediate prototype cannot be found in English or American literature, we must turn to Europe for it. With Debussy and Stravinsky in music, and Gauguin and Matisse in painting, it should have been evident to every one that art was entering upon an era of change.' (p. vii).
[82] Lowell, 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces, "Grotesques" for String Quartet', p. 87.
[83] Ambrose, 'Amy Lowell and the Music of Her Poetry', p. 50.

made strange […] by the use of verbal and sound repetition, visual configuration, and syntactic deformation. Or, again, it is language perhaps quite ordinary but placed in a new and unexpected context.'[84] It is Lowell's maddening repetitions and disjointed poetic forms which defamiliarize the reader with the communicative function of language, severing, however momentarily, the connection between sound and sense. Just as language is made strange by Lowell's composition, the image of playing strings is made strange by the absence of a player – by Lowell's anthropomorphic connection between the noise such instruments may produce and that 'thin-voiced' drone of human vocal chords. Granted the semblance of a voice, Lowell's strings appear to overwhelm the text, 'screeching' their song in a language that appears at once familiar and strange – a language that appears to the reader as a powerful source of the uncanny.

We can understand the effects of Lowell's use of sound in terms of what Jane Bennett calls 'thing-power' or the 'strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience.'[85] Lowell's text sets out to quell the reader's doubt, and they are compelled to admit, however reluctantly, that the strings do appear able, as Bennett would assert, 'not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.'[86] When Lowell's strings assault the senses with their guttural song, there is an apprehension; the reader does not know for certain if the strings are alive or not; they do not know what it is the strings are 'screeching' – if the strings mean harm. As the human listener, eavesdropping on the recital, confesses, 'It hurts'; the thing-power of Lowell's strings renders them as grotesque as Stravinsky's music – as surreal, avant-garde, hideous things. It would, perhaps, be no surprise if Lowell intended for the two to be heard and read together: a thingly composition of music *and* language. In Lowell's text, however, there is a violent fracturing that occurs, just as the hierarchical categories that are human and nonhuman object are subverted against the reader's will, and Lowell's strings begin to formally and linguistically direct the poem with their glossolalia:

> Pigs' cries white and tenuous,
> White and painful,
> White and –

[84] Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, 'The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound: The 2006 MLA Presidential Forum', *PMLA*, Vol. 123.3 (2008), pp. 749 – 761 (pp. 753 – 754).
[85] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. xvi.
[86] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. viii.

Bump!
Tong![87]

Here, the repetition of 'white' becomes a peculiar sort of white noise – 'painful' to the reader's ear, penetrating and shrill. It overwhelms the text, regurgitated three times in quick succession; it appears to lose any semblance of logical meaning, transformed into pure sound by its relapse. The poem borders on musical composition, in which sound produces sense beyond language. There is a semblance of a wide yawning aspirant, then, a fricative splitting air; the sharp and abrasive phonetic pattern offers little comfort to the reader. In 'The Poetry of Sound', Craig Dworkin argues that 'Simultaneously bridging and sequestering, sound has accordingly been understood as both the opposite of meaning and the essence of meaning.'[88] He goes on to assert that this ambiguity occurs due to the predominant belief that 'the value of a poem lies in the relation between sound and sense.'[89] For Dworkin, there is, therefore, a profound tension between sound as expression and sound as inexpression – sound as sense and sound as nonsense – that cannot, and perhaps should not, be resolved. Lowell's composition revels in this apprehension to perturb its readers, compelling us to recollect those moments where language fails and pure sound – a gasp, a shriek, a hoot – assumes control. The 'Bump!' and 'Tong' of Lowell's strings therefore revaluates the functionality of human language, as Lowell considers what strange vernacular nonhuman objects might use to communicate, just out of human earshot. Toward the end of the first movement, the listener's lines shrink in dimension until there is a complete omission and the strings assume complete authority over the text, directing its lineation, punctuating it with onomatopoeia. The listener's description of the performance is overwhelmed by a sudden crescendo – the 'Bump!' and 'Tong!' of the anthropomorphic strings drowning out their lines in an uncanny language that the reader cannot comprehensively translate, though the connotation is surely 'painful', and the reader is left to question if their thing-power should be feared.

The anthropomorphic object's thing-power is acceptable only if it does not seek to overwhelm the human subject's physical and psychological autonomy, as the self-proclaimed centre of the world. When the nonhuman object exceeds the human subject's physical and psychological autonomy, it therefore becomes a threatening, grotesque, and uncanny thing. Bennett, however, states that the familiar 'image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalised matter

[87] Lowell, 'Stravinsky's Three Pieces, "Grotesques" for String Quartet', p. 89.
[88] Dworkin, 'The Poetry of Sound', p. 756.
[89] Dworkin, 'The Poetry of Sound', p. 756.

feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.'[90] For Bennett, it is this human-centred rhetoric which prevents us 'from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies.'[91] In Lowell's composition, the reader does not therefore know what it is the strings 'Bump!' and 'Tong!' but it is and will be 'painful'; the ontological categories, human and nonhuman, are rupturing. Lowell compels her readers to acknowledge the startling vitality of the material world and all its cognisant, or indeed, articulate things. The strings realise the human subject's worst nightmare, that the anthropomorphic nonhuman will overpower their subjectivity, seeking mastery – working, touching, playing, consuming, beating, treating their bodies as they have treated those of other objects. Lowell's composition therefore confronts the reader with their anthropomorphobia, striking them with the harrowing question: when the anthropomorphic object begins to contradict my desires – crawling, twitching, blinking, or 'shrieking' – what will it do to me? When Lowell's 'organ growls,' the reader must therefore heed its strange and guttural warning song, communicating a disquieting thing-power.

For Bennett, however, it must be acknowledged that though the thing-power of the anthropomorphic object-subject may provoke anxiety or horror for the human subject – disrupting ontological classification – it may also delight in equal measure:

> They disturb perhaps because they explore the possibility of animateness of humans, nonhumans, and nonanimals alike. If the power to self-move, to laugh, or to dance adheres, albeit differentially, in all material things, then humans must reckon with a much larger population of entities worthy of ethical concern, and humanity faces the difficult prospect of moderating its claim to uniqueness. At the same time, animations can delight, perhaps for the same sensory reasons that a kaleidoscope does – metamorphoses of shape, colour, size, and pattern capture the imagination.[92]

There is, then, a strangely familiar assimilation of matter and meanings happening in Bennett's concept of thing-power. Here, an apperception occurs: there is a commonality between Freud's acknowledgement that the word *heimlich* 'merges with its formal antonym, *unheimlich*, so that which is *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*' and the corresponding manifestation of pleasure and displeasure in Bennett's thing-power.[93] There is a plurality to both concepts, a rejection of proper categorisation with the power to actuate complex psychological and physical transformations in the human subject, the nonhuman object, the literary text.

[90] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. ix.
[91] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. ix.
[92] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 112.
[93] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 132.

Lowell communicates this plurality, this assimilation of matter and meanings in her polyphonic prose – formally combining poetic and prosaic material in a method that vehemently opposes Ridge's use of character, spatial notation, plot, and fragmentation in 'Sun-Up'. Assuming the typographical alignment of the prose text, Lowell's creation must, in contrast, be examined according to those theoretical contexts associated with the prose poem. In their paper on the history and critical reception of the prose poem, Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton contend that prose poetry is 'a form that is widely written, yet as a significant part of contemporary literature in English it exists in a kind of critical half-light – perhaps largely because it is 'strangely like' both poetry and prose without clearly being one or the other.'[94] For Hetherington and Atherton, encountering the prose poem is an uncanny experience, for 'what initially appears to be a paragraph of prose is, on a first reading, ousted as a prose poem,' and the 'experience of reading the text becomes unsettling because the familiar is made strange.'[95] There is an anxiety – an awe – surrounding this hybrid form, 'its tight rectangular appearance and compression,' which eludes proper classification.[96] In *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem,* Jeremy Noel-Tod, asserts that it is the prose poem's formal precarity which singles it out as 'the defining poetic invention of modernity'; he argues that the only possible definition of the prose poem is 'a poem without line breaks,' for the form is so diverse that its principal structure is the only 'common denominator.'[97]

As a close relative of the prose poem, Lowell's definition of polyphonic prose is strikingly similar to Noel-Tod's contemporary definition, for Lowell asserts that polyphonic prose is prose only in 'typographical arrangement.'[98] Many critics credit Lowell as the first to experiment with polyphonic prose; Jane Dowson argues, for example, that Lowell's polyphonic prose 'broke down binary oppositions and allowed for the articulation of plurality' by employing 'poetic strategies such as metre, rhyme, and alliteration' to produce a strange, 'orchestral effect' in which a multiplicity of narrators, images, and poetic techniques are synthesised. [99] In music, the term 'polyphonic' is simply defined as 'involving the playing of more than one note simultaneously; composed or arranged for several voices or parts' or 'consisting of several melodies combined' or 'involving the production of many sounds or

[94] Paul Hetherington & Cassandra Atherton 'Unconscionable Mystification'?: Rooms, Spaces and the Prose Poem', *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, Vol. 12.3 (2015), pp. 265 – 281 (p. 265).
[95] Hetherington & Atherton, 'Unconscionable Mystification', p. 275.
[96] Hetherington & Atherton, 'Unconscionable Mystification', p. 275.
[97] Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'Introduction', *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*, ed. by Noel-Tod (London: Penguin Books, 2018), pp. xix – xliv (p. xx).
[98] Lowell, *Men, Women and Ghosts* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing Co., 2004), p. 2.
[99] Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910 – 1939* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 141.

voices; many-voiced.'[100] From this, we might understand Lowell's polyphonic prose as a sonant synthesis, composed from the modern world of other people, language, and objects – an experimental symphony in which human subjects and nonhuman objects, manifesting a powerful thing-power, may partake simultaneously. Furthermore, just as Mark Goble suggests that such 'noise' or 'interference' in modernist art and literature may confuse this 'fantasy of perfect communication between form and content,' I explore Lowell's polyphonic prose as a destabilising interference of sound, syntax, and sense.[101]

The sonic interference of Lowell's 'Breakfast Table' – its synthesis of human and nonhuman speech – may disturb and delight readers by inducing, simultaneously, that 'state of wonder' and 'temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement' which Bennett identifies as the 'enchantment' effect:[102]

> In the fresh-washed sunlight, the breakfast table is decked and white. It offers itself in flat surrender, tendering tastes, and smells, and colours, and metals, and grains, and the white cloth falls over its side, draped and wide. Wheels of white glitter in the silver coffee pot, hot and spinning like catherine-wheels, they whirl, and twirl – and my eyes begin to smart, the little white, dazzling wheels prick them like darts. Placid and peaceful the rolls of bread spread themselves in the sun to bask. A stack of butter-pats, pyramidal, shout orange through the white, scream, flutter, call: "Yellow! Yellow! Yellow!"[103]

'Breakfast Table' was published in *Some Imagist Poets, 1916* and appears in a sequence of five polyphonic prose poems titled 'Spring Day' which follows one human subject and their interactions with nonhuman objects, from the bathtub to the bed, on an ordinary day. For Andrew Thacker, Lowell's 'Breakfast Table' delivers 'a kind of defamiliarization of the breakfast paraphernalia' which should be considered a 'semi-serious attempt to capture both the ordinariness and the absurdity of everyday objects' in the home.[104] When it is first encountered, Lowell's breakfast table appears to invite the human subject – and, conversely, the reader – to interact with its form: it does not touch, but invites touching; it does not look, but invites looking; it does not taste, but invites tasting. There is an absurdity to such an invitation, for the human / nonhuman binary is actively disturbed – the reader cannot know for

[100] Oxford English Dictionary, *Polyphonic* (2019) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/147301?redirectedFrom=polyphonic&> [Accessed 26 August 2019].
[101] Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 244.
[102] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life,* p. 5.
[103] Lowell, 'Breakfast Table', *Some Imagist Poets, 1916, An Annual Anthology,* pp. 82 – 83.
[104] Andrew Thacker, 'Unrelated Beauty: Amy Lowell, Polyphonic Prose, and the Imagist City', in *Amy Lowell, American Modern*, ed. by Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 104 – 119 (p. 109).

certain whether it is the human subject or anthropomorphic nonhuman object that commands the interaction and it borders on mania. This ambiguity is not resolved, for Lowell's polyphonic prose is many-voiced, incorporating human and nonhuman sounds, shouts, and screams. In *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (2018), Angela Leighton argues that the phonic plurality of the literary text may mean that the reader cannot 'finish' one reading before detecting the other, for 'each reading raises the ghost of a different voice, a different tone, rhythm, or stress, and therefore arrives at a different destination of meaning.'[105] Leighton therefore asserts that though the reading eye witnesses a text physically unaltered by a second look, the listening ear may 'detect' the 'murmur of possibilities in every phrase, always still to be summoned into speaking life.'[106] When Lowell's 'butter-pats' release a 'scream,' is it a squeal of pleasure – like children at play – or a shriek of terror, comprehending that their bodies are about to be carved up, spread out, and eaten by the human subject? Here, Lowell's polyphonic prose entertains the possibility of a line break, a cessation of sound happening in silence between sentences, even in the absence of spatial notations. It is a playful and lively form, which revels in sonic plurality; it is a maddening and uncanny form for it wallows in sonic contradiction.

Lowell's vernacular ambles leisurely in sprawling phrases interposed by commas and connectives, 'tendering tastes, and smells, and colours, and metals, and grains' – it yawns aspirants and plosives ('wide' and 'pot' and 'white'), compelling the reader to confront the agency of the object world anew. Through Lowell's polyphonic prose, the reader is therefore caught in a 'momentary immobilising encounter' with the anthropomorphic nonhuman object which Bennett deems 'enchantment' – compelled to distinguish 'new colours, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify.'[107] It must be acknowledged that this profound attention to sensory experience does appear to offer a compelling parallel with the imagist principles of 'clarity, precision, and concrete observation.'[108] When the 'white glitter in the silver coffee pot' – its sharp fricative timbre – 'pricks', it sets the tempo of the poem 'spinning' toward an end-stop – the sonic 'whirl' and 'twirl' of Lowell's polyphonic prose accelerating and decelerating with metronomic precision, accompanying the symphony of movement happening in the object world. Accelerando, allargando. Though the physical and psychological agency of the object world

[105] Angela Leighton, *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 7.
[106] Leighton, *Hearing Things*, p. 7.
[107] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 5.
[108] Healey, 'Some Imagist Essays: Amy Lowell', p. 135.

may confront us with our own anthropomorphobia, there is something profoundly compelling about the anthropomorphic nonhuman object, whether we are willing to admit it or not.

There is a striking resemblance between Lowell's conceptualisation of polyphony in her polyphonic prose and that which Mikhail M. Bakhtin defines as 'heteroglossia' in 'Discourse in the Novel' (1981).[109] For Bakhtin, heteroglossia is 'another's speech in another's language […] a special type of double-voiced discourse which serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions' through the text.[110] There is, then, a 'potential dialogue […] embedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages.'[111] In Lowell's polyphonic prose, the intentions of human subject and nonhuman object diverge, and in the silence between sentences, the reader is compelled to determine, through their dialogue, who or what is speaking. This compulsion, however, is never satisfied; Lowell's polyphonic prose distorts the distinction between human and nonhuman sonance, and the reader cannot know for certain whether the discourse happening between human subject and nonhuman is a venerable conversation or a violent disagreement between voices, worlds, and languages.

There is, then, a vacillation in which the reader is compelled to return to the text's polyphony – to listen anew, to amplify its sonic contradictions. When Lowell's 'white cloth falls over on its side,' does it lay down to rest, contentedly, on the breakfast table, or does it keel over in submission, knowing that its body is a matter of aesthetic – manipulated by the human subject to boast other things, to apprehend stains? There is a slippage of resonances, as internal rhymes ('cloth' and 'hot') are displaced across sentence breaks, and assonants ('bask' and 'stack') reverberate like a piercing white noise; they offer no reasonable pattern of frequencies, inducing a painful confusion of the eye and the ear. The reader experiences that transient state which Bennett describes as 'a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition' – the neglected dimension of enchantment which must befall but does not dominate.[112] Here, Lowell's polyphonic prose disturbs the reader's symbolic order of the world with the alarming possibility that they have forced themselves upon nonconsenting nonhumans – an alternate scene in which Lowell's anthropomorphic objects are afforded a physical and psychological agency which is subsequently appropriated by humans. Before the sensation can take hold, however, there is

[109] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), trans. by Michael Holquist, pp. 259 – 422.
[110] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', pp. 324 – 325.
[111] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', pp. 324 – 325.
[112] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 5.

what Bennett designates a 'fleeting return to childlike excitement' as the 'world comes alive as a collection of singularities' – an extraordinary world in which Lowell's anthropomorphic 'butter-pats' are enchanted, once again, by the simple pleasure of their 'Yellow! Yellow! Yellow!' bodies.[113]

Just as Leighton contends that 'the human ear itself only goes so far in the detection of sound,' Lowell's polyphonic prose amplifies and augments the sonance of nonhuman objects that may occur somewhere 'outside our range' – 'too high or too low for human detection' – beyond what Leighton calls the 'threshold of audibility'.[114] Here, Lowell's polyphonic prose begins to make that which has, for so long, been inaudible to the human ear, audible; it is a mode of composition which affords its readers the auditory range to listen beyond the human. When considered alongside Lowell's classification of polyphonic prose as an 'orchestral' form, we must finally acknowledge Bennett's consideration of the word 'enchant' and its phonic connection to the French verb *chanter* or 'to sing' – or, as Bennett describes, 'to surround with song or incantation […] to cast a spell with sounds […] to carry away on a sonorous stream.'[115] Lowell's polyphonic prose appears to 'surround' readers with its 'song' – its symphony of human and nonhuman vocalisation, poetic and prosaic recitations, the deafening resonances of that slippage between the uncanny and enchantment effects. An orchestra of sonic human subjects and nonhuman objects composed in poetry *and* prose, Lowell's polyphonic prose therefore 'immobilises' the reader in a performance of sound, so they might begin to touch, smell, taste, see, and listen to the vociferations, the physically and psychologically vibrant matter of the object world anew.[116] It compels us to acknowledge the vitality of those nonhuman objects which actively participate in our material world, just out of human earshot.

THE AGENCY OF ASSEMBLAGES: A CONCLUSION

Through their silent and sonant anthropomorphic objects, both Ridge and Lowell's compositions alert us to the delighting and disquieting agency of nonhuman matter, and its ability to overwhelm our human-centred understanding of the world and all its things. For Bennett, after all, any 'attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman' is 'futile' – she argues that we must 'seek instead to engage more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the

[113] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 5.
[114] Leighton, *Hearing Things*, p. 20.
[115] Lowell, 'Preface', *Can Grande's Castle* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1918), p. xv; Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 6.
[116] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, p. 5.

nonhumans in the assemblages' in which we all participate.[117] Bennett defines 'assemblages' as 'ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts' in which 'no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group.'[118] For Bennett, the human subject is simply one genus of matter in a world of active materialities – there is and can be no conceivable hierarchy. After Bennett, I propose that Ridge and Lowell demonstrate how physical and psychological slippages between human and nonhuman matter – between poetic and prosaic matter – may begin to obstruct the process of ontological classification, heralding a radical recognition of the commonalities between things. To conclude this chapter, I therefore offer a formal reconceptualisation of Ridge and Lowell's compositions as assemblages which revel in the agglomeration of human and nonhuman materialities – poetic and prosaic materialities – compelling us, as readers, to acknowledge our position as just another genus of vibrant matter participating in the transformation of this 'ad hoc' collective that is a literary text.

To theoretically explicate the notion of assemblage, Bennett turns to what Baruch Spinoza identifies as 'affective bodies', which are 'associative or (one could even say) social bodies, in the sense that each is, by its very nature as a body, continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies.'[119] For Bennett, the human and nonhuman bodies of an assemblage continuously modify their respective counterbodies and are modified by those counterbodies in return. The assemblage is, after all, simultaneously a product and process. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari summarise the assemblage's capacity for modulation in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980): 'The assemblages are in constant variation, are themselves constantly subject to transformations.'[120] This faculty of the assemblage to affect and be affected is evidenced in Lowell and Ridge's compositions as human subjects and nonhuman objects are continually altered via physical and psychological encounters with their counterbodies in the material world. In Ridge's 'Sun-Up,' there is an unbearable likeness between Janie, the woman-like doll, and Betty, the female child that is not-quite-woman, which compels readers to apprehend what strange matter the human subject and nonhuman object might have in common. Janie, whose physical appearance is like-me, whose psychological reasoning is like-mine, is afforded the potential to disrupt ontological classification, to silently overwhelm Betty's status as protagonist. In Lowell's 'Grotesques,' an anthropomorphic string quartet shrieks a language

[117] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 116.
[118] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 23.
[119] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 21.
[120] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 82.

that servers the productive connections between sound and sense – granting the reader (as listener) the capacity to heed the nonhuman object's communication of a material world beyond a human-centred rhetoric. There is and can possibly be no player. In modernist poetry, the 'I' which has belonged, with so little opposition, to the human subject, becomes the 'I' of the nonhuman object. In the assemblages of Ridge and Lowell, both human subject and nonhuman object are ousted as affective materialities, which compel readers to participate in a radical revaluation of the binary oppositions, the ontological classifications, which have traditionally ordered the world and all its things.

Formally, poetic or prosaic appropriations of plot, spatial notations, character, rhyme, and typographical arrangement are transformed by the presence of their counterbodies in the assemblage. The reader, too, is rendered but another genus of affective material – a counterbody – in the textual assemblage for their repeated participations in the comprehension of form, and in the transformation of meaning. In *Influx and Efflux* (2020), Bennett examines the agglomeration of human and nonhuman materialities in the poetry of Walt Whitman – exploring the processes by which physical and psychological matter enters and exits bodies, stimulating transformations in its counterbodies, within itself.[121] She contends that Whitman's poetry offers a critical prototype of an 'I' – which may represent the human subject, the nonhuman object, or, indeed, the reader – that is a 'a porous and susceptible shape that rides and imbibes waves of influx-and-efflux but also contributes an influence of its own.'[122] For Bennett, matter transforms matter – is transformed by matter – in happenstance encounters which may disturb or delight in equal measure. To comprehensively realise the literary assemblages of Ridge and Lowell, the reader must therefore become an affective materiality to agitate, facilitate, and modulate the text – an affective materiality which is agitated, facilitated, and modulated by the text. In the process of reading Ridge's 'Sun-Up,' we must acknowledge the 'you' which disrupts the boundary between first and second-person, between human subject and nonhuman object, as me and not-me concurrently, permanently implicated in the 'sad and terrible' narrative arc of Janie the doll.[123] In the process of reading Lowell's 'Breakfast Table,' we must add our reader's voice to the symphony of human and nonhuman discourse orchestrated by her polyphonic prose – but another form of vociferous matter, yearning to listen and be heard, within the composition. In modernist poetry, the reading 'I' must be willing to coexist alongside the 'I' of the anthropomorphic nonhuman object. Lowell and Ridge's literary

[121] Bennett, *Influx and Efflux: Writing up with Walt Whitman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).
[122] Bennett, *Influx and Efflux*, p. xi.
[123] Ridge, 'Sun-Up', p. 22.

assemblages, as ‘ad hoc groupings’ of poetic and prosaic material, communicate the physical and psychological assimilation of human and nonhuman matter through experimental language and forms – culminating with the reader’s assimilation with the composition.[124] Heralding the modernist object’s disruptive potential, Lowell and Ridge’s assemblages facilitate the radical disturbance of anthropocentric philosophy which pervades twentieth century literary and artistic culture, destabilising the process of ontological classification. Furthermore, Lowell and Ridge’s assemblages prompt new enquiries regarding the ways in which readers are implicated in the destabilisation of subject and object positions: by what means do modernist poets defamiliarize matter, manipulating our language to transform humans, objects, and texts into unnameable things?

[124] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 23.

‘A BINARIAN’S NIGHTMARE’: THE MAKING OF MINA LOY’S THINGLY POETICS

In 1940, Mina Loy sketched and submitted her designs for an alphabet game to luxury toy manufacturer, FAO Schwartz. As Margaret Konkol describes:

> The package included an introductory letter, a hand-painted scripted dialogue demonstrating play between a young child and an older sibling or parent, diagrams of two letter sets of the game – one for “Build Your Own Alphabet” and another for “The Alphabet that Builds Itself” – and a prototype letter “B” from the third version “An Alphabet Toy” / “Jack in the Box Alphabet.”[1]

The letters of Loy’s alphabet game were comprised of segmental components ‘to be manufactured with attractive inexpensive plastics, or lacquered cardboard’ and held together by magnetic strips or ‘small perturbances (pegs) fitting into holes’ on each part.[2] For Konkol, though Loy’s alphabet game has remained ‘an as-yet-unrealized-modernist artefact’ – an ‘unpublished modernist poem’ – it playfully articulates Loy’s conceptualisation of ‘language as a physical substance which infers its own morphology.’[3] For Loy, our communicative language must be dismantled; it must be made to reassemble in disparate combinations, confronting the player with its materiality. Loy’s alphabet game transforms language into an object – a thing – for the player to physically and psychologically manipulate. It directs the player to modification: ‘Make a magic. Slant a very short piece through the bottom right side of O so, Q. It has turned into “Q”.’[4] Loy’s alphabet game compels the player to dwell on the malleability of language: ‘How many letters can one build with the long and short straight pieces?’[5] For Konkol:

> The activity of play sets the pieces in dynamic flux as letters form themselves into familiar icons as well as newly invented shapes, making play an act of writing that is part imitation and part invention. This toy is a poem, writing itself through play, and, as a poem, it is also a toy, playfully signalling the malleability of its most basic signifying elements.’[6]

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[1] Margaret Konkol, ‘Prototyping Mina Loy’s Alphabet’, *Feminist Modernist Studies*, Vol. 1.3 (2018), pp. 294 – 317 (p. 294).
[2] Mina Loy, ‘Letter to FAO Schwartz’ (1940), Box 7, Folder 184, YCAL MSS 6, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[3] Konkol, ‘Prototyping Mina Loy’s Alphabet’, p. 294, 295.
[4] Loy, ‘Build Your Own A B C’ (1940), Box 7, Folder 184, YCAL MSS 6, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[5] Loy, ‘Build Your Own A B C’.
[6] Konkol, ‘Prototyping Mina Loy’s Alphabet’, p. 295.

According to Loy's instructions, the player begins the game by assembling the letter 'I' and concludes by assembling the letter 'U' – building the alphabet out of sequence.[7] There is a progressive movement from the 'I' of Loy as writer / designer / artist to the 'U' which signifies the active player / reader, who must become a segmental component in the toy / poem, participating in its manufacture and subsequent demolition. In playing Loy's alphabet games, the player or reader is compelled to relive their earliest acquisition of the found material that is language in childhood, when the shapes and sounds of letters were strange, their order negotiable – when human subjects and nonhuman objects were liberated from ontological classification, things with infinite possibilities.

When encountering Loy's oeuvre, it is clear that Loy was captivated by the latent potentiality of the world and all its materials. As Tara Prescott contends, just as 'she rescued egg cartons and discarded cigarette wrappers for use in her collages, assemblages, and ephemeral art, Loy also collected archaic words and forgotten expressions for use in her poetry.'[8] Though Loy is principally remembered – if she is remembered at all – as a poet, Loy trained as an artist in Munich, London, and Paris, where she formed life-long relationships with artists such as Wyndham Lewis, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Constantin Brancusi, Joseph Cornell, and Stephen Haweis, who would become her first husband.[9] As Carolyn Burke recalls, 'It was one of her enduring complaints that she never knew whether to develop an idea with a pen or with a paintbrush.'[10] It is perhaps this complaint that triggered Loy's radical use of material things – combining oil paint, rags, acetate, found objects, electricity, papier maché, and language in alternate combinations to bring about her poems, paintings, clothing, hats, collages, novels, lampshades, plays, and three-dimensional art-objects. For Prescott, art therefore 'suffused all aspects of her daily life' and many models, moments, and movements would rematerialize 'in her poetry, and her poetic vision flowed back into her developing visual art.'[11] There is, then, a resulting plurality to Loy's life and oeuvre which has been similarly noted by Roger Conover in his introduction to *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*; he sketches Loy as 'a binarian's nightmare' – simultaneously Feminist, Futurist, Surrealist, Dadaist, Wife, Mother,

[7] Susan Gilmore describes Loy's alphabet game as 'literally and figuratively "out of order"' in 'Imna, Ova, Mongrel, Spy: Anagram and Imposture in the Work of Mina Loy', *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, ed. by Maeera Shreiber and Keith Tuma (Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 1998), pp. 271 – 318 (p. 306).
[8] Tara Prescott, *Poetic Salvage: Reading Mina Loy* (Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2017), p. 77.
[9] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage*, p. 78. For a comprehensive summary of Loy's training as an artist, see Carolyn Burke's *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (New York: Farrar Straus, and Giroux, 1996).
[10] Burke, *Becoming Modern*, p. 338.
[11] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage,* p. 77.

Lover, Poet, Painter, Playwright, Seamstress, Lampshade Maker, and 'none of the above' at all.[12] As a modernist practitioner, Loy was famously eclectic, appropriating a miscellany of techniques from the literary and artistic movements with which she was surrounded – refusing to align herself completely with one over another. To speak of Mina Loy is always, therefore, to speak in plural; there are, after all, innumerable Loys – each one as enigmatic as the last. As Conover recalls, a rumour circulated throughout Paris during the twenties that Mina Loy 'was in fact not a real person at all but a made-up persona,' for such an artist simply could not exist.[13]

This chapter explores the unimaginable, unpalatable, and unnameable dimensions of Loy's oeuvre, and its denunciation of scholarly valuation. I contend that the radical plurality of Loy's compositions systematically dismantles the theoretical distinctions between human and nonhuman matter, between sex and gender, and between literary and artistic production, to bring about a disturbance of genre, and a language which commands all physical and psychological interactions with the material world. The first half of this chapter contemplates the extent to which Loy's lampshades (made in the image of other objects) and 'Songs to Joannes' (made in the image of a poem) defamiliarize the nonhuman object, compelling the viewer to interrogate the assumed stability of ontological classification – of communicative language.[14] Just as Loy's lampshades defamiliarize the nonhuman object, I argue that Loy's compositions defamiliarize the literary text. What happens, after all, when the reader cannot know for certain what it is that they are reading? Following this critical discourse on Loy's rejection of ontological classification, and drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject – that which 'does not respect borders, position, rules,' disturbing 'identity, system, order' – I explore the ways in which Loy's experiments stimulate physical and psychological anxiety, overwhelming the theoretical distinctions between self and other.[15] In the second half of this chapter, I therefore examine the unpalatable objects of Loy's 'Magasins du Louvre' and 'Costa San Giorgio' – contemplating the extent to which they become material analogies for the transgressive female subject, and the extent to which Loy's compositions should be considered abject objects in their own right. Sarah Hayden frames Loy's entrance into the art world as a coded act of liberation, against the notion that a woman who 'did' anything was, after all, an unwomanly thing; she argues that 'making is both Loy's entry into modernity and, as she

[12] Roger Conover, 'Introduction', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker,* ed. by Conover (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), pp. xi – xx (p. xiii).
[13] Conover, 'Introduction', p. xii.
[14] Mina Loy, 'Songs to Joannes', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 53 – 68.
[15] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

pursued interstitial occupations as a designer and artisanal producer, a means to support herself.'[16] By participating in Loy's literary and artistic experiments, I therefore argue that the reader is made complicit in an act of radical resistance – a rejection of those binarised modes of cognition which dictate what an object is and does; what a text is and does; what a woman is or does. Finally, this leads to an examination of the resulting 'thingness' of Loy's oeuvre. Building on Bill Brown's thing theory, in which 'thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)', I argue that Loy's literary and artistic experiments reveal the latent possibilities of the material in which she works – be it oil paint, rags, found objects, papier maché, or language – forming excessive, unidentifiable, plural things which resist ontological classification. [17] As a result, I propose that Loy's compositions offer a radical rethinking of the literary object – its customary spatial notations, typography, punctuation, and communicative language – confronting the reader with the pure potentiality of a thingly poetics.

MAKING LAMPSHADES, MAKING POEMS

When Mina Loy attended the Dada costume ball in 1917, she wore a handcrafted lampshade dress. That year, Loy also published 'Songs to Joannes', in which an 'unimaginable family' don their 'lamp-shade red dresses', exhibited the long-lost painting *Making Lampshades*, and began selling her avant-garde lampshades to clients.[18] In 1926, Loy subsequently opened a lampshade shop in Paris with the financial backing of art collector and socialite, Peggy Guggenheim. Just as Loy's compositions appropriate traditional poetic form, rhyme, and meter to subvert readerly expectation, many of Loy's lampshades border on the unnameable, made in the image of other objects: a vase of calla lilies, a desk globe, a ship at sea, a swan, a star, an aeroplane with incandescent acetate windows and a working headlight and taillight.[19] For Julie Gonnering Lein, there is, therefore, an 'electric' connection between Loy's creatively charged

[16] Sarah Hayden, *Curious Disciplines: Mina Loy and Avant-Garde Artisthood* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), pp. 2 – 3.
[17] Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 1 – 22 (p. 5).
[18] Loy, 'Songs to Joannes', p. 54. For a detailed history of Loy's lampshade business, see Burke, pp. 341 – 343 and Jessica Burstein's discussion of Loy's lampshade production in 'Loy, Inc.', *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 2012), pp. 187 – 189.
[19] Though many of Loy's original lampshades have been lost, a small selection of photographs and designs are included in the Mina Loy Papers and the Carolyn Burke collection on Mina Loy and Lee Miller at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Loy, 'Original design for lampshade decorated with airplane' (1941), Box 7, Folder 186, YCAL MSS 6, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; Jean-Loup Charmet Photos Presse Paris, 'Lamps de Mina Loy' (1920), Box 7, Folder Loy, Mina: Lamps, circa 1920, YCAL MSS 778, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

acts of making lampshades and making poetry.[20] Lein argues that Loy's poems are afforded the same 'luminous opacity' as her lampshades (as objects made to obscure and amplify light in equal measure), with her poems comprising 'obfuscating features' including a lack of punctuation, improper grammar, ambiguous and fragmented syntax.[21] Lein contends that 'just as her lampshades enfold, direct, and decorate the radiance of electric light, her poetics of luminous opacity appropriates, filters, and shapes the brilliance of the avant-garde according to her unique and expressive need and desire.'[22] Whilst Lein privileges a socio-historical reading in which she reads twentieth-century technological advancements to electric power alongside Loy's poems to explore the 'critical setting' of her work, I argue that the unimaginable forms of Loy's lampshades and poetry overwhelm the habituative processes of ontological classification on which human cognition and linguistic communication rely.

Loy's products stimulate their viewing or reading audience to fundamentally rethink their assumptions regarding lampshades, regarding poems. This reading follows Jessica Burstein's discussion of Loy as a designer across artistic mediums in *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (2012); she offers the term 'domestica' to describe Loy's products in order 'to emphasize the household elements in Loy, crossed as they are with a rigid eroticism that makes strange the recognizable circuits of the everyday.'[23] In Burstein's assertion that Loy's products render the domestic strange, there is a subliminal flicker of the uncanny; Loy's products manifest all that is unhomely within the homely. Burstein's analyses may therefore illuminate Loy's lampshades, which overload 'the recognizable circuits of the everyday' with their luminous imitations of domiciliary objects, as well as her compositions, which defamiliarize the reader with this thing we name language.[24] I argue that in exciting a transformation of the lampshade's aesthetic value and ergonomic function, Loy's defamiliarization of the nonhuman object is intensified by a defamiliarization of the human subject via a disruption of the ordered, grammatical dimensions of a language that amplifies and obfuscates cognition.

In 1917 – the same year that Loy began producing lampshades – Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky published 'Art as Technique' and introduced the concept of

[20] Julie Gonnering Lein, 'Shades of Meaning: Mina Loy's Poetics of Luminous Opacity', *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 18.3 (2011), pp. 617 – 629.
[21] Lein, 'Shades of Meaning', p. 618.
[22] Lein, 'Shades of Meaning', p. 618.
[23] Burstein, *Cold Modernism*, p. 152.
[24] Burstein, *Cold Modernism*, p. 152.

defamiliarization.[25] For Shklovsky, defamiliarization is the dynamic process by which art 'removes objects from the automatism of perception' – from that destructive 'habitualization' which has long desensitized the human subject to the world and all its matter.[26] Shklovsky contends that habitualization occurs when the human subject encounters the nonhuman object more than once, when the human subject begins to recognise its material form, ergonomic function, and aesthetic value: 'The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it – hence we cannot say anything significant about it.'[27] Just as the human subject acquires knowledge of the nonhuman object, they are powerless to experience its potency, for all future encounters with the nonhuman object hinge on assumption. The aim of defamiliarization is therefore to make the nonhuman object appear strange or 'unfamiliar' to the human subject – 'to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception' so that the human subject may encounter the physical and psychical dimensions of the nonhuman object as if for the very first time.[28] As Shklovsky summarises, the purpose of art is 'to make the stone *stony*.'[29]

The radical design of Loy's lampshades therefore offer a striking model of defamiliarization in art, masquerading as other objects with other names – with other forms and functions – playfully debunking the habituality of the human subject's perceptions regarding the nonhuman object, revelling in the instability of a language that insists on the propriety of proper nouns. For Shklovsky, detaching the object from its name is also a powerful source of defamiliarization in literature. He contends that when an author does not name the nonhuman object or 'avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects' in their descriptions, the object becomes strange to the human subject for it verges on the unidentifiable.[30] Loy's desk globe and calla lily lampshades, for example, disconnect the ergonomic function of the object from its aesthetic appearance. They do not appear to the viewer as lampshades in shape or size; they do not appear to be lamps at all for their apparent lack of a visible power wire, or noticeable dock for the lightbulb, or the traditional cylindrical shape of the shade which sits atop the stand. Loy obscures the lamp's accepted segmental components by producing them in the likeness of other things – rendering the lamp's customary descriptors obsolete. For Burke, these 'celestial globes and star shapes

[25] Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1965), trans. by Lee T. Lemon & Marion J. Reis, pp. 3 – 24. For an introduction to Russian Formalism, see Lemon and Reis' preface to the volume, pp. ix – xvii.
[26] Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 13.
[27] Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 13.
[28] Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 12.
[29] Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 12.
[30] Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 13.

seemed to have materialized from the pages of *Lunar Baedecker* […] Indeed, to those who knew her poetry, Mina's lamps transferred its images to an earthly plane.'[31] Burke argues that these lampshades do not simply reproduce descriptions from Loy's poetry but reveal high voltage currents between two systems of production in which her 'increasingly abstract mediations on the theme of creativity (and creation) could be dramatized in the play of light and shadow – the moment of revelation when a *mappemonde* was lit from within.'[32]

Prescott similarly identifies the circuit networks between Loy's productions; she contends that Loy's 'art suffused all aspects of her daily life' – it surged into poetry, and in succession, 'her poetic vision flowed back into her developing visual art.'[33] Following Burke and Prescott, I propose that we must look to those high voltage circuits of production to apprehend the strange filament that conducts this electrical charge, igniting Loy's literary and artistic compositions from within, exciting transformations in nonhuman objects. Lampshades, bulbs, currents, shocks, and illuminations flood Loy's compositions, from the 'inconducive bedroom' of 'At the Door of a House' to the 'celestial conservatories / blooming with light' in 'The Starry Sky of Wyndham Lewis'. [34] In the 'subliminal flicker' of 'Songs to Joannes', there is 'only the impact of lighted bodies / Knocking sparks of each other / In chaos' – an anonymous human subject confesses, 'I must live in my lantern'.[35] What neither Burke nor Prescott concede, however, is that these currents between Loy's systems of production are accompanied by a process of defamiliarization. The 'moment of revelation' which occurs with the illumination of the desk globe, vase of calla lilies, or poetic composition coincides with the recognition that the object is something other – something with a disparate name.[36] Loy's lampshades amplify the very contradiction that charges her compositions: an unnameability.

The viewer's primary encounter with the lampshade is, after all, a playful optical illusion – a profound confusion of matters – in which the viewer is led to believe that the lamp is a desk globe, a vase of calla lilies. Here, the viewer's primary physical and psychological interactions with the object hinge on an involuntary retrieval of information regarding another object altogether – one with a dissimilar aesthetic value, ergonomic function, and proper name. With the flick of a switch, however, the viewer is fast alerted to the object's masquerade. Just as the viewer assumes that they have mastered the desk globe (spherical replica of the earth or

[31] Burke, *Becoming Modern*, p. 343.
[32] Burke, *Becoming Modern*, p. 343.
[33] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage*, p. 77.
[34] Loy, 'At the Door of a House', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* p. 33; Loy, 'The Starry Sky of Wyndham Lewis', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, p. 91.
[35] Loy, 'Songs to Joannes', p. 53, 54, 59.
[36] Burke, *Becoming Modern*, p. 343.

other celestial body, miniature map of a world) or the vase of calla lilies (decorative vessel without handles, brim with water to display fresh-cut flowers), the object is rendered strange. If the desk globe really is a desk globe – if the vase of calla lilies really is a vase of calla lilies – there is a discharge of electric light, a power line hum, that should not be. In her description of Loy's airplane lampshade, Prescott discusses a similar contradiction, an assimilation of modernity and materiality in Loy's 'willingness to juxtapose the old and the new, the artistic and the technical.'[37] Though this assimilation occurs more overtly in Loy's airplane design, which depicts an airplane 'painstakingly outfitted with real windows and working lights' – 'a pinnacle of modern transportation' – it occurs, too, in Loy's celestial globe and calla lily lamps, for they fuse traditional domestic ephemera with the modern invention of electricity.[38] Here, the domestic object is defamiliarized; the viewer is compelled to look, look again, to do away with all that they once claimed to know and trust about the object.

As Daniel P. Gunn argues in his commentary on defamiliarization, 'To produce an effect of defamiliarization, then, the artist must consciously violate the accepted ways of making meanings – whatever they are.'[39] When encountering Loy's lampshades, the viewer is subsequently alerted to the uncomfortable apprehension that their eyes and the resulting connotations brought forth by seeing, are deceptive, that the material world of objects and the language through which they are named is not as static, logical, or binarised as they have been led to believe. The language through which we encounter the object – its name, as accompanied by a set of socially, politically, and historically attributed characteristics – might fail us at any time. Loy's lampshades overload the 'recognizable circuits' between nonhuman object, aesthetic value, ergonomic function, and proper noun.[40] They are always, therefore, accompanied by the switching on of active cognition – violating the theoretical distinctions between all that is knowable or unknowable, identifiable or unidentifiable, nameable or unnameable.

When examined alongside Mina Loy's status as a female artist in the twentieth-century, it must also be acknowledged that her act of making and marketing lampshades troubles the distinction between high and low brow forms of art; though applied and decorative arts were steadily becoming more accepted in the art world, they were still considered a less rigorous, more 'feminine' alternative to oil painting or sketching. Female students of art were only just

[37] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage*, p. 79.
[38] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage*, p. 79.
[39] Daniel P. Gunn, 'Making Art Strange: A Commentary on Defamiliarization', *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 38.1 (1984), pp. 25 – 33 (p. 30).
[40] Burstein, *Cold Modernism*, p. 152.

beginning to gain acceptance into art colleges; perceived as hobbyists, they were not taken seriously by their male peers. Furthermore, it was expected that they would either teach or become wives.[41] In Loy's hands, however, all procurable material – be it oil paint, rags, acetate, found objects, electricity, papier maché, or language – was a material apt for producing art, for making a proficient name, or perhaps more fittingly in the context of this study, names for oneself as an artist. Just as she harnesses the domestic art of lampshade-making to bring about an intellectually rigorous defamiliarization of the nonhuman object and the language with which we define it, Loy fractures the traditionally 'highbrow' form of the poem – its metrical formula – to communicate 'lowbrow' subjects such as sex, childbirth, abortion, and the construct of virginity. As Prescott contends, Loy 'made no distinction between which materials were suitable for art and which themes or words were fit for poetry.'[42] Loy's oeuvre resists canonisation with the ideology that material is material is material for producing good art. For Loy, good art is not produced though compliance with the customs of a literary genre or creative practice, but through their appropriation, that is, through the artist's ability to combine literary genres or creative practices in uncustomary ways – to defamiliarize the product.

Though critics, including Lein, Burstein, Prescott, and Burke have illuminated Loy's lampshades through the context of twentieth-century lighting technologies, none have explored the electric connections between the lamp and the poem that overload the circuits charged with naming. Here, I contend that just as Loy overloads the productive circuits between nonhuman object, aesthetic value, ergonomic function, and proper noun with her lampshades, she overloads the productive circuits between literary genre, practice, linguistic content, and form – defamiliarizing this thing we name a poem. It is 'Songs to Joannes', a strange and formally asymmetrical composition, spanning fifteen pages in Loy's collection, that offers, perhaps, the most startling model of defamiliarization in Loy's poetry. Comprising thirty-four fragments of verse, 'Songs to Joannes' communicates its despondent chronicle of romantic coupling in what Lucia Pietroiusti calls a 'disturbed chronology,' obscuring the boundaries between 'possibility, desire, and reality' in the text.[43] 'Songs to Joannes' was printed in 1917, the same year that Shklovsky published 'Art as Technique' – the same year that Loy began producing lampshades. Whilst Loy's lampshades masquerade as other objects, resisting habitualization and rejecting the propriety of proper nouns, Loy's poems also utilise obfuscating praxes, including the

[41] Burke, *Becoming Modern*, pp. 74 – 75.
[42] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage*, p. 77.
[43] Lucia Pietroiusti, 'Body and the Text/Body of the Text in Mina Loy's *Songs to Joannes*', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 9 (2008), pp. 29 – 40 (p. 31).

omittance of punctuation and improper grammar. After all, as Lein contends, the connections between Loy's lampshades and her poetry are far more comprehensive than one might assume, for like 'electrical currents, her lines of meaning routinely jump gaps and sometimes risk short-circuiting the sense of a stanza altogether.'[44] Following my analysis of Loy's lampshades, I therefore argue that the conductive language and alternative forms in which Loy composes may spark defamiliarization. This is discernible in 'Songs to Joannes', as Loy overloads the circuits charged with naming human subjects and nonhuman objects:

IV
Once in a mezzanino
The starry ceiling
Vaulted an unimaginable family
Bird-like abortions
With human throats
And Wisdom's eyes
Who wore lamp-shade red dresses
And woollen hair[45]

Absent of punctuation, Loy's 'Songs to Joannes' shocks the reader with an electrical surge of images, sounds, and metaphors – charging readers with the power to punctuate the composition for themselves, to determine where a pause, a resistor, should terminate the current or reduce its flow, for the poem is an overloaded circuit, and there can be no inconducive reading. Manifesting in a theatre, Loy's 'unimaginable family' border on unreality – they are illuminated by a 'starry ceiling' of spotlights, which may render choice players visible, brighten the auditorium for intermission, or transform the audience's perception of three-dimensional objects onstage. With the exposition of the stanza – 'Once' – the reader anticipates a chronicle, the opening monologue to an act that does not come. The reader cannot know for certain whether the 'Bird-like abortions / With human throats' are players in the production onstage, members of the audience, or something without a name: an anthropomorphic nonhuman with 'woollen hair' lurking in the decorated rafters. The defamiliarization is so profound that the composition short circuits; the reader cannot know for certain who or what they are encountering through the obscurity.

The composition also sparks a confusion of grammar. 'Wisdom' is capitalised, as if it is, or could possibly, be a proper name – as if 'Wisdom' were not a characteristic, but a character. The reader experiences a diversion of current, an alternate circuit of meaning in

[44] Lein, 'Shades of Meaning', pp. 626 – 627.
[45] Loy, 'Songs to Joannes', p. 54.

which ‘Wisdom’ has ‘eyes’ and a corporeal body with which the ‘Bird-like abortions’ share a commonality. This commonality, however, is an aborted connection. As Lein asserts, Loy’s phrases ‘jump gaps’ and cause the circuit through which meaning is distributed between composition and reader to short.[46] When considered alongside the definitions of ‘abortion’ – the proper noun – as ‘a person or thing not fully or properly formed,’ an ‘arrested or imperfect development of a structure,’ or a ‘monstrosity,’ Loy’s ‘Bird-like abortions’ interfere, obstruct, or terminate the productive connections between word and meaning on which communication relies – rendering the composition grotesque.[47] Finally, the obfuscating power of the lampshade overloads the composition as Loy’s ‘unimaginable family’ appear in ‘lamp-shade red dresses’, the segmental components of their bodies shadowed and intensified by the ambiguity of Loy’s language. After all, the reader cannot know for certain if the ‘dresses’ they wear are a ‘lamp-shade red’ in colour – ‘lamp-shade’ functioning as an underpowered adjective in the clause – or if they are comparable to the ‘lamp-shade’ in shape, or if they are ‘dresses’ hewn from ‘lamp-shades’ themselves. Loy’s ‘unimaginable family’ therefore charges the reader to conduct bad connections that are systematically aborted, to determine where punctuation, or resistors, should terminate the current or reduce its flow, to rewrite the circuits of meaning in the composition.

In his analysis of defamiliarization Shklovsky asserts that poetic form and its capacity to make strange the language through which the human subject comes to the object, produces a ‘deautomatized perception’ – making ‘pronunciation difficult’ to slow cognitive discernment.[48] He identifies the poem’s ‘repetition of identical sounds’ and its ‘disordering’ of formal rhythm ‘which cannot be predicted’ as powerful sources of defamiliarization, both of which overwhelm Loy’s composition.[49] For example:

> XVII
> I don’t care
> Where the legs of the legs of the furniture are walking to
> Or what is hidden in the shadows they stride [50]

Within the internal repetition of ‘the legs of the legs of the furniture,’ there is a semblance of an electrical stutter. The syntax of the line is rendered strange by the inference that ‘the legs of

[46] Lein, ‘Shades of Meaning’, p. 626.
[47] Oxford English Dictionary, *Abortion* (2019)
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/503?redirectedFrom=abortions#eid> [Accessed 27 September 2019].
[48] Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’, p. 22.
[49] Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’, p. 22.
[50] Loy, ‘Songs to Joannes’, p. 59.

the furniture' may have functioning 'legs' of their own. It borders on short circuitry, for the reader is led to believe that the miscommunication is theirs – they have simply misapprehended the line and must read it again to restore the directional current of meaning. When the reader attempts to 'rewire' the line correctly, however, there is a moment of revelation: their mistake is not a mistake at all, but a recurring component in the line's configuration. Here, the reader is confronted with the unreadable, unintelligible, or unnameable dimensions of 'Songs to Joannes' – its ability to conduct bad connections that are systematically aborted, deliberately overloading readers with its ambiguity. Then, the process of defamiliarization happening with 'the legs of the legs of the furniture' is amplified. There is a spark of physical agency to their alacrity, a surge of anthropomorphism as 'the legs of the furniture' interfere with ontological categories, human subject and nonhuman object. When considered alongside 'furniture' (as a collective noun) the reader cannot know for certain who or what they are interacting with through the composition, be it chair or table or something without a name. This is further intensified by the unimaginable circuitry of a composition that appears to follow no metronomic pattern of syllables, omitting punctuation completely in favour of spatial notation – its lines erratically aborted or protracted, oscillating between first-person and third-person narration. There are stuttering repetitions, and when rhymes do resonate, they are internal – 'care' and 'Where' – and superficially impulsive, connecting words which do not strike the reader as particularly charged with implication at all. There is, then, something apparently unpoetic about Loy's texts. Coming to the reader in numbered circuits, 'Songs to Joannes' appears to guarantee the reader that there is a logic to its high voltage form, though the sum of its components remains unsolvable.

In Loy's compositions, the segmental components of the poem are rendered unidentifiable, and the reader cannot know for certain what they are encountering. Loy's compositions, after all, defamiliarize poetic form. For Loy, the reader comes to this thing we name poetry with cognitive discriminations that must be aborted if the writer is to do anything significant with the circuitry of language. Loy's compositions alert the reader to the electric revelation that there is 'Something taking shape / Something that has a new name' forming within literary and artistic modernism.[51] I argue that this something is a mode of composition which overloads the ontological classification of human subjects and nonhuman objects, charged with an alternating current of literary genres and artistic practices. Here, Loy's

[51] Loy, 'Songs to Joannes', p. 57.

compositions illuminate the transformative potential of a material world beyond the theoretical parameters of the proper noun.

BECOMING ABJECT

For Loy, there is a maddening commonality between objecthood and womanhood that should no longer be permitted to hold. In 'Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots' (1915) Loy offers a penetrating feminist critique with the conjecture that 'Men's eyes look into things / Our eyes look out' – the female condition is therefore powerfully aligned with the nonhuman object in all its manmade materiality, born into the world with an assigned proper name, ergonomic function, aesthetic and monetary value.[52] Just as Loy sought to pluralise the nonhuman object, defamiliarizing its physical and psychological dimensions, she also sought to pluralise the female subject, demolishing those socially, politically, and historically disseminated nouns which moderate the female subject – which name her Wife, Mother, Virgin, Whore, or Spinster. In her 'Feminist Manifesto' (1914), Loy advocates a complete 'destruction of virginity' – sacrificing 'virtue' in 'defiance' of the 'superstition' that a woman's value can be ascribed to sexual purity.[53] Loy declares that 'there is nothing impure in sex – except the mental attitude to it' and that a 'social regeneration' incorporating these philosophies must be brought about to render obsolete the choice between 'parasitism', 'prostitution' or 'negation' that all women must make, between becoming an object of desire or an object of repulsion.[54]

In 'Futurism, Fashion, and the Feminine,' Rowan Harris contends that 'the issue of how to identify or disidentify as a woman […] remained central' to Loy's literary and artistic practice from the 'prolonged nerve vibrations' of childbirth in 'Parturition' to her reformation of the 'feminine' domestic arts.[55] However, it must be acknowledged that Loy's compulsive returns to what it is to be a female subject in the twentieth century are not a simple matter of identifying or disidentifying with an antiquated lot of 'feminine' physical or psychological qualities, but of displacing the processes of identification and disidentification completely. For Loy, this subject we name a woman comprises the radical potentiality to disrupt the material world – the order of things – rejecting the theoretical distinctions between sex and gender, between self and other, between human and nonhuman. This critical demolition of conceptual

[52] Loy, 'Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 21 – 23 (p. 21).
[53] Loy, 'Feminist Manifesto', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 153 – 156 (p. 155, 154.
[54] Loy, 'Feminist Manifesto', p. 156, 154.
[55] Rowan Harris, 'Futurism, Fashion, and the Feminine', *The Salt Companion to Mina Loy*, ed. by Suzanne Hobson & Rachel Potter (London: Salt, 2010), pp.17 – 46 (p. 24).

parameters and linguistic systems can be read alongside what Julia Kristeva designates as the 'abject', or that which triggers nausea, antipathy, and horror in its refusal to 'respect borders, position, rules' – that which revels in ambiguity.[56] Reading Kristeva's conception of the abject alongside Loy's experiments may therefore elucidate their physically and psychologically disruptive materialities, engaging readers in a radical modernisation of the conditions of womanhood.

As Prescott describes, Loy's 'Magasins du Louvre' (1915) depicts a 'looking-glass world of shop fronts, where the women walking on the street and their doll versions in the store face similar fates', the poem oscillating between descriptions of the porcelain dolls and the female bystanders. Loy's refrain, 'All the virgin eyes in the world are made of glass,' produces a radical assimilation of human and nonhuman material, so that the reader cannot know for certain to which body the description refers, be it doll, woman, or both simultaneously.[57] For Kristeva, the abject stimulates 'a collapse of the border between inside and outside' – there can be no absolute differentiation between self and other, between subject and object.[58] There is, therefore, a degeneration of binary oppositions, in which Loy satirises the Victorian credence that a woman is hewn from absolutely unresponsive matter – that the female subject holds 'glass' eyes in her sockets which do not perceive, but 'reflect the image of the viewer' like those of a doll.[59] The doll-like woman, is, after all, the definitive object of desire: she dare not see, speak, or stand at will. Here, there is a disquieting slippage between the nonhuman object and human subject, for they are both miniatures of a woman: the woman-like doll and the virgin child that is not-quite-woman. The physiological structure of the doll body recalls the feminine ideal – a miniaturised 'Angel in the House' for little girls to learn and play out the domestic fantasy of wife and motherhood, idolising her smooth, coiffed hair and the coy blush of her porcelain skin.[60]

For Loy, the glass eyes of the doll, which are the glass eyes of the virginal woman, are intrinsically fragile; they induce a critical shattering in the composition:

> All the virgin eyes in the world are made of glass
> Long lines of boxes
> Of dolls
> Propped against bannisters
> Walls and pillars

[56] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
[57] Loy, 'Magasins du Louvre', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 17 – 18 (p. 17).
[58] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 52.
[59] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage*, p. 27.
[60] Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1858).

Huddled on shelves
And composite babies with arms extended
Hang from the ceiling
Beckoning
Smiling
In a profound silence[61]

Loy's refrain triggers a process of fragmentation within the composition – its lines are spontaneously broken, piercing through the whiteness of the page in asymmetrical shards. Here, the fragile glass from which the eyes of the doll-like woman are formed advocate the potentiality to shatter those remaining fragments of a 'Victorian heritage which calculated the marriage value of women according to their purity' and sexual ignorance.[62] Then, there is an alternate reflection in which the eyes of the woman-like doll are hewn from are absolutely unresponsive material, fabricated in the ideal image of woman, who has a human-like mouth but cannot speak. Once again, it is the 'profound' silence of the doll which disturbs the process of ontological classification in the composition; the stillness of its body bears an unbearable likeness to a corpse, which is, for Kristeva, a powerful manifestation of the abject. Kristeva contends that the corpse is abject precisely because it 'is death infecting life' – 'a terror that dissembles' the theoretical distinction between human subject and nonhuman object altogether, for the human body verges on a terrifying and irreversible objecthood.[63] Here, the reader cannot not know for certain whether the refrain names the body of the doll-like woman or the body of the woman-like doll, and this assimilation of dead and living matter overwhelms the body of the composition.[64] Loy's 'Magasins du Louvre' compels the reader to acknowledge the abject mortality of their body and all its material components.

This abject collusion of bodies is later sharpened with Loy's use of the collective pronoun 'they' in the second stanza:

All the virgin eyes in the world are made of glass
They alone have the effrontery to
Stare through the human soul
Seeing nothing
Between parted fringes
One cocotte wears a bowler hat and a sham camellia
And one an iridescent boa[65]

[61] Loy, 'Magasins du Louvre', p. 17.
[62] Virginia M. Kouidis, 'Rediscovering Our Sources: The Poetry of Mina Loy', *boundary 2*, Vol.8.3 (1980), pp. 167 – 188 (p. 170).
[63] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
[64] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
[65] Loy, 'Magasins du Louvre', pp. 17 – 18.

Here, Loy's omittance of punctuation amplifies the assimilation of human and nonhuman matter happening in the composition, signifying the irrational materiality of a language which revels in ambiguity. Loy's line breaks therefore become the reader's only lasting system of reprieve from an amalgamation of clauses, for in those terminations, the reader is presented white voids in which that perverse confusion of ontological classification is further augmented, in which proper syntax cannot not hold. For Kristeva, 'The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.'[66] The reader cannot know for certain where one sentence begins and another ends; meaningful connotation begins to disintegrate. Loy's compositions are abject things which corrupt themselves internally to deny conclusive understanding – to deny the conception of language as a communicative system, to deny the law of grammar. The spatial notations of 'Magasins du Louvre' propose the semblance of a comma, dash, or end stop which cannot manifest itself into actuality. They deliberately mislead us into punctuating – unpunctuating – the composition again with the expectation that we may, after all, comprehend its denotations. 'Magasins du Louvre' revels in contradictions which reject definitive resolution: the glass eyes of the doll-like woman or the woman-like doll are afforded the dexterity to 'Stare through the human soul' and see 'nothing' concurrently.[67] 'Magasins du Louvre' exploits readerly anticipation with its abject materiality, which may aesthetically resemble this thing we name poetry, but delivers as something other, something the reader cannot positively identify.

For Kristeva, the author or poet that is 'fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, […] introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language – style and content.'[68] Following Kristeva's argument, it is clear that the something that remains unnameable and overpoweringly unpalatable in Loy's compositions is, therefore, a perversion of matters, a manipulation of proper grammar and literary genre. As Alfred Kreymborg considers in *Our Singing Strength: An Outline of American Poetry* (1929):

> Such sophistry, clinical frankness, sardonic conclusions, wedded to a madly elliptical style scornful of regulation grammar, syntax and punctuation […] horrified our gentry and drove our critics to furious despair. The nudity of emotion and thought roused the

[66] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 15.
[67] Loy, 'Magasins du Louvre', pp. 17 – 18.
[68] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 16.

> worst disturbance, and the utter nonchalance in revealing the secrets of sex was denounced as nothing less than lewd.[69]

He concludes, 'It took a strong digestive apparatus to read Mina Loy.'[70] Her compositions are hard to swallow. Loy's 'Magasins du Louvre' first regurgitates the reader's automated observations of the commonalities between the beautiful, silent, and virginal doll-like woman and woman-like doll. Then, there is an overwhelming perversion of content as the 'Long lines of boxes / Of dolls / Propped against banisters' beckon the reader to correct the omittance of punctuation, the confusion of syntax in the composition, to become 'cocottes' – prostitutes seeking customers on the Parisian streets. Loy adopts the doll-like woman and the woman-like doll's sleek, coiffed hair – the coy blush of her porcelain skin – to deny the legitimacy of the manmade image, for its appearance conveys no sincere connotation. Loy's doll-like woman and woman-like doll may become a wife, mother, virgin, whore, spinster, all or none of the above at all. Finally, the doll-like woman and woman-like doll are ousted as abject things, for their the radical materialities border on the unnameable. Loy's compositions, too, are ousted as abject things, for their radical materialities border on the unnameable.

Throughout her oeuvre, Loy returns to what Prescott describes as an 'obsession with the cult of virginity that persists across cultures' – manufacturing a productive connection between the female subject and nonhuman object.[71] In 'The Costa San Giorgio' (1914), she satirises the correlation between virginity and economic value as the female subject is represented as a fine domestic ornament: 'the china virgin / Consummately dusted' on her wedding night.[72] In the absence of a dowry, the virginity of the object-women which furnish Loy's 'Italian Pictures' (1914) becomes their bartering aid, their viability for marriage dependent on preserving the illusion of sexual abstinence, for their bodies are commodities. For Loy, the virgin body is therefore perceived as though it were made from 'china' – a material that is notoriously fragile and expensive to produce, effortlessly cracked by slovenly hands, and easily procured for the right price. As Susan Zelazo contends, 'Seeking to instantiate herself in a cultural milieu which tended to objectify the female body,' Loy's intention was to compel readers to 'sense as she does, and, in so doing, made important advances in the sociocultural configuration of women as whole and complex beings worthy of intellectual,

[69] Alfred Kreymborg, *Our Singing Strength: An Outline of American Poetry* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1929), p. 448.
[70] Kreymborg, *Our Singing Strength*, p. 448.
[71] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage*, p. 26.
[72] Loy, 'The Costa San Giorgio', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 10 – 12 (p. 12).

physical, artistic and spiritual presence in the world.'[73] Here, Loy's analogy ridicules the manmade paradigm of virginity: one must be careful not to break the 'china' figure of the object-woman, for damaged goods do not hold their worth when they come to market. The female ornament must be 'Consummately dusted' when the contract of matrimony has been satisfied, and thereafter at the desire of the purchaser – her spouse. For Loy, the nonhuman object and female subject share a profoundly disturbing commonality: in order to be accepted into the order of things in the material world, they must appear to the purchaser as passive material, whether they are physically and psychologically autonomous or not. There is, after all, an anxiety regarding transgressive matter – its resistance of ontological classification, its rejection of those allegedly successful orderings we have made of things in our material world. Loy's analogy compels the reader to radically reappraise the condition of objecthood, that is, the condition of womanhood.

It should be acknowledged, however, that Loy's object-women are not always a matter of porcelain or china, but sometimes something more unpalatable entirely. The narrator of Loy's 'The Costa San Giorgio' encounters 'Oranges half-rotten' being 'sold at a reduction' – 'Hoarsely advertised as broken heads' by the local merchant from his stall.[74] Certainly, the orange is most commonly encountered as a food object, the human subject stripping its rind to consume the sweet, ripened fruit within. However, as Prescott recalls, Loy appears to employ these 'sale pitches' as 'analogies for the tacit buying and selling of potential brides' – the female body, as signified by the body of the orange, becoming a commodity and an object of consumption.[75] The subsequent repetitions of these 'sale pitches' formally and linguistically disrupt both the construction of text and the speaker's attempts to synthesise the collage of nonhuman objects and human subjects participating in the scene. For Prescott, the reading 'eye jumps from the "BROKEN HEADS" of the orange vendor to head shaved by the barber' almost instantaneously – synthesising that 'implicit connection between "BROKEN HEADS" and broken maidenheads' almost instantaneously.[76] Here, there is a collusion of human subject and nonhuman object happening in the pun that confuses the perforated rind of the orange and the hymen, and the semblance of a head in the spherical dimension of the orange, its pits. The capitalised reiteration of 'BROKEN HEADS' materialises, then, just one line down from the

[73] Suzanne Zelazo, '"Altered Observation of Modern Eyes": Mina Loy's Collages, and Multisensual Aesthetics', *The Senses and Society*, Vol. 4.1 (2009), pp. 47 – 73 (p. 49).
[74] Loy, 'The Costa San Giorgio', p. 11.
[75] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage*, p. 24.
[76] Prescott, *Poetic Salvage*, p. 24.

original – a repetition, a return of the repressed, a regurgitation of unsavoury matter that overwhelms the speaker's description of the scene:

> Oranges half-rotten are sold at a reduction
> Hoarsely advertised as broken heads
> BROKEN HEADS and the barber
> Has an imitation mirror[77]

Here, the formal body of the composition begins to sunder alongside the oranges, the heads, the maidenheads, as the repetition of 'BROKEN HEADS' is immediately followed by a perforation in the line – a hole that should not be. There is a peculiarity to the splitting, its abject whiteness, which appears to signify all that is uncommunicable through the composition: though object-women are something to be purchased, consumed, and discarded at will, if they are not peddled before their expiration date, they become unwanted or valueless goods.

When Loy's oranges or 'broken heads' begin to rot, they also begin to lose their primary function as objects of consumption. Here, Loy's 'half-rotten oranges' border on the abject, their shrivelled, putrefying forms becoming repulsive and unpalatable, provoking disgust, and even horror, and threatening to disrupt the productive distinction between human subject and nonhuman object on which language depends. For Kristeva, 'Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection,' for it triggers an immediate and powerful reaction from human subject.[78] Kristeva subsequently describes that physical and psychological instant when 'the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and […] all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.'[79] Here, the abject radically affects the conditional stasis of the human body, disrupting the theoretical cohesion of the 'I':

> 'I' want none of that element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it. But since the food is not an 'other' for 'me,' who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself.[80]

[77] Loy, 'The Costa San Giorgio', p. 11.
[78] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.
[79] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 2 – 3.
[80] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.

Here, Kristeva sporadically contains the 'I' within inverted commas, denouncing its supposed consistency, manifesting the 'I' as an affective materiality which is produced via physical and psychological encounters between self and other. As Loy's human speaker is confronted by the abject object, there is, however, an arresting absence of the 'I' – the speaker wants none of the orange, but it continues to interpolate, to actively interpose their narrations. Here, the speaker cannot immediately reject the abject nonhuman object, for it revels in a disobedience that should not be, regurgitated by the composition. The abject object does not, after all, 'respect borders, positions, rules' – it opposes 'identity, system,' the order of things.[81] There is a slippage between human subject and nonhuman object that is manifested on the 'half-rotten' surface of their 'broken heads' – acting as corporeal reminders of what happens to the aging, unmarried, or sexually transgressive female subject in the twentieth-century, who becomes an unsavoury or hard to swallow thing.

There is an arresting commonality between Loy's 'broken heads' and those contained in the folder of 'heads' which is archived at The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (see Figure 2); predominantly female in form, Loy's mixed media compositions revel in the absence-presence of the unpalatable female body:

Figure 2: Loy, 'Heads' (n.d.), Box 7, Folder 185, YCAL MSS 6, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[81] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p. 4.

Severed from their proper contexts, they are ambiguous things which apprehend the female subject's abjection from selfhood, that is, subjecthood. Loy's artistic products, after all, be they manuscripts or drawings, compel the viewer or reader to concede the absurdity of the object-woman's status as material commodity in a world of things. Furthermore, the unnameable, unimaginable 'I' that is present in 'July in Vallombrosa' (part one) and 'Costa Magic' (part three) of Loy's 'Italian Pictures', withdraws from the abject object that is the physically and psychologically autonomous female, favouring something more palatable – 'I C E C R E A M' – something that is, perhaps, easier to digest.[82] Finally, the 'I' that is absent from 'The Costa San Giorgio' (part two) is replaced with the collective 'we' – 'we' that resists and rejects the singular 'I' – 'we' that is compelled to retain and repeat the nauseating condition that a woman's body is not her own, that the object's body is not its own, that in resisting this condition, they become abject things.

Finally, Loy's compositions begin to reject any permanent semblance of a discernible form. They spontaneously detach themselves from the comfort of the left margin, transforming the reader's physical and psychological encounters with the poem:

> While listening up I hear my husband
> Mumbling Mumbling
> Mumbling at the window
> Malediction
> Incantation[83]

In Loy's 'Italian Pictures', 'Costa Magic' follows 'The Costa San Giorgio' – it is a composition occupied with the abject materiality of language, presenting little context to the reader, who cannot know for certain who is speaking, what is occurring, or where the theoretical parameters of the composition might lie. There is a semblance of a wife, a negotiation, a conception, a daughter. These, however, are matters of little significance, for in 'Costa Magic' Loy destabilises the communicative operations of language, liberating its radial potential to establish a semblance of spontaneous form, which bears an aesthetic likeness to poetic verse, but does not function correspondingly at all. Here, the habitual process of reading is rendered obsolete – the reader cannot know for certain whether there is one stanza or two, whether they are expected to read left to right or down columns. The composition might read 'While listening up I hear my husband / Mumbling Mumbling / Mumbling at the window' and 'While listening

[82] Loy, 'The Costa San Giorgio', p. 11.
[83] Loy, 'Costa Magic', pp. 12 – 14 (p. 13).

up / Mumbling / Mumbling / Malediction / Incantation' simultaneously – it revels in formal and linguistic plurality. All punctuation is omitted; capitalisation is erratic, occurring in the centre of a phrase; spatial notations cut white holes in the composition, where unimaginable words assert their repulsive absence-presence. We cannot know how many words – if any – have been disordered or displaced, because the composition opposes reading for the sake of communication. Loy's compositions therefore propel us 'toward the place where meaning collapses' and the abject 'does not cease challenging its master' – denouncing the belief that our perfunctory knowledge of what an object is or does, what a woman is or does, what a text is or does, constitutes mastery.[84]

Like the object-women of Loy's 'Magasins du Louvre' and 'The Costa San Giorgio,' Loy's material compositions are rendered abject; they participate in a formal and linguistic mutiny against the ontological classification of this thing we name poetry – revelling in all that is unimaginable, unpalatable, and unclassifiable. Loy's compositions, after all, border on a madness that the reader cannot name, for they participate in a rejection of communicative language, that is, punctation, formal grammar, syntax, and spatial notation. They transform in the operation of reading, stimulating abjection in their repetitions and regurgitations of linguistic matter, which flout readerly digestion. Loy's texts participate in a critical disturbance of those binary oppositions which have, for so long, categorised female subjects, nonhuman objects, and literary compositions – heralding the pure potentiality of the abject and all its material potentialities, its denial of symbolic order. Throughout the miscellany that is her oeuvre, Loy therefore triggers a radical cross-examination of the signifying processes through which we name the material world, human subjects, and nonhuman objects. Finally, Loy's abject compositions propel us toward what I term a thingly poetics, one which compels us to acknowledge what might happen when the useful function of the object cannot hold – what might happen when the useful function of language cannot hold.

MAKING POEMS, MAKING THINGS

Throughout *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, the word 'thing' appears thirteen times. The anonymous speaker of 'Songs to Joannes' affirms, 'I go / Gracelessly / As things go', and in 'Der Blinde Junge' an 'expressionless "thing" / blows out damnation and concussive dark,' asserting its

[84] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p. 2.

strange and unconceivable materiality on the text.[85] In the absence of context, the thing is a thing that revels in abject plurality; the word 'thing' comes to the reader as a radical ancillary for when language fails or forgets to name the thing it is attempting to describe. The thing is that which rejects borders and rules, resisting proper definition. In things, the pure potentiality of language is therefore materialised. Following my analysis of the unimaginable, unnameable, unconventional, and unpalatable dimensions of Loy's oeuvre, I conclude this chapter with a reconnaissance of Loy's poetics, which might be named – if it is to be named anything at all – a thingly poetics, placing her disparate compositions in conversation with Bill Brown's thing theory. In his seminal publication, aptly titled *Things* (2004), Brown contends:

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.[86]

For Brown, the 'thing' is therefore that which appears to 'hover' over the 'threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable' – comparable to those chance encounters with the strangely familiar, the uncanny or *unheimlich* thing.[87] Thinglyness is negation. Thinglyness is a state of being, neither this nor that – neither here nor there – in the symbolic orders of other people, language, and objects. The thing is that which 'one need not, cannot, or does not wish to give a specific name to.'[88] As Loy contends in an unidentified fragment archived at The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 'Things have no importance until they are impossible.'[89] Here, I argue that Loy's compositions are impossible things in which communicative language and formal grammar collapse, confronting the reader with a repellent question: what is this thing doing to me?

Though the terms 'object' and 'thing' are frequently used interchangeably in dialogue and literary scholarship, they refer to incongruent processes of signification.[90] It is here that academic studies on objects and things diverge, one signifying the human subject's encounters

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[85] Loy, 'Songs to Joannes', p. 62; 'Der Blinde Junge', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 83 – 84 (p. 84).
[86] Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 4.
[87] Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 5.
[88] Oxford Dictionaries, *Thing* (2018) <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/thing> [Accessed 14 August 2018].
[89] Loy, 'Unidentified Fragment' (n.d.), Box 6, Folder 183, YCAL MSS 6, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[90] A significant critical publication in which 'thing' and 'object' interchangeably is Tristin Garcia's *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

with an identifiable nonhuman object with a given ergonomic function or aesthetic value, the other signifying the human subject's encounters with that unidentifiable matter which resists automatic comprehension. When we encounter the familiar nonhuman object, for example, we are privy to some prior knowledge of its condition. When we encounter the abject materiality of the unnameable thing, however, we are compelled to participate in an active cross-examination: What is this thing? Have I encountered this thing before? Who, where, or what can I compare this thing to? What is the use of this thing? What is this thing doing to me? As Brown contends, 'mastering things can take the form of submitting to them, subjecting oneself to the point where subject and object, human and nonhuman, seem to converge.'[91] For Brown, our physical and psychological interactions with things threaten the theoretical cohesion of the material world, for we are compelled to acknowledge the transformative power of things. In our happenstance encounters with impossible things, Brown argues that we must surrender ourselves to a confusion of matters, a slippage between self and other in which the ontological classification of humans and nonhumans, subjects and objects, cannot hold.

Though this cross-examination may occur during our encounters with nonhuman objects, it is automatic – a rapid, spontaneous retrieval of information facilitates our comprehension of the nonhuman object's social, historical, or political function in the material world. This is how we are able to recognise, in an instant, the doll's apparent 'dollness' or the orange's 'orangeness' – we compare the doll or the orange to every object we have ever encountered before, recognising within the doll or the orange a commonality with other dolls, other oranges. Our interactions with things, however, overwhelm the theoretical stability of cognitive processing – defamiliarizing automatic perception. There is, therefore, an anxiety surrounding the thing and all its degeneracies of form; we apprehend the thing until it comes to us with a proper noun and ergonomic function. The thing is always a potential object. Furthermore, as Loy's lampshades would attest, the object is always a potential thing.

Loy's artistic experiments, *Lobster Boy* (1930) and *Christ on a Clothesline* (1955 – 1959), with their eccentric combinations of materials, human and nonhuman matter, acquire a thingly dimension; their transgressions disarm the viewer, challenging those automatic cognitive processes concerning object recognition. *Lobster Boy*, for example, is a model of an adolescent with a lobster tail for legs and lobster claws for hands, set inside a glass bell jar. Its doll face is a rudimentary thing – black holes for eyes, a black slit for a mouth. As Susan Rosenbaum contends, despite its gendered title, 'the figure clearly has breasts' and its

[91] Brown, 'Materialities of Modernism', p. 291.

'ambiguous or hybrid sex, coupled with its conjoining of human and crustacean forms, suggests new physical configurations of sex and gender.'[92] Its androgyny arrests the viewer in a radical denunciation of ontological classification. *Lobster Boy* revels in the betweenness of sexual and gendered matter – the betweenness of human and nonhuman matter. Its segmental components are discernible, but the assemblage in which they participate detaches the doll face, the human torso, the lobster claw and tail, from their routine contexts. Loy's *Lobster Boy* repels the viewer with its abject materiality, that is, the excessive commonality of matter liberated from ergonomic function and aesthetic value, the autocracy of the proper noun. As Brown argues, things represent 'what is excessive in objects' and 'what exceeds their mere materialisation as objects or their mere utilisation as objects – their sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems.'[93] With its rejection of ontological classification, Loy's *Lobster Boy* exceeds the condition of objecthood; it resists singularity in form and connotation, rejoicing in the plurality of things. *Lobster Boy* is an effigy of excess, a thing revered.

We can also apprehend the physical and psychological transgressions of the thing in Loy's *Christ on a Clothesline*. For Thea Lenarduzzi, *Christ on a Clothesline* is 'a collage contained in a deep glass box, which, in place of the conventional finery of religious art, shapes rags and papier-maché into the Son of God.'[94] Here, the body of 'Christ' is a dirty bedsheet, hung out to dry – his face a white mask on a drooping washing line. 'Christ' does not have a neck or legs, but a pair of arms dangles, limp, from wooden pegs. Like Ridge's living doll, Janie, the parts do not correlate, entirely, with those of a human body – 'Christ' is pegged out like a costume. The viewer cannot know for certain if the matters pegged onto that thin, yellow cord are more human or nonhuman – are corporeal or artificial members. Loy's collage meticulously suspends this thing named 'Christ' over what Brown deems the 'threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable,' and, as my discussion of Kristeva has shown, the palatable and unpalatable.[95] After all, the viewer cannot know for certain if 'Christ' is dead due to some heinous manmade intervention, or whether it was hewn from some dead, manmade matter. It borders on lunacy; *Christ on a Clothesline* is a blasphemous thing.

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[92] Susan Rosenbaum, *Mina Loy's Lobster Boy* (2019) <https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/4d955018a26b1e800a1f90d8afedac71/lobster-boy/index.html> [Accessed 9 October 2019].
[93] Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 5.
[94] Thea Lenarduzzi, *The Many Faces of Mina Loy* (2011) <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/the-many-faces-of-mina-loy/> [Accessed 9 October 2019].
[95] Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 5.

Furthermore, when interacting with Loy's thingly compositions, the reader is subjected to a corresponding experience. The phonetic non-rhythm and non-rhyme of the line, its erratic spatial notations and eccentric linguistic formulations, all reject syntactic order – manifesting all that is excessive in poetry. There is, after all, 'Something taking shape / Something that has a new name' forming within literary and artistic modernism: a thingly poetics.[96] Loy's 'Time-Bomb' (1945), for example, is a composition apprehended in the process of detonation, paralysing the reader with a disturbance of philological matter, blowing its punctuational debris (a comma, an end stop) across the poetic line:

> The present moment
> is an explosion ,
> a scission
> of past and future[97]

Here, there are vacuities in the composition which detach, however momentarily, language and punctuation from the contextualising phrase. The anti-structure of Loy's composition necessitates an active methodology of reading, for it explodes the phrase, which must be recovered by the reader in the restorative process of interpretation. Loy's spatial notations, however, thwart this act of restoration; though the composition bears a formal resemblance to poetry, it violates readerly expectation. Because punctuation does not occur at regular intervals, one phrase transverses or interposes another in a scrupulous collage of linguistic matter. The reader cannot know for certain where one phrase concludes and other commences. Though 'Time-Bomb' comes to the reader in coherent stanzas, an asymmetrical sequence of words expedites the formation of grammatically absurd combinations– 'moment / explosion / scission' or 'The present / is an explosion' – compelling the reader to acknowledge the volatility of language. In the two surviving drafts of 'Time Bomb,' Loy appears to explode and implode the composition once again, experimenting with its typographical dimensions; she drafts the manuscript in uppercase letters, as if the text had been cut, violently, into the whiteness of the page, and then, in lowercase, save for the first letter of each line, to maintain a semblance of proper grammar and formal syntax that is later overthrown by the process of reading.[98] Here, Loy experiments with its spatial notations until the last, unimaginable form is manifested – *until* the composition revels in excess. Above all, 'Time-Bomb' is a composition

[96] Loy, 'Songs to Joannes', p. 57.
[97] Loy, 'Time-Bomb', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, p. 123.
[98] Loy, 'Time Bomb' (n.d.), Box 5, Folder 125, YCAL MSS 6, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

which compels us to radically reconceive the communicative function of language, and its role in the process of ontological classification. For Loy, the segmental components of this thing we name language must be dismantled – they must be made to reassemble in disparate combinations, challenging the reader to relive their earliest requisitions of the found material that is language in childhood, when the shapes and sounds of letters were strange, their order negotiable, things with infinite possibility.

In ‘Feminist Manifesto,’ Loy further complicates the reader’s encounter with this thing that is the literary text – this thing that is language – through the dynamic, disruptive potential of typographical distortion:

Figure 3: Loy, 'Feminist Manifesto', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, p. 153.

Here, Loy’s distorted typography disturbs the physical and psychological margins of the literary composition as we know it (see Figure 3), demanding an active reappraisal of the methods by which we classify the material world and all its excessive things. Loy’s ‘Feminist Manifesto’ antagonises the reader: it overwhelms the automatic process of ontological

classification, revelling in the transformative potential of a language that rejects the propriety of grammar – of the proper noun. As Mary Ann Caws contends, the manifesto, in particular, is a maddening form, 'an act of *démesure*, going past what is thought of as proper, sane, and literary. Its outreach demands an extravagant self-assurance.'[99] The hulking, underscored phrases of Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto' – too big for the text – will not simply lie, contentedly, in the whiteness of the page. They aggravate oppositions. They brawl and shout, compelling the reader to return, to regurgitate, to recite 'Inadequate,' 'Women,' 'Wrench,' 'Reform,' 'Absolute Demolition' over and above all other phrases, for the composition rejects the comfort of the margin and the reader cannot cohesively apprehend such material from left-to-right. After all, 'At the peak of its performance,' the manifesto's 'form creates its meaning.'[100] Formally, Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto' commands the 'you' that is the reader to read astern, to read against the linear circuitry of linguistic communication. It charges the reader, by example, to reject automatic cognition, for the manifesto should not be reprehensible for 'scratching on the surface of the rubbish heap of tradition' – the 'Reform' it desires must formally operate within its composition if the reader is to apprehend its radical condemnation of the binary oppositions which have, for so long, classified human and nonhuman matter. It appropriates and overwhelms literary genre; the justified margins, the analogous sentences of the prose-text cannot hold, for a disturbance must occur within our language, that is, the acquired matter through which we philosophise, if we are to appraise the material world anew. Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto' borders on thinghood – aesthetically unconceivable, it functions to disorder the socially, politically, and historically-governed functions of these things we name literary compositions, female subjects, nonhuman objects. It overwhelms those aged techniques and archaic traditions that would compromise its thinghood, its radical rejection of the proper noun. As Kreymborg asserts, 'Had a man written these poems, the town might have viewed them with comparative comfort. But a woman wrote them, a woman who dressed like a lady and painted charming lampshades.'[101] In Loy's compositions, there is an 'Absolute Demolition' of those binary oppositions which classify poetry and prose, one that is augmented by an 'Absolute Demolition' of the binary oppositions which classify sex and gender. Readerly comfort is, therefore, of little consequence to Loy's compositions, for they are revolutionary things which venerate the physical and psychological plurality of matter.

[99] Mary Ann Caws, 'The Poetics of the Manifesto: Nowness and Newness', *Manifesto: A Century of Isms,* ed. by Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), pp. xix – xxxii (p. xx).
[100] Caws, 'The Poetics of the Manifesto', p. xx.
[101] Kreymborg, *Our Singing Strength*, pp. 488 – 489.

It is evident, then, that Loy's thingly poetics are manifested in her creative appropriation and renovation of found material – rendering the unimaginable, unpalatable, unnameable dimensions of the overloaded circuit, the womanly doll, the half-rotten orange, the explosion, the manifesto, in the whiteness of the page. In literary modernism, this thing we name a poem must, above all else, physically and psychologically defamiliarize the reader with the communicative function of language, which orders involuntary cognition. This process is exemplified in Loy's compositions, for they render obsolete the reader's ability to classify matter; her use of abjection denounces and revolutionises the propriety of proper nouns, forms, syntax, and connotations. Whether they are hewn from cardboard, oil paint, rags, acetate, found objects, electricity, papier maché, or language, the volatile materialities of Loy's things command the active viewer or reader to assemble – reassemble – their segmental components in disparate combinations, if they are to mean anything at all. Loy's things thus participate in an active severance of the obsolescent, arbitrary connections between forms and functions – annihilating the socially, politically, or historically-governed praxes regarding what an object is or does, what a woman is or does, what a text is or does. Through this operation, Loy's things offer a vigorous reappraisal of the literary composition as we know it – its habitual spatial notations, typographical dimensions, punctuation, and grammatical order – confronting us with the physical and psychological potentiality of her thingly poetics. Here, Loy's things stimulate new investigations into the cerebral activity of the modernist composition: how, after all, might modernist poets anticipate the modern study of neuroscience in their radical literary experiments, corroborating the plasticity of people, language, and objects to excite transformations in the chemistry of the text?

THE BRAIN IS A PLASTIC THING: GERTRUDE STEIN AND THE BARONESS ELSA VON FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN'S NEUROPLASTIC EXPERIMENTS

By January 1902, Gertrude Stein had failed her final exams as a medical student at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland.[1] Her anatomy professor, Dr Franklin Paine Mall, offered her a second chance to graduate on the condition that she would successfully complete an anatomical model of an embryonic human mid-brain.[2] Throughout Autumn 1902, Stein consequently laboured over the model of what 'we would today call a late-term foetus or infant' midbrain, producing sixty-three drawings and approximately twenty-five pages of text.[3] When she submitted her portfolio for approval, however, Dr Mall – described by his colleagues as 'the greatest living anatomist at the time' – was baffled by the thing with which he was confronted. Following days of introspection, Dr Mall consulted Florence Rena Sabin, who graduated one year ahead of Stein by completing a similar assignment; offering Stein's model to Dr Sabin for assessment, he commented, '"Either I am crazy or Miss Stein is. Will you see what you can make out of her work?"'[4] Stein's midbrain was subsequently consigned to the refuse bin. In 'Strange Anatomy: Gertrude Stein and the Avant-Garde Embryo', Lynn M. Morgan considers what Stein had done to trigger such a powerful retort from her professors:

> Stein had twisted the brain stem before the soft brain was fixed. Imagine, for a moment, what this entailed. Someone, likely Stein herself, had been sent to the cold storage room where Mall was building a collection of hundreds of late-term foetal and infant cadavers for use by the medical students. Someone would have had to cut open the skull and remove the small brain, which if it were fresh would have been surprisingly malleable, the consistency of soft butter. Perhaps someone shuddered. Perhaps someone squeezed the delicate brain or dropped it on the floor. (Stein was, by all accounts, notoriously clumsy.) By the time someone fixed the brain in a solution of formalin, it had been mangled, but the error went unnoticed. Someone cut the distorted brain into sections and painstakingly built a model that turned out to be nonsensical and wrong.[5]

Though Stein's garbled, enigmatic midbrain was failed by her professors – and therefore lost

[1] Steven Meyer offers a comprehensive account of Stein's medical training in *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001). Lynn M. Morgan additionally offers insight into Stein's time at Johns Hopkins University through Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 'The Embryography of Alice B. Toklas', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 50.1 (2008), pp. 304 – 325.
[2] Lynn M. Morgan, 'Strange Anatomy: Gertrude Stein and the Avant-Garde Embryo', *Hypatia*, Vol. 21.1 (2009), pp. 16 – 34 (p. 18).
[3] Morgan, 'Strange Anatomy', p. 19.
[4] Edmund Wilson, *Upstate: Records and Recollections of Northern New York* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), p. 63.
[5] Morgan, 'Strange Anatomy', p. 20.

to history – such visceral, tactile encounters with this miniaturised specimen of the human brain must have triggered something in Stein's own cerebrum. Perhaps Stein's model was not designed to be the textbook specimen that her professors desired, but something else altogether – something with a new appellation and function, something that she would go on to explore in her literary experiments. As Lewellys Franklin Barker, another of Stein's scientific mentors, considers, 'I have often wondered if my attempts to teach her the intricacies of the medulla oblongata had anything to do with the development of the strange literary forms with which she was later to perplex the world.'[6] Though Stein's subsequent departure from Johns Hopkins Medical School is often presented as her departure from the scientific community, Stephen Meyer argues that Stein's poetic compositions are theoretically motivated by her studies in human brain anatomy.[7] For Meyer, Stein ultimately 'reconfigured science *as* writing and performed scientific experiments *in* writing.'[8]

Building on Meyer's critical study of Stein's writing as science, this chapter considers the strange and contorted anatomy of Stein's midbrain as model for her literary experiments.[9] I explicate the peculiar methodologies of Stein's compositions through contemporary studies in brain plasticity or 'neuroplasticity', which describes the 'ability of the nervous system to form and reorganise connections and pathways, as during development and learning or following injury', or the brain's capacity to modify its physical and psychical structure via lived experience.[10] Despite the abundance of scholarly material on Stein's life and work, this is the first neuroplastic reading of *Tender Buttons* (1914), and I propose that it offers a way of conceptualising the plasticity of Stein's seminal publication as that which synthesises, modulates, and repairs meaning through the operation of reading.

Following my analysis of Stein's neuroplastic experiments, this chapter turns to those conducted by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. By juxtaposing their outlandish methodologies, I consider the radical literary potential of the three forms of plasticity (developmental plasticity, modulational plasticity, and reparative plasticity) examined by Catherine Malabou in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2004) and *Plasticity at the Dusk*

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[6] Lewellys Franklin Barker, *Time and the Physician* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), p. 60.
[7] Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, pp. xi – xxiii.
[8] Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, p. xxi. For further discussion of Stein's writing as science, see Jonah Lehrer's 'Gertrude Stein: The Structure of Language' in *Proust was a Neuroscientist* (New York: Canongate Books, 2007), pp. 144 – 167. Lehrer details an experiment Stein conducted regarding automatic writing, the result of which was published in the May 1898 edition of the *Psychological Review*.
[9] Morgan, 'Strange Anatomy', p. 19; Barker, *Time and the Physician*, p. 60.
[10] Oxford English Dictionary, *Neuroplasticity* (2019) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/50933187?redirectedFrom=neuroplasticity#eid> [Accessed 26 November 2019].

of Writing (2004).[11] A pioneer of New York Dada, the Baroness erected trash sculptures – her *Cathedral* (1918) is a wood fragment, and *God* (1917) is a rusty plumbing trap on a mitre box. She was frequently arrested for public indecency, composing humorous sound poems which she would perform to the streets, parading half-naked around Greenwich Village in costumes hewn from found or stolen bric-a-brac which would revolutionise the art world.[12] For Amelia Jones, the Baroness 'functioned as a site of violent projections' and 'was thus a figure who pointed to the limits of avant-gardism' – resisting any semblance of social etiquette, rejecting those sexual and gendered binaries of the early twentieth-century.[13] In 1922, Jane Heap, editor of *The Little Review*, similarly argued that the Baroness is 'the only one living anywhere who dresses Dada, loves Dada, lives Dada.'[14] Despite her notoriety, however, the Baroness is notably absent from the modernist canon; if she is remembered at all, it is only in cameo. Little scholarly material exists on the eccentric Baroness, with the exception of Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo's *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*, which reacquainted the literary world with her experimental compositions in 2011. As Linda Lappin asserts,

> the Baroness flits (and at times streaks naked) through the memoirs, correspondence, and iconography of many artists and writers of the period: Man Ray, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Marcel Duchamp, Berenice Abbot, Djuna Barnes. Dismissed for decades as a lunatic, she has now been recognized as America's first Dada artist.[15]

We are positioned, then, at the brink of a modern renaissance for the Baroness and her literary experiments, which were so far beyond the understanding of her contemporaries that they could not be sufficiently appreciated for all that they were and continue to be: empirical studies into the peripheral limits of plastic cognitive function and the grammatically coded, found material that is communicative language.

Rather than aiming to suggest that it is possible to reduce literature to simple matter of brain chemistry, my analyses of Stein and the Baroness' experiments build on Nidesh Lawtoo's study of neuroplasticity in novels of Joseph Conrad; according to Lawtoo, 'the neurosciences

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[11] Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans by. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. by Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
[12] Linda Lappin, 'Dada Queen in the Bad Boys' Club: Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven', *Southwest Review*, Vol. 89. 2 (2004), pp. 307-319 (p. 309).
[13] Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neuraesthenic History of New York Dada* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), p. 8.
[14] Jane Heap, 'Dada', *The Little Review*, ed. by Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, Vol. 8.2 (1922), p. 46.
[15] Lappin, 'Dada Queen in the Bad Boys' Club', p. 308.

paradoxically confirm a point theorists in the humanities have been making all along: they emphasize the dominant role played by culture, history, and language – not nature – in the formation, deformation, and transformation of subjectivity.'[16]After all, with the modern discovery of neuroplasticity, we must acknowledge that if our brains are physically and psychologically modified in response to sensory encounters with other people, language, and objects, then who or what we read must modulate our experiences and assumptions regarding literary compositions. In this chapter, I argue that the garbled, eccentric, and critically disdained works of Gertrude Stein and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven formally anticipate the concept of neuroplasticity, articulating the development and reparation of the neuronal pathways accountable for the identification of nonhuman objects in the material world via experimental language techniques including fragmentation, repetition, and spatial notation. I contend that the literary experiments of Stein and the Baroness produce a radical defamiliarization of nonhuman objects, language, and genre, manifesting the defining condition of the plastic brain, that is, what Malabou identifies as 'the completeness of form and the possibility of its disintegration.'[17] This study culminates with the affirmation that this plasticity of form may actuate, within our literary compositions, the disruptive potential to signify the material world in all its plurality – synthesising, exciting, modulating, repairing, and executing the synaptic connections between people, language, and things.

MODULATIONAL AND REPARATIVE PLASTICITY: GERTRUDE STEIN AND THE NEW LANGUAGE OF OBJECTS

For Omri Moses, Stein is fascinated by the 'material that other novelists discard' – monotony, habit, reiteration, and all that is, or could be, considered ordinary.[18] Her *Tender Buttons* picks at little morsels of food and all manner of stuff sitting on the periphery of the domestic home: seltzer bottles, pastry, umbrellas, dresses, hats, and the stuffing of a cushion are brought to the head of a house where nobody is cooking or cleaning – a house with no obvious occupants at all, save an anonymous human subject, who slips in and out of the fragments, a textual apparition.[19] *Tender Buttons* is split into three sections – 'Objects,' 'Food,' and 'Rooms' – which, in her original carnets and materials for *Tender Buttons*, archived at The Beinecke Rare

[16] Nidesh Lawtoo, 'Conrad's Neuroplasticity', *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 23 (2016), pp. 771 – 788 (p. 771).
[17] Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, p. 2.
[18] Omri Moses, 'Lively Habits: Gertrude Stein', *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life* (California: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 117 – 152 (p. 117).
[19] Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: The Corrected Centennial Edition*, ed. by Seth Perlow (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2014).

Book and Manuscript Library, are continually reorganised.[20] Though ruled horizontally, Stein turned her notebooks on their side and composed across lines, rejecting the left margin; as Seth Perlow describes, Stein 'began by writing on each recto page, and when she had thus reached the end of a notebook, she flipped it and worked back to front, writing on the verso pages.'[21] *Tender Buttons* is, therefore, a manuscript in which the order of things is frequently subverted. There is, I propose, a plasticity to Stein's manuscript; it need not matter if 'Food' occurs before or after 'Objects' and 'Rooms', for each section refers, recurs, repairs the other. On returning to a particular segment for close analysis, we find that it has been permanently transformed by our physical and psychological encounters with the others – it is a text that revels in revising the arbitrary connections between things. *Tender Buttons* is a manuscript which borders on lunacy and monotony in equal measure, making the home and all its anxious furniture thingly through its peculiar composition, which does and does not resemble poetry. Jeanette Winterson argues that Stein 'enlarges what is small, reduces what is large, twists and turns her material so that she can misrepresent it' – repeating things, rejecting meaning for the sake of communication, resisting the synaptic connections between proper nouns and nonhuman objects.[22]

For Elisabeth A. Frost, academic scholarship on *Tender Buttons* has historically hinged on biography or reader-response. She contends that such criticism has, to date, either deciphered the text alongside Stein's private life (framing the disjointed, repetitive, nonsense text as a method of concealment for her physical and psychological relationship with her lover, Alice B. Toklas) or delivered some scathing commentary on the arbitrary nature of language and the reader's fruitless desire to 'make sense' or 'solve' the problem of the fragment at hand.[23] This chapter, however, seeks to go beyond such readings with the contention that Malabou's theory of plasticity may offer new ways of interpreting Stein's thingly process of composition. For Rebecca Scherr, Stein's primary objective as a writer is the synthesis of the

[20] Stein, 'Tender Buttons: Manuscript Notebooks and Typescript' (1910 – 1912), Box 74, Folder 1367 – 1369, YCAL MSS 76, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. When drafting *Tender Buttons*, Stein composed in three carnets inscribed 'O' for 'Objects,' 'Fo' for 'Food,' and 'Ro' for 'Rooms' – the carnets are unnumbered, and it is unclear if Stein composed one before another or intended a particular order in which they should be printed. Furthermore, the contents page of the bound typescript for *Tender Buttons* lists 'Food,' 'Rooms,' then 'Objects' as the correct order. In the same typescript, however, the sections are printed in the following order: 'Rooms,' 'Objects,' 'Food'.

[21] Seth Perlow, 'A Note on the Text', *Tender Buttons: The Corrected Centennial Edition*, ed. by Seth Perlow (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014), pp. 88 – 97 (p. 91).

[22] Jeanette Winterson, 'Testimony Against Gertrude Stein', *Art Objects* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp. 45 – 60 (p. 54).

[23] Elisabeth A. Frost, 'Signifyin(g) on Stein: The Revisionist Poetics of Harryette Mullen and Leslie Scalapino' *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 5.3 (1995), n.p.

senses in poetic form, 'questioning, resisting, shifting, experimenting with, and undermining literary and cultural practices.'[24] Similarly, Margueritte S. Murphy, studying the formal likeness of Toklas' cookbooks and Stein's 'Food', reasons that in *Tender Buttons*, Stein is making a new language, and an improved recipe for domesticity.[25] I argue, therefore, that *Tender Buttons* brings about a new language of objects – one that synthesises, modulates, repairs, and terminates the ontological classification of things in the material world. I contend that Stein experiments with the dormant thinglyness of language *and* object simultaneously, appropriating the sense-making function of the plastic brain. In *Tender Buttons*, the domestic object becomes a multisensory playground for neuroplastic operations, and, the brain's potential for (trans)formation after happenstance meetings with people, language, and things.

Plasticity is etymologically derived from the Greek word *plassein* (to mould); for Catherine Malabou, 'it means at once the capacity to receive form […] and the capacity to give form.'[26] The human cerebrum is simultaneously 'formable' and 'formative' – a modifiable, malleable, metamorphosing thing that is partially determined by our genetic code, and partially derived from lived experience.[27] For Hugh J. Silverman, neuroplasticity should therefore be considered 'a kind of "indecidable" between flexibility and rigidity, suppleness and solidity, fixedness and transformability, identity and modifiability, determination and freedom.'[28] It is plasticity, after all, which affords the brain its capacity to repair and reorganise itself when one of its constituent parts is damaged or fails, its ability to regenerate cells after cell death or 'apoptosis', and its dexterity for synaptic modulation, which adapts and strengthens neuronal pathways throughout our lives, when we learn a new word, for example, or a new meaning for an old word. Even familiar processes such as 'thinking, learning, and acting can turn our genes on and off, thus producing our brain anatomy.'[29] As Norman Doidge states, the brain is not, as scientists once believed, 'a glorious machine' with a stable or linear mode of processing stimuli; 'while machines do many extraordinary things, they don't change and grow.'[30] Malabou explicates this potential for transformation with an analogy; she holds that the brain

[24] Rebecca Scherr, 'Tactile Erotics: Gertrude Stein and the Aesthetics of Touch', *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol. 18.3 (2007), pp. 193 – 212 (p. 194).
[25] Margueritte S. Murphy, 'Familiar Strangers: The Household Words of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons'*, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 32. 3 (1991), pp. 383-402.
[26] Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 5.
[27] Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p. 4 – 5.
[28] Hugh J. Silverman, 'Malabou, Plasticity, and the Sculpturing of the Self', *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 36 (2010), pp. 89 – 102 (p. 89).
[29] Norman Doidge, *The Brain that Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. xv.
[30] Doidge, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, p. xiv.

'sculpts' its genetic program during development just as the sculptor chisels the form of a statue from a block of marble. Upon completion, she argues that there can be 'no possible return to the indeterminacy' of the marble's 'starting point' – it is permanently changed.[31] Malabou contends that plasticity must not, therefore, be confounded with elasticity; elastic material can return to its original form following its metamorphosis.

Plasticity triggers irreversible psychological *and* physical changes as the human cerebrum acquires information through lived experience, synthesising, exciting, modifying, and executing neuronal pathways in direct response to material stimuli. Synaptogenesis occurs, followed by synaptoterminus. Plasticity therefore holds the arresting potential to revolutionise the way we encounter nonhuman objects in the world. Every nonhuman object, after all, is always a potential thing. Brain plasticity is simultaneously responsible for our ability to identify, categorise, and amalgamate nonhuman objects with their proper nouns and our ability to defamiliarize nonhuman objects – to render obsolete their aesthetic value or ergonomic function in favour of plurality, excess, abjection, thinglyness. Despite our similarities in genetic and anatomical structure, the brain's capacity for synaptic modulation, apoptosis, and reparation means that no two brains are comprised of identical neuronal pathways due to the exclusivity of our personal histories; without the transformation of these neuronal pathways we would not, after all, be able to learn, remember, or adapt to our surroundings.[32] The ordinary things we encounter on an ordinary day prominently shape the brain's structure as 'links among simultaneously firing neurons are created or strengthened, making their firing together in the future more likely.'[33] Brain plasticity is therefore responsible for our acquisition of language in childhood, how we adopt socially, historically, and politically acceptable behaviours – how we are able to 'learn and remember the relationship between unrelated items' to form associative memories.[34] We need only turn to those complex, synaptic connections between, for example, Gertrude Stein and roastbeef, or between the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and pubic hair, to observe this in action. Silverman argues that 'each of these plasticities demonstrates an understanding of the brain that has a position between determination (rigid, pre-figured, con-figured in advance) and freedom (supple and

[31] Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p. 15
[32] Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p. 5
[33] Dan Siegel, *Interpersonal Neurobiology: Relationships, Health, and the Brain* (2015) <http://www.drdansiegel.com/blog/2015/01/07/brain-insights-and-well-being-2/> [Accessed 4 May 2018].
[34] Wendy A. Suzuki, *Associative Memory and the Hippocampus* (2005) <http://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2005/02/suzuki.aspx> [Accessed 9 January 2018].

transformative)'; the plastic brain simultaneously produces and annihilates form, cultivating and denouncing stasis, revelling in contradiction.[35]

Throughout *Tender Buttons*, there are repetitions, refrains which are duplicated within and between fragments – modulating and repairing what can only be described as the synapses between word, object, and meaning:

> A TABLE.
> A table means does it not my dear it means a whole
> steadiness. It is likely that a change.
> A table means more than a glass even a looking glass is tall.
> A table means necessary places and a revision a revision of a
> little thing it means it does mean that there had been a stand,
> a stand where it did shake.[36]

There is a return to things past, a redefinition or 'revision' of all that we once assumed to know about the object, that is, the table, in a house where nobody is cooking or cleaning. Stein begins her description with that 'steadiness' or stability which has traditionally characterised the table, whose primary resolve is to hold other objects. Next, Stein quantifies the aesthetic value and ergonomic function of the table in relation to another object entirely – 'a glass' or 'looking glass' – manifesting, in the whiteness of the page, those arbitrary comparisons that the plastic brain must produce between objects to recollect or appraise their merit. Here, Stein acknowledges 'a revision a revision' which necessarily occurs in the plastic brain when the human subject physically or psychologically encounters the nameable object in the material world. With this encounter, the human subject acquires knowledge of the object, and after their initial comparison between objects, comes a modification to aid future recognition or evaluation of the object in question. With the repetition of 'it means it does mean' Stein therefore amplifies the human subject's futile desire for 'steadiness' – a stability in meaning – that is never corroborated. Stein consequently defamiliarizes the object – the table – once again, as the composition experiences a synaptic modulation and the table becomes 'a stand, a stand where it did shake.' Here, Stein's composition postulates that objects, the language with which we name objects or assign objects an ergonomic and aesthetic value, are precarious or 'shaking' things.

For Malabou, language has always been plastic. It cultivates and annihilates form, physically and psychologically modifying the human cerebrum in the operations we name

[35] Silverman, 'Malabou, Plasticity, and the Sculpturing of the Self', p. 89.
[36] Stein, 'A Table', *Tender Buttons*, p. 28.

reading or verbal discourse. We experience the material world, after all, through the found matter that is language – proper nouns and adjectives facilitate our ontological classifications, and our sensory encounters with things. Having acquired the basic principles of grammar, we are able to produce eloquent sentences which allow us to describe and communicate our experiences to others – concurrently stable enough to signify according to the dictionary and volatile enough to reject singularity in meaning. When known words appear out of context, our language simply will not mean for the sake of articulation. Just as the plastic brain is simultaneously genetically coded and subject to continuous neuronal transformation, language is simultaneously grammatically coded and subject to continuous formal transformation. Language, too, is modified as we use it; the meaning of a word oscillates, distends, and contracts with its use throughout history. We form new words from old words (neologisms or portmanteaux) in happenstance meetings with unnameable things. What, then, might the plasticity of language and the brain lend the composition that is literary form? Just as Malabou theorises that 'form is plastic' – that 'the nervous system presents the clearest, most striking model of this type of organization' – I propose that literary form may hold a latent potentiality for plasticity, though we are just beginning to know it. *Tender Buttons* is, after all, a manuscript which articulates what Malabou considers 'the completeness of form and the possibility of its disintegration,' in which the brain's capacities for synaptic modulation and repair are manifested via experimental praxes, augmenting the grammatical, referential, communicative function of language.[37]

In some fragments of *Tender Buttons*, modulations are localised, occurring within a phrase. For example, in 'An occasion for a plate, an occasional resource is in buying and how soon does washing enable a selection of the same thing neater.'[38] Here, the words 'occasion' and 'occasional' resemble each other; their alliterations and phonetic ornamentations bear the same texture of fricatives and sibilants; their spelling is near identical, and they occupy a near analogous space on the line, save some 'occasional' extra letters. Their meanings, however, are not analogous. Stein's 'occasion for a plate' might be an 'a particular event' or the time of its occurrence, a 'ceremony or celebration,' a 'conjunction of circumstances favourable or suitable to an end or purpose,' an 'opportunity' or 'something that produces an effect' – the word 'occasion' is endowed with a multiplicity of meanings, dependent on who is reading and how.[39]

[37] Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, p. 1, 7, 2.
[38] Stein, 'A Plate', *Tender Buttons*, p. 17.
[39] Oxford English Dictionary, *Occasion* (2020) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130114?rskey=87hr11&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> [Accessed 19 May 2020].

Meanwhile, Stein's 'occasional resource' might be a resource that appears (or is used) 'irregularly' or 'incidentally' – it is perhaps a resource 'made or adapted for use on a particular or special occasion,' it is perhaps an 'imperfect' or 'incomplete' resource inappropriate for general use.[40] Stein's fragment comprises all and none of these meanings at all. For Joseph LeDoux:

> When someone speaks to you, for example, you decode the sentence meaning of the words (semantics), the grammatical relations between the words (syntax), and your knowledge about the word (pragmatics). You usually are not aware of performing these operations, but simply do them. While you end up consciously knowing what the person said, you don't have conscious access to the processes that allowed you to comprehend the sentence.[41]

Stein's *Tender Buttons* is a composition which renders the plasticity of language (that is, the plastic operations happening in the brain as we interact with language) distinguishable. To read *Tender Buttons* is to negotiate plasticity – to defamiliarize the automatic procedure of reading. Here, the reader (becoming neurotransmitter) is compelled to participate in the formation, excitation, modification, and termination of those neural pathways between word, object, grammar, and meaning which constitute communicative language. *Tender Buttons* is a plastic thing, though we do not yet know it. *Tender Buttons* is a plastic thing, though we are just beginning to know it.

Linda Mizejewski argues that *Tender Buttons* is a rebellion, a mutiny 'against the confinements of definition' in which Stein 'liberates our habitual ways of seeing ordinary objects' – turning 'our eye to what the domestic woman traditionally deals with: household objects, kitchen items, the home.'[42] She does not, however, consider the revolutionary potential of habit in the Steinian home. As Moses recalls, habit, for Stein, 'is not a fixed, rigid, and permanent part of a person' but 'the inner movement of repetition' that 'is the very principle of liveliness' – a habit disrupts the present moment with its recurrence, but 'never repeats in the same way twice.'[43] We are not born with habits, but acquire them through lived experience; they are adaptations, (trans)forming neuronal pathways in our plastic brain. Such habits are anything but stable; like Stein's linguistic repetitions, they manifest differently with each

[40] Oxford English Dictionary, *Occasional* (2020) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130118?redirectedFrom=occasional#eid> [Accessed 19 May 2020].
[41] Joseph LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), p. 11.
[42] Linda Mizejewski, 'Gertrude Stein: The Pattern Moves, the Woman Behind it Shakes', *Women's Studies*, 13 (1986), pp. 33 – 47 (p. 38).
[43] Moses, 'Lively Habits: Gertrude Stein', p. 117.

reiteration; they encompass the possibility of un-happening, of un-doing the theoretical permanency of the human subject and nonhuman object at any given moment. As Moses contends, 'We are regular beings because we accumulate manners and behaviours and because that accumulation has a history that allows us simultaneously to recognise ourselves and depart from ourselves.'[44] It is habit, after all, which affords the plastic brain its capacity to contextualise objects – 'without habits, objects have no way of slotting themselves into place in a form that the body understands' – and repetitions modify those neuronal pathways which connect the object with its proper name, ergonomic function, and aesthetic value.[45]

It is habit which affords us the capacity to act as a resolute subject in a material body, able to identify (with) other people, language, and objects. Our habits, however, modulate and repair existing neuronal pathways; we adapt and acquire knowledge through repetition, which transforms the physical and psychological structure of the cerebrum. For Paul B. Armstrong, 'although the objects we become accustomed to may change with experience, […] the capacity to recognize visual shapes is a fixed, inherited feature of the cortex that is localised in particular areas of the brain' that are specialised for form, motion, colour, and facial recognition.[46] The plastic brain is, therefore, contingent on a paradox of being both genetically-coded *and* open to constant neuronal variation – able to (un)consciously assimilate complex multi-sensory information in a rational, localised manner *and* acquire new behaviours, skills, knowledge, and words in response to stimuli. Though we are made privy to the proper names of Stein's 'Objects' – our plastic brains are able to conjure an image, some contextualising information on 'Eye Glasses' or 'Cake' in the operation of reading – her descriptors contradict all that we once presumed to know or trust about the material world.[47]

Stein's descriptors defamiliarize objects, amending or terminating our habitual discernments, rendering objects uncanny, abject, or thingly via the process of reading. It is through habit, Moses argues, that 'two or more different tendencies enter into conflict, one pattern of expression intersecting or interfering with another, causing sequences of repetition to unravel or veer in a new direction'. Such habits, for Stein, may therefore hold the potential to modify our conceptions of all objects, including the literary composition, by acknowledging the plastic materiality of language.[48] Referencing *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) by

[44] Moses, 'Lively Habits: Gertrude Stein', p. 117.
[45] Moses, 'Lively Habits: Gertrude Stein', p. 124
[46] Paul B. Armstrong, *How Literature Plays with the Brain: The Neuroscience of Reading and Art* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 35 – 36.
[47] Stein, 'Eye Glasses', *Tender Buttons*, p. 22; Stein, 'Cake', *Tender Buttons*, p. 51.
[48] Moses, 'Lively Habits: Gertrude Stein', p. 122.

William James, who mentored Stein as a psychology student at the Harvard Psychological Laboratory, Moses recognises the propensity to develop habits as that which 'involves change and adaptation to change, not repetition in its pure form' – a plastic operation between 'unadaptability (an extreme rigidity that leaves it unfit for new circumstances)' and 'self-dissolution (excessively rapid change)'.[49] Plasticity is not the absence of form, but the possibility of its transformation. The linguistic habits of Stein's *Tender Buttons* modify its physical and psychological structure, thereby modulating our ability to identify, name, and ontologically classify nonhuman objects, and these things we name literary compositions.

Stein's linguistic habits repeat, facilitating synaptic modulation throughout the composition as neuronal pathways between fragments are synthesised, repaired, and terminated. Between 'Glazed Glitter' and 'Careless Water' there is an active synaptic junction. In 'Glazed Glitter,' 'There can be breakages in Japanese.'[50] Then, in 'Careless Water,' a modification of the habit: 'No cup is broken in more places and mended, that is to say a plate is broken and mending does do that it shows that culture is Japanese.'[51] *Tender Buttons* is a composition with a mind – a memory – of its own, and its readers must act as neurotransmitters, relaying and maintaining significations between parts. Upon delivery, the reader or neurotransmitter expediates a transformation in the composition: linguistic connections are formed, strengthened, or, as in the juncture between 'Glazed Glitter' and 'Careless Water', permanently altered. Across both fragments, Stein refers to the ancient Japanese art of *Kintsugi* (also known as *Kintsukuroi*), which is a 'method for repairing broken ceramics with a special lacquer mixed with gold, silver, or platinum.'[52] It is, therefore, apt that a reparative plasticity happens between them in the operation of reading. Whilst 'Glazed Glitter' declares that there 'can be breakages in Japanese,' 'Careless Water' adds lacquer to the broken statement, mending the 'cup' – the composition – through repetition; there can be no return to the original form. Stein engages the reader, as neurotransmitter, to enable reparations in *Tender Buttons*, for there could be no variation without their activity. Stein engages the reader, as neurotransmitter, in the plastic materiality of the literary composition, that is, the plasticity of the material world.

[49] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890); Moses, 'Lively Habits: Gertrude Stein', p. 124.
[50] Stein, 'Glazed Glitter', *Tender Buttons*, p. 11.
[51] Stein 'Careless Water', *Tender Buttons*, p. 23.
[52] Collins Dictionary, *Kintsugi* (2017) <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/19460/Kintsugi> [Accessed 07 November 2018].

In *Lectures in America* (1935), Stein reasons, 'When I was working with William James I learned one thing, that science is continuously busy with the complete description of something, with ultimately the complete description of anything, with ultimately the complete description of everything."[53] In her draft materials, Stein even subtitles one of the three sections for *Tender Buttons*, 'Studies in Description' – manifesting, once more, the philosophical connection between her scientific training and literary experiments.[54] In *Tender Buttons*, Stein, who made a science of literary composition, therefore formulates a new language of objects, manifesting complete descriptions of matter in all its plasticity. For Stein, the description of the object must be amended in the operation of reading if it is to communicate its potential for transformation, the arbitrary constitution of ontological classification. *Tender Buttons* is, therefore, a composition which physically and psychologically modulates as we are reading – assimilating phonetic and descriptive repetitions which facilitate spontaneous connections between parts, compelling us to acknowledge the unbearable likeness of matter – departing from the original form to produce modifications in the meaning of things. Stein is occupied with the complete description of those plastic neurological progressions which occur in the human cerebrum when we encounter nonhuman objects in the material world. *Tender Buttons* is therefore a plastic composition, with a mind – a memory – of its own, remembering and reacting to sensory interactions with nonhuman objects in the material world, to the referentiality of this thing we name language. As readers or neurotransmitters, we are made privy to only those transitory significations of matter which enable us to apprehend reparations in the composition. *Tender Buttons* articulates a maddening glossolalia, for there is always more to the plastic composition than the material we are reading. It is (un)stable enough for us to distinguish its habitual phonetic and descriptive repetitions, to facilitate its obsessive modifications; Stein's repetitions are habits which modulate and repair our automatic sensory comprehensions regarding the nonhuman object, for they never appear in the same condition twice.

For Scherr, 'poetic language itself becomes an object that Stein touches, strokes, and explores with her hands, and in following the dips and curves of both the solid objects she names in the titles and language itself.'[55] She argues that *Tender Buttons* vigorously subverts the traditional hierarchy of the senses, in which sight and hearing are most often privileged,

[53] Stein, *Lectures in America* (Massachusetts: Little, Brown, and Co., 1957), p. 156.
[54] Stein, 'Food Studies in Description' (n.d.), Box 74, Folder 1366, YCAL MSS 76, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[55] Scherr, 'Tactile Erotics', p. 196.

making touch, which is habitually categorised as a marginal sense, aligned with all that is feminine or other, the principal operation by which the speaker encounters the object.[56] Just as Stein's titles are often solid objects with the capacity to touch or be touched ('Cucumber,' 'A Red Hat,' 'Book,' 'A New Cup and Saucer') textures are manifested through her language, which strives to adjourn, however momentarily, the plastic brain's capacity to refer via an omittance of the contextualising forces that are visual and sonic description.[57] In 'Objects,' the anonymous speaker therefore appears to interact with the thing at hand in the absence of sight, 'The kind of show is made by squeezing' – 'Within, within the cut and slender joint alone, with sudden equals and no more than three, two in the center make two one side.'[58] Reading Renu Bora, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that 'to perceive texture is always, immediately, and de facto to be immersed in a field of active narrative hypothesizing, testing, and reunderstanding of how physical properties act and are acted upon over time.'[59] She concludes, 'Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?'[60] Stein's 'Objects' condemns reader and speaker alike to conjecture; neither is made privy to the proper name of the object, what it does, what it looks, smells, or sounds like. This is the age-old guessing game in which the anxious child must plunge their hand 'within, within' the small, dark opening in a box and, 'squeezing,' apprehend the thing obscured.[61] To surmise its identity in the absence of visual or sonic descriptors, we are left only with the textural perceptions of Stein's language, which must become the object. Stein's composition is a dense thing with crudely squared, fricative edges, abruptly spliced with commas – a sharp and cutting plosive. In the assemblage, there is a semblance of an asymmetrical or geometric shape. Part-metal? Part-wood? Part-concrete? Stein's descriptors grant us the ability us to perceive the pure potentiality of the object, rendering obsolete our traditional schemes of knowing.

According to Moses, 'If one subtracts from the perception of an object the habit that allows the object to be recognised and therefore positioned in a context, one is left only with fugitive sensations and potentialities that overwhelm the body's capacity to act.'[62] In the absence of visual or sonic descriptors, we are left with unidentifiable, unpalatable,

[56] Scherr, 'Tactile Erotics', p. 195.
[57] Stein, 'Cucumber', *Tender Buttons*, p. 55; Stein, 'A Red Hat', *Tender Buttons*, p. 19; Stein, 'Book', *Tender Buttons*, p. 30; Stein, 'A New Cup and Saucer', *Tender Buttons*, p. 22.
[58] Stein, 'Objects', *Tender Buttons*, p. 22.
[59] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 13.
[60] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 13.
[61] Stein, 'Objects', p. 22.
[62] Moses, 'Lively Habits', p. 134.

unimaginable, unnameable things which radically denounce the ontological classifications of matter – we cannot name an object without first naming another, then, another. In arresting sight and sound, Stein therefore circumvents plastic referentiality, that is, our ability to contextualise objects, to distinguish, in an instant, its proper name, ergonomic function, and aesthetic value. In reading 'Objects,' we therefore touch the possibility of the unnameable thing – 'squeezing' through the small, dark opening in the box that the composition provides, modulating and repairing our physical and psychological comprehensions of the material world. Here, the textural perceptions of Stein's *Tender Buttons* manifest the thing's capacity to overwhelm – exciting the radical potential of matter once it has been liberated from automatic cognition. However, even as we are deprived of the ability to see or hear, Stein acknowledges that we are powerless to suspend the plasticity of our brains for long. We seek to contextualise and refer – to manufacture significations between things – however arbitrary the pursuit.

L. T. Fitz therefore associates Stein's modality of composition with the cubist paintings of Pablo Picasso:

> We have said that Stein sees Picasso as attempting to express only what is really seen by the eye and not what is interpreted by memory. Stein herself presents only those aspects of a nonhuman object or a character which present themselves to our five senses.[63]

Here, Fitz is referring to the plastic brain's capacity to anticipate the other side of the object; when sight fails us, when our ability to hear, touch, smell, or taste fails us, the plastic brain anticipates, associating the object at hand with some connected, retained memory. When we encounter an apple in a bowl, for example, we assume that the other side is round simply because this is what we have learnt from turning over other apples. We interact with Stein's experiment in arresting the plastic brain's ability to contextualise matter through 'Objects' – she obstructs those senses which dominate automatic cognition so that we might begin to experience the material world anew.

Fitz' paper centres on three similarities between Stein and Picasso's methods: '(1) a cubist approach; (2) a style which concentrates on what is seen rather than what is remembered; and (3) a calligraphic or nonsymbolic concept of language.'[64] What, however, is a cubist approach to language? The cubist portrait does away with 'the illusion of depth' and instead, shatters its object, situating its form on one two-dimensional 'plane' – it is non-linear and non-

[63] L. T. Fitz, 'Gertrude Stein and Picasso: The Language of Surfaces', *American Literature*, Vol. 45.2 (1973), pp. 228 – 237 (p. 232).
[64] Fitz, 'Gertrude Stein and Picasso', p. 230.

representational.[65] Just as the cubist portrait does away with the focal point, Stein does away with spatial notation, metre, and rhyme; *Tender Buttons* is a manuscript composed in crude squares of typographical matter, which does and does not simply communicate. Stein's 'Objects,' 'Food,' and 'Rooms' occupy ambiguous, two-dimensional, white 'planes' in which the reader is compelled to labour, however arbitrarily, to contextualise the pluripotent matter they describe – they are non-linear and non-representational. *Tender Buttons*, however, overwhelms our aptitude for object recognition, that is, our hypothetical mastery over the material world; Stein's compositions accost readers with the plasticity of other people, language, the order of things, poems. Perhaps it is the cubist technique of Stein's *Tender Buttons* that has continually perplexed readers and critics. Perhaps it is the cubist technique of Stein's *Tender Buttons* that prevents us, quite extraordinarily, from realising this desire; our plastic brains synthesise, repair, contextualise, but *Tender Buttons* resists. We assign it connotation: '*Tender Buttons* is a series of cubist portraits' or '*Tender Buttons* is a semi-autobiographical text on Stein's physical and psychological relationship with her female lover,' but *Tender Buttons* modulates, revelling in its plasticity.

In her 1913 poem, 'Sacred Emily,' Stein famously pens, 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose' – a line which would become a refrain throughout her work, variations of it appearing in *Operas and Plays*, *The World is Round*, *Alphabets and Birthdays*, *Stanzas in Meditation*, *Lectures in America*, *As Fine as Melanctha*, *Bee Time Vine*, and, finally, *Four in America*.[66] It asserts the materiality of language on the reader; the name of an object *is* an object *is* the name of an object. We are (perhaps justly) suspicious of its certainty – it provokes contradiction, anxiety. Here, Stein compels her readers to interrogate the functionality of language; as she contends in *Lectures in America*, 'Nouns are the name of anything and anything is named [...] but do they go on just using the name until perhaps they do not know what the name is or if they do know what the name is do they not care about what the name is.'[67] For Stein, those neuronal pathways which allow us to recognise, remember, and repeat the structures of language are so often stimulated that they have become routine. Stein's 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose' therefore confronts readers, once more, with the volatility of a language which directs cognition, which has transformed the physical and psychological constitution of the human cerebrum, which has rendered proper nouns and formal syntax obsolete, manipulating

[65] Tate Britain, *Cubism* (2018) <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/cubism> [Accessed 09 November 2018].
[66] University of Pennsylvania, *Stein's Rose* (2017) <http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Stein-Gertrude_Rose-is-a-rose.html> [Accessed 13 November 2018].
[67] Stein, *Lectures in America*, pp. 325 – 326.

language into becoming meaningless. It compels us to read, read again. Stein's experiment momentarily apprehends the communicative function of language, that is, the referentiality of the plastic brain. On close reading, however, the reader may begin to perceive those invisible, embedded remains of punctuation in the clause; perhaps it is not 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose' but '*Rose is a rose? Is a rose? Is a rose?*' What is, after all rose-like about the rose? Does a rose exist, outside of the found material that is language? How has the name, rose, come to signify the object, rose, so completely? If a rose is not a rose by any other name, a rose is a rose by its name. Despite Stein's overwhelming desire to do away with meaning, there are meanings in her description. Our language is a plastic thing, though we do not yet know it. Our language is a plastic thing, though we are just beginning to know it. As Joseph Lehrer explains, 'Stein's experimental failure, her inability to make prose entirely meaningless, was her greatest achievement. Although she aimed for obscurity, her art still resonates. Why? Because the structure of language – a structure that her words expose – is part of the structure of the brain.'[68] In making meaning in Stein's 'failed' literary experiments, perhaps readers have been supporting what Stein confirmed about the referentiality of language, about the structure of the human cerebrum, all along, quite unwittingly – that our plastic brains *must* make meaning in literary compositions, that there *must* be synaptic junctions between Stein's phrases.

DEVELOPMENTAL PLASTICITY: THE BARONESS ELSA VON FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN, SPATIAL NOTATION AND PORTMANTEU

If there are synaptic junctions between Stein's words, words *are* the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's synaptic junctions. We do not know the function or form of those neuronal pathways in which her synapse-words participate, but there must be a logic to them, for her compositions revel in the manifestation of plastic operations – synthesising, modulating, repairing, terminating associations between word, object, and meaning in response to stimuli in the material world. For Irene Gammel, the Baroness enjoyed a dynamic, artistic connection with ordinary objects, adorning herself with an eclectic wardrobe of assemblage and ready-made accessories – 'a bra made of tomato cans, celluloid curtain rings covering her arms as bracelets, a blinking battery taillight on the bustle of her dress' are but a small assortment of her fashions.[69] Just as she transforms the use-value of the common object in her art, the

[68] Lehrer, *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, p. 167.
[69] Irene Gammel, 'She Strips Naked: The Poetry of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven', *The Literary Review*, Vol. 46.3 (2003), pp. 468 – 472 (p. 486).

Baroness' poetry overturns the boundary between what has traditionally been considered 'poetry' and 'trash'. Certainly, her eclectic poetics are not the sort to be measured in metrics or consort with some ancient, pre-meditated form. For Gammel, the Baroness' poetry 'slashed the English syntax, dispensed with sentences, and used word columns for onomatopoeic sound effects and flexible meaning' – dealing a 'death blow to the old, comatose language to create a new chemistry' between word, sound, construction, and meaning.[70] Like Stein, the Baroness sought to radically overwhelm the mundanity of ordinary, grammatical, communicative language. The Baroness' experimental praxes, however, often transcended the literary composition; her *Enduring Ornament* (1913), her famous birdcage hat (with live bird), and her starring role in the 1921 film by Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp: *Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Shaves her Pubic Hair* are all strategically devised to render ordinary matter strange, abject, thingly. It is perhaps due to her excessive, interruptive methodologies that the Baroness was ultimately censored from mainstream magazines, and with time, *The Little Review*, which had previously championed her compositions alongside those of James Joyce.[71] Though Lapin contends that the Baroness' work demands a readership for its 'high humour and plastic approach to language,' she does not grant any further attention to the revolutionary plasticity of her compositions.[72] In light of this, I consider the Baroness' compositions as rigorous experiments in developmental plasticity – articulating the slippery continuum between 'the completeness of form and the possibility of its disintegration' which organises the human cerebrum.[73]

For Gammel and Zelazo, the Baroness' compositions are 'multisensual' – 'not simply visually, acoustically, and orally charged, but also as kinaesthetic and tactile, and deeply aromatic' – things which compel the 'reader, listener, viewer [to] sense as she does, and act her will.'[74] Though Gammel and Zelazo are principally referring to the multisensuality of the Baroness' sound poetry, it must be acknowledged that their conclusions are similarly apposite for her printed manuscripts, in which phrases are abstracted from the comfort of the left margin, and confounded with rough diagrams and faux mathematical equations. They manifest the latent plurality of people, language, objects, stimulating compulsive repetitions of repetitions, which modify themselves in the operation of reading. They are messy, loud, outlandish

[70] Gammel, 'She Strips Naked', p. 469.
[71] Gammel, 'She Strips Naked', p. 470.
[72] Lappin, 'Dada Queen in the Bad Boys' Club', p. 313.
[73] Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, p. 2.
[74] Gammel and Zelazo, 'Harpsichords Metallic Howl–: The Baroness Else von Freytag-Loringhoven's Sound Poetry', *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 18.2 (2011), pp. 255 – 271 (p. 261).

compositions, penned in her notorious sharp-edged, all-caps scrawl, which herald the radical potential of all that is unpalatable, all that is unnameable. I argue that the Baroness' compositions revel in excess, coercing readers to negotiate plasticity – exciting those arbitrary connections between multi-sensory stimuli in the material world. For Julie Godspeed-Chadwick, the Baroness was 'so far ahead of her time that her performances could not register as anything other than grotesque' – she is 'an abject subject due to her excesses' – we experience a primitive anxiety, a repugnance, a queasiness, during physical and psychological interactions with radical matter, which disrupts the ontological classification of things.[75] I contend that the Baroness' rigorous appropriations of portmanteaux, typography, echolalia, and spatial notation are plastic, synthesising, modulating, repairing, and terminating our habituative apperceptions of the literary composition. The Baroness' compositions, after all, actuate a fundamental criterion of plasticity: plasticity is not the absence of form, but the possibility of its transformation.

The Baroness' 'Subjoyride' (1919) is a composition occupied with the materiality of our language, and the plastic method of its acquisition and amendment; as Lappin explains, 'Impressed with the advertising slogans designed to publicize the new consumer products of the twenties, Elsa created a new genre of poetry […] pieced together from scraps of advertising language.'[76] For Lappin, the Baroness' experiments culminate in 'ready-made poems' – manufactured from temporal images of commodified objects, detached from their contexts, and slogans adapted from those popular billboard advertisements circulating around New York City.[77] Arranging her found material into stanzas, the Baroness fabricates a product which resembles this thing we name a poem:

> Wake up your passengers —
> Large and small — to ride
> On pins — dirty erasers and
> Knifes
> These three graces operate slot
> for 5 cents.
> Don't envy Aunt Jemima's
> Self raising crackerjack
> Laxative knitted chemise
> With that chocolaty

[75] Julie Godspeed-Chadwick, 'Reconsidering the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Kay Boyle: Feminist Aesthetics and Modernism', *Feminist Formulations*, Vol. 28.2 (2016), pp. 51 – 72 (p. 52).
[76] Lappin, 'Dada Queen in the Bad Boys' Club', p. 310.
[77] Lappin, 'Dada Queen in the Bad Boys' Club', p. 310.

Taste — use pickles in pattern
Follow green lyons.[78]

With its appropriation of 'Aunt Jemima,' the composition actuates neuroplastic function – the human cerebrum's facility to assimilate multi-sensory stimuli in the material word with previously retained experiences, spontaneously collating past and present encounters with things to form cohesive apperceptions. For the Baroness, twentieth-century commodity culture is so pervasive that slogans, advertisements, and products may overwhelm the human subject's cognitions as they encounter other people, language, and objects in the milieu. Because we continually interact with brands or branding, those neural pathways associated with saleable goods are repeatedly stimulated concurrently with others, and 'when two neurons fire at the same time repeatedly (or when one fires, causing another to fire), chemical changes occur in both, so that the two tend to connect more strongly.'[79] Subsequently, when one neuron is excited, the other is concurrently. Associative memory is established and retained, however arbitrarily. As Kimberly Lamm asserts, 'by the time the Baroness wrote this poem in 1919, 'Aunt Jemima' and 'Crackerjack' had become ubiquitous as products and brands. Boxes of Crackerjacks began to offer a small plastic prize in 1912, which made them highly sought after, and in 1914, the image of Aunt Jemima was popular enough that the Pearl Milling Company was named after her.'[80] Simulating the arbitrary, referential process which links recurrences of 'Aunt Jemima' in twentieth-century women's magazines, radio advertisements, billboards, and the original pancake and waffle mix on the domestic kitchen shelf or awaiting purchase at the supermarket, to disparate matter, 'Subjoyride' articulates the physical and psychological (dis)equilibrium of the human cerebrum, between logic and madness. The linguistic matter that is acquired and appropriated by 'Subjoyride' is overwhelmed with synaptic junctions which facilitate the concurrent excitation of two or more meanings, connecting slogans and merchandise with the cityscape, all its human and nonhuman litter – 'passengers,' 'dirty erasers,' 'Knives,' '5 cents,' 'pickles' – in an overload of multi-sensory matter. We cannot know for certain which neuronal pathways are stimulated in the plastic brain of the composition to establish or retain the connections between 'Aunt Jemima' and 'green lyons,' for it synthesises meaning as we read; it does not corroborate one before exciting the next. Just as

[78] Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Subjoyride', *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,* ed. by Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 99 – 103 (p. 102).
[79] Doidge, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, p. 63. Here, Doidge is summarising Donald Hebb's theory.
[80] Kimberly Lamm, *Readymade Baroness: The Gendered Language of Dadaist Dress* (2011) <https://jacket2.org/article/readymade-baroness#21> [Accessed 20 November 2018].

the Baroness' costumes, performances, and sculptures render common matter strange, her poems appropriate the communicative function of language to actuate its radical neuroplastic potential – to articulate the material world in all its excess. 'Subjoyride' stimulates the reader to modulate arbitrary connections, to act as neurotransmitters regulating ambiguities between the complex synaptic junctions that are words. Our language is a plastic thing, though we are just beginning to know it.

In her correspondence with Djuna Barnes, the Baroness provides some supportive contextualising material on her unorthodox composition process. She considers merging simultaneous drafts of a poem, printing 'Firstling' and 'He' (1923 – 1924) on one page:

> What is interesting about the 2 together is their vast difference of emotion — time knowledge — pain. That is why they should be printed together. For they are 1 + 2 the same poem — person sentiment life stretch between one — divided — assembled — dissembled.[81]

For Tanya Clement, 'versioning for the Baroness was more than a method to arrive at some final, perfect poem'; instead, versioning produced a sort of 'transtextual dialog' within the poem.[82] Though Clement does not name it so, the Baroness' methodology is certainly neuroplastic; what Clement terms 'transtextual dialog' may also be considered a formal manifestation of the human cerebrum's ability to acquire knowledge, to modulate its physical and psychological organisation through experience, to regenerate after injury (necrosis) or cell death (apoptosis). The Baroness' intent to articulate the complex development of a poem, a person, continually 'divided — assembled — dissembled', parallels Malabou's assertion that plasticity articulates the slippery continuum between 'the completeness of form and the possibility of its disintegration.'[83] The Baroness recognises the operational contradictions that regulate poetry and people simultaneously, both of which are stable enough to maintain the coherency in form, yet unstable enough to experience absurd formal transformations in direct response to encounters with other people, language, and objects. In her correspondence, the Baroness therefore outlines a plastic methodology for composition in which the printed manuscript is erected from its prior iterations, in direct response to encounters with other compositions, which permanently modulate its form and content. Here, the original draft – that is, the neuronal genesis of the plastic composition – undergoes apoptosis as the Baroness

[81] Freytag-Loringhoven, quoted by Tanya Clement, *The Baroness in Little Magazine History* (2011) <https://jacket2.org/article/baroness-little-magazine-history#19> [Accessed 6 December 2018].
[82] Clement, *The Baroness in Little Magazine History.*
[83] Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, p. 2.

meticulously terminates and then assimilates its phrases, phonetic patterns, punctuation. Synaptogenesis occurs, followed by synaptoterminus.

There is a developmental plasticity in the genetic execution of the composition, for 'determinacy and nondeterminism cross paths in an astonishing way' in its regulation.[84] As Malabou contends, this genetically coded 'template' of the human cerebrum is 'then refined (sculpted) during development and, in a subtler but always powerful way, throughout life. The nervous activity of pre-established circuits thus takes over from apoptotic sculpting.'[85] The Baroness' methodology develops the grammatically or 'genreically' coded structure of the composition through the plastic operation of versioning – modulating the linguistic activity, that is, the connotations of those pre-established sentences in the original draft. After, the meaning of the composition is subtly refined through its encounters with readers. There can be no return to the original form. Like Stein's manuscript for *Tender Buttons*, in which 'Food,' 'Objects,' and 'Rooms' are compulsively reordered, there is a plasticity to the Baroness' methodology, for both synthesise, modulate, repair, and terminate connections between arbitrarily related parts. Material is material is material. Whilst the neuroplastic action of *Tender Buttons* is primarily contingent on its readers and the referentiality of their human cerebra, the Baroness' methodology manifests neuroplastic action in the white matter of the page, actuating psychological and physical modification through versioning.

It is possible, therefore, to examine neuronal pathways in the Baroness' spatial notations. In a handwritten draft for 'Orchard Farming' (1927), for example, the Baroness employs linear annotations to function as neurotransmitters, conveying signals between synapse-words, across the chemical junction of the page:

[84] Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p. 21.
[85] Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p. 21.

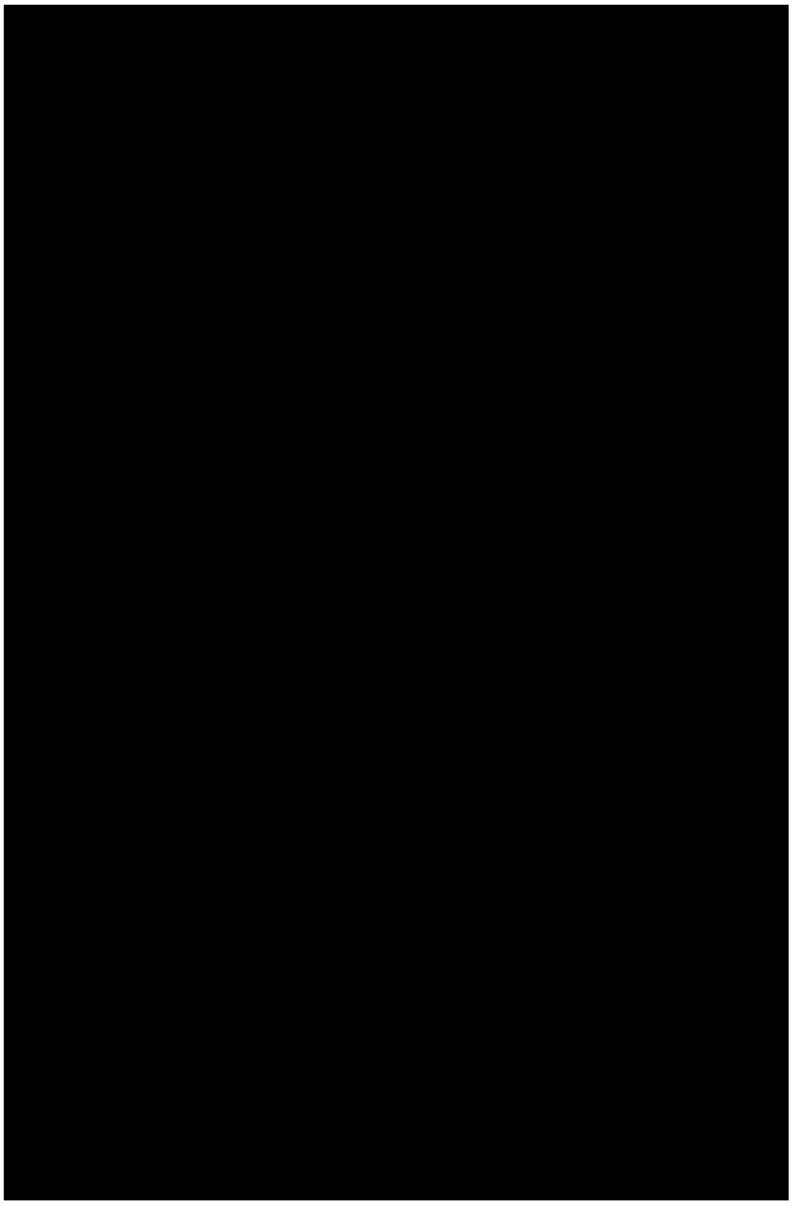

Figure 4: Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Orchard Farming', *Body Sweats*, p. 129.

The Baroness excites connections between ‘Burning’ and ‘Contrast’ – between ‘Contrast’ and ‘That/Popps/With/Fruits’ (see Figure 4) – in annotations which render the complex neuronal pathways between words, on which linguistic communication relies, palpable to the reader.[86] Here, the composition foregrounds its neuroplastic materiality, experimenting with its ability to associate words with things, to modulate the connotations of words, to appropriate words for operation within a particular context. The Baroness expends one or two words per line only, producing voids within the composition in which the reader’s plastic brain must anticipate when, how, or if the next line will contextualise or review the last. Localised within the sentence, a word may revel in plastic ambiguity (we cannot know for certain what links ‘Dung’

[86] Freytag-Loringhoven, ‘Orchard Farming’, *Body Sweats*, p. 129.

and ‘Space’ or ‘Buff’ and ‘Sulphur’) or may shut down, reduced to its dictionary definition, so that the sentence may mean for the sake of meaning something to communicate. In ‘Heir’ (1924 – 1915), the Baroness rigorously examines this process, as ‘Love = Rhythm – / Rhythm = Logic – / Logic = Beauty – / Beauty = Sense – / Sense = Love’. Synaptic modulation occurs between word and punctuation, where the word means and subsequently means differently in context, when subtracted from or equated with other words.[87] The Baroness’ compositions therefore render the opening up and shutting down of the word (which is habitually overlooked in any text; it is happening now, in this thesis) material. There is a plasticity to her writing, which modifies the connotations of words by connecting two or more via linear neurotransmitters; they propagate one or two-word lines which rapidly detach and reattach word to context (there are junctions *between* words; the word *is* a junction), exciting their plastic ambiguity. The Baroness’ compositions are brain-like – they stimulate, modulate, and terminate the neuronal pathways between words in the plastic operation of reading.

In ‘To Home’ (1923) the Baroness’ dash-like notations order neuronal pathways in the composition, communicating the semblance of a stimulus that the reader is not privy to, which excites chemical activity in the synapse word. The Baroness renders this chemical activity in the sonance of her synapse-words, which hiss, toot, and whir in excitation:

> Twirrly — whirrly — green-gem-studded-deep miriardbreasted — spume milk laced — carbonpaper — tinsel — tinfoil tinted — frothknit — crochet — scallop filigree — galloping — stamping horse —[88]

The Baroness’ synapse-words modulate networks between phonetic patterns, which refer to and bear a likeness to each other (the plosive ‘p’ of ‘galloping’ and ‘stamping’ – the assonance of ‘twirrly’ and ‘whirrly’); they assimilate repetitions, ‘tinsel’ and ‘tinfoil tinted,’ in which the second syllable-word repairs the meaning of ‘tin’ and all its grammatically coded associations. Ordered with dash-like notations, the Baroness’ compositions exacerbate the plastic connections between sign, sound, and sense. They assure the reader that there is or must be a logic to their order, however arbitrary. There is a formal dissolution, then, as the neurotransmitters facilitating these referential connections begin to disintegrate:

> Swish — sh — sh — sh — sh —
> Sish —

[87] Freytag-Loringhoven, ‘Heir’, *Body Sweats*, pp. 230 – 231 (p. 230).
[88] Freytag-Loringhoven, ‘To Home’, *Body Sweats*, pp. 185 – 187 (p. 185).

Sish —
Sh — sh — sh — sh —
S—s—s—s—r—r—r—r—
Suuuuuuu —
Suuuuuu
Suu — suu — suu — s — s — s — s — s —
Sushpl —
Pl — pl — — up —
Plup lup — p — lup p —
Llllup — ee — ee ee —
Ee — ee — ee — — — —
Sussa — tout![89]

This is the guttural, excessive, delirious clamour of the Baroness' sound poetry. There, in its sibilance, a semiotic babble, a susurration of aluminium foil, a hiss of water through a faucet, a rasping, a tearing, a popping in the plosives. For Richard Kostelanetz, 'though superficially playful, text-sound art embodies serious thinking about the possibilities of vocal expression and communication; it represents not a substitute for language but an expansion of our verbal powers.'[90] Here, there are dashes to fire sound-neurons, to synthesise, to modulate, to terminate the productive connections between sound and sense; these dashes are stammers, the babbling echolalia of a child that is learning why and how to speak, 'dislocating and liberating meaning in an on-going proliferation of fissions and fusions.'[91] Finally, the Baroness compels the reader to relive their earliest requisitions of the plastic material that is language in childhood, when the shapes and sounds of letters were strange, their order negotiable – when those neuronal pathways between sign, sound, and sense were not absolutely formed, but still in the abstract process of formation. The Baroness' sound poems grant us the ability to perceive the pure potentiality of language, rendering obsolete our traditional schemes of communication.

For Francesca Chiappini, the Baroness' spelling 'oddities' and 'word-formations' are another dominating trait of her work; where there is no word for what she seeks to articulate, she constructs another, often merging German and English.[92] Chiappini posits that the Baroness has a 'physical, manual relationship with language, which she treats like modelling clay' – kneading, splicing, pinching, grafting, squeezing, pounding letters into words (old and new, hybrid, multi-lingual) to air-dry on the page. There is a textural sensitivity in the Baroness'

[89] Freytag-Loringhoven, 'To Home', *Body Sweats*, p. 186.
[90] Richard Kostelanetz, *Text-Sound Texts* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), p. 16.
[91] Gammel and Zelazo, 'Harpsichords Metallic Howl', p. 269.
[92] Francesca Chiappini, 'Spelling Errors as a Cry of Protest: The Idiosyncratic Language of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven', *Altre Modernità*, Vol. 1 (2017), pp.190 – 203 (p. 198).

compositions, similar to that of Stein's 'Objects' which, in the absence of visual or sonic descriptors, manifest the thing's capacity to overwhelm. The Baroness, however, excites the radical potential of linguistic matter, once liberated from automatic communication, in portmanteaux or neologisms. Though Chiappini does not refer to plasticity in relation to the Baroness, modelling this sticky, supple thing we name language like clay, it conjures Malabou's analogy of the artist sculpting a block of marble:

> Plastic material retains an imprint and thereby resists endless polymorphism. This is the case, for instance, with sculpted marble. Once the statue is finished, there is no possible return to the indeterminacy of the starting point. So plasticity designates solidity as much as suppleness, designates the definitive character of the imprint, of configuration, or of modification.[93]

Whilst the Baroness' portmanteaux or neologisms retain a semblance of the grammatically coded material, that is, the primary word, they are physically modified – they are assimilated, affixed to one and other in such a way that their psychological meaning is permanently mutated. There is 'solidity as much as suppleness' in the portmanteau and it borders on a madness.[94] Its type-set manifestation on the white matter of the page resists polymorphism, and yet a transformation has surely taken place in 'phalluspistol,' 'spinsterlollipop,' 'kissclangor,' 'amatriculate,' 'fieldadmarshmiralshall,' or 'laurellaquergreen'.[95] There can be no return to the original form. These are rebel words which should not, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, exist. The Baroness' portmanteaux or neologisms are grotesque, excessive, plastic words, which simply will not mean for the sake of communication. They synthesise, modulate, and repair arbitrary connections between things, revelling in the referentiality of language. They contemptuously flaunt their abject materialities, that is, the radical plasticity of their composition, formed in the peculiar image of their creator, adorned in her tomato can bra, celluloid curtain ring bracelets, and birdcage hat, which transform the aesthetic value or ergonomic function of ordinary matter just as her poems render obsolete the mundanity of our grammatical, communicative language.

For their maddening, excessive, garbled contributions to the literary world, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Gertrude Stein must therefore be acknowledged

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[93] Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p. 15.
[94] Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p. 15.
[95] Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Cosmic Chemistry', *Body Sweats*, p. 153; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'A Dozen Cocktails – Please', *Body Sweats*, p. 48; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Last Gesture', *Body Sweats*, p. 134; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Ultramundanity', *Body Sweats*, p. 164; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'To Home', *Body Sweats*, p. 185; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Haunt', *Body Sweats*, p. 232.

as pioneers of those plastic modes of writing that twenty-first century writers, with their modern comprehension of the human cerebrum and its developmental, modulational, and reparative plasticity, are only just beginning to articulate through this thing we name the literary text. From Stein's linguistic habits, which are radically modified via repetition in direct response to multi-sensory interactions with things in the material world, to the Baroness' plastic spatial notations and neologisms, which may repair or terminate the neural pathways between word, meaning, and object, there can be no return to obsolete modes of composition. Through their rigorous experiments into the peripheral limits of cognitive function and the grammatically coded material that is language, Stein and the Baroness therefore activate the pure potentiality of plastic composition, its revolutionary dexterity to signify, once and for all, the material world in all its plurality – synthesising, exciting, modulating, repairing, and terminating the synaptic connections between people, language, and things. We must, therefore, actuate a critical modification to our habitual comprehensions of Stein and the Baroness, acknowledging their notoriety as literary scientists, whose radical and intellectually rigorous experiments in language prefigured plastic modes of composition – stimulating a permanent alteration in the physical and psychological chemistry of the text. After all, the formulation of neuroplasticity perhaps confirms what academics have argued all along about literary modernism – that it excites a powerful articulation of the slippery continuum between annihilation and creation, solidity and malleability, tradition and experiment. To this end, I therefore contribute the contention that modernist literary objects, in all their uncanny, enchanting, defamiliarized, abject, or thingly dimensions, excite a powerful articulation of the slippery continuum between human subject and nonhuman object, denouncing anthropocentric rhetoric, and alerting readers to the overwhelming plasticity of the material world in which they participate. The modernist object, after all, has always been plastic, though we are just beginning to know it. The human subject and nonhuman object, after all, have always been plastic, though we are just beginning to know it. The literary text, after all, has always been plastic, though we are just beginning to know it.

THE TEXT IS A PLASTIC THING:
A MANIFESTO

BEFORE PLASTICITY – the semblance of absurd rigidity – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – knowledge and no knowledge on the method of its acquisition or adaptation or application – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – form and the absence of veridical form – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – the ludicrous belief that you, dear reader, are useless and absolutely unresponsive matter – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – communicative language – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – categorical negation, that is, oblivion –

BECAUSE BEFORE PLASTICITY THERE WAS ALWAYS PLASTICITY!

We, after all, have always been plastic. Our language, after all, has always been plastic, though we could not yet know it – though we are just beginning to know it.

Plasticity is etymologically derived from the Greek word *plassein* (to mould); 'it means at once the capacity to receive form […] and the capacity to give form.'[1] Those neuronal pathways which comprise our brains, our texts, are simultaneously 'formable' and 'formative' – modifiable, malleable, metamorphosing things which are partially genetically coded, that is, genreically coded, that is, grammatically coded, and partially derived from our personal encounters with the material world, with other people, language, texts, and nonhuman objects.[2]

~~YOU ARE NOT A MATTER OF BEING THE RIGHT CELLS AT THE RIGHT TIME.~~

[1] Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans by. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 5.
[2] Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p. 4 – 5.

~~THE TEXT IS NOT A MATTER OF BEING THE RIGHT WORDS AT THE RIGHT TIME.~~

BEFORE PLASTICITY – the abstraction of genre, the hypothesis of definition and definitions for the sake of meaning anything at all – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – was the poem poetic, was the novel novel, was the short story sufficiently short or the play particularly playful?

BEFORE PLASTICITY – text was simply text, that is, it should appear to you, dear reader, in perennial and omniscient forms – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – categorical negation, that is, delirium –

BECAUSE BEFORE PLASTICITY THERE WERE ALWAYS SLIPPAGES BETWEEN THINGS, BETWEEN WORDS, BETWEEN FORMS!

and yet – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – slippages between forms were grotesque and surreptitious things – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – all hybridity was profanity, that is, mutation, that is, distasteful, that is, punishable by law of genre – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – dictionaries, that is, the farcical conviction that a word is as good as a word is word which

should mean analogously every other sentence – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – the knowledge that our language has never been abiding nor authentic!

> (Our language, after all, has always been plastic, though we are just beginning to know that etymology is revision and remembrance and returning and revolution is translation, is portmanteau, is the breeding of words, is the conceiving of words, is neologism. Here, a habit in which Sigmund Freud's examination of the etymology of the Germanic word, *heimlich*, signifies the plasticity of all language, in which the word *heimlich* 'merges with its formal antonym, *unheimlich*, so that which is *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*,' in which the word, *heimlich*, becomes the other as you are looking. [3] There can be no return to the original form –
>
> and let it be known that our language is volatile matter, that plastic language excites, modulates, repairs, and terminates those neuronal connections between word, meaning, and object as it is used in a sentence or a stanza –
>
> and portmanteau, that is, neologism, means that a word may retain a semblance of its grammatically coded material as it is physically modified – as two or more words are assimilated, affixed to one and other in such a way that their psychological meaning is permanently mutated. Synaptogenesis, followed by synaptoterminus. These are rebel words, unimaginable words, delirious words, unpalatable words, excessive words, uncategorizable words, plastic words, which do not simply mean for the sake of communication, but for naming things our old language never new to name

[3] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 132, (first publ. in *Imago*, Vol. 5 (1919), pp. 297 – 324).

neuroplasticity, that is, the plasticity of the cerebrum, that is, the plasticity of our language, that is, the plasticity of the nonhuman object.)

BEFORE PLASTICITY – there could be no human subject or nonhuman object – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – the pure potentiality of things in the presence of the pluripotent subject – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – there could be no acquisition of knowledge or adaption or application of language to things, the thing that is language – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – no remembering, no repairing, no revolutionizing the relations between language and the functions and forms of other things – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – no slippages between human subject and nonhuman object, for all slippages revel in plastic materialities, that is, physical and psychological modifications to the original that is not the original that is original is not original.

(All matter is plastic, though we are just beginning to know it.)

PLASTICITY IS NOT THE ABSENCE OF FORM, BUT THE POSSIBILITY OF ITS TRANSFORMATION!

BEFORE PLASTICITY – you, as you know it, could not exist – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – the text, as we know it, could not exist – **BEFORE PLASTICITY** – no lyric, no essay, no elegy, no ballad, no sonnet, no fable, no epic, no limerick, no biography, no autobiography, no review, no fantasy, no legend, no sequel, no musical, no tragicomedy, no gothic romance, no prose poem, no play poem, no film poem, no visual poem, no hypertext, no thesis, no creative criticism, and absolutely no manifesto!

> (And let it be known that the 'manifesto moment positions itself between what has been done and what will be done, between the accomplished and the potential, in a radical and energizing division,' that the manifesto has always been plastic –
>
> that the manifesto oscillates between the formed and all that has yet to be formed, operating between past, present, and possibility is continually modified throughout the history of modernism in response to encounters with these things we name other people language, and nonhuman objects –
>
> that the manifesto stutters, screams obscenities –
>
> that the manifesto revels in excess, a plastic performance –
>
> that the manifesto is a 'going past what is thought of as proper, sane, and literary,' for it operates beyond and between genres, beyond and between the logic grammar and all that is ungrammatical, absurd, or irrational –
>
> that the manifesto 'form creates its meaning.')[4]

Plasticity is not the absence of form, but the acknowledgement that form could not be form is not form in the absence of movement, that is, deviation, that is, adjustment, that is, revision. Plasticity is not the absence of form, but is between form and formlessness, that is, the

[4] Mary Ann Caws, 'The Poetics of the Manifesto: Nowness and Newness' in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. by Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), pp. xix – xxxii (p. xxi, xx, xx).

acknowledgement that there can be no possible return to the original that is not original but nonetheless originary.

PLASTICITY = MODULATION = PLASTICITY = MODIFICATION

All form is the interrogation of bodies, the transience of bodies. All form is the modification of bodies, to better recollect the material condition of plastic bodies as they are encountered in the material world – between stability and instability, between coherence and incoherence, between form and formlessness is not the absence of form but the possibility of its transformation.

> *We revel in the plasticity of defamiliarized, abject, thingly form – in the compulsion to smell, touch, see, taste, hear the material world and all its absurdity anew.*
>
> *We riot in the formation and stimulation and annihilation and formation of synaptic junctions between word, meaning, and object over, and over, and over again – there can be no possible return to the original.*

The plastic text, after all, is a maddening, overwhelming, noisy thing, which does and does not resemble. It is not concerned with naming, but the process of naming – the tensions between matters and form and language and objects and the slippages and the possibilities of matters and form and language and objects and glossolalia is not a simple oscillation of phonetic matter, but of synapses:

> *We become neurotransmitters –*
>
> *detonate, excite, synthesise connections between sound – word – thing – memory – and sometimes, we do not make it, sometimes, the junction is too vast, sometimes, meaning is pluralised –*
>
> *and we are caught in the process of naming, that is, the process of un-naming.*

And let it be known that the plastic anatomy of the human cerebrum is the plastic anatomy of this thing we name and un-name a literary text and –

> (Though the basic structure of the human cerebrum is genetically coded – though the basic structure of the literary text is grammatically and genreically coded – the

> human cerebrum undergoes developmental plasticity over time, growth, maturation, encounters with other people, language, and nonhuman objects modify and kill neuronal connections, the literary text undergoes developmental plasticity over time, interpretation, revising, encounters with other people, language, and nonhuman objects modify and kill neuronal connections.
>
> Then, synaptic modulation in human cerebrum and the literary text, which must repair, relapse, return, renew, remember, relinquish itself with every iteration – synaptogenesis, followed by synaptoterminus – there can be no return to the original form.)

axons transmit information from neurones and dendrites receive information from neurones and you, reader, are axon and dendrite simultaneously – and the authorial 'I' is both axon and dendrite simultaneously – language is both axon and dendrite simultaneously – and these things happen, these things are partially contingent on who or what is encountering and –

THE PLASTICITY OF THINGS = THE PLASTICITY OF US = THE PLASTICITY OF HUMAN MATTER = THE PLASTICITY OF NONHUMAN MATTER = THE PLASTICITY OF THE LITERARY TEXT =

> the plasticity of pen caps – of bottle caps – of pipe caps – of balloon clips – and hair pins – and paperclips – and hindlimbs – and hosiery – and handguns – and shrunken heads – and soft root vegetables – and soft grey matter – and soft white matter – and mothers – and metaphors – and six loose teeth from a comb – and
>
> let it be known that plasticity is the radical recognition of the porosity of matter, that is, the formative continuums between things, that is, the possibility of slippages between things that are physical and psychological –
>
> because all matter is plastic, all meaning is plastic – and

there can be no return to the original form, for in communicating the plasticity of things, language and grammar border on a collapse we call creation, for in communicating the plasticity of human subjects and nonhuman objects, the classifications border on a collapse we call creation – and all plasticity is collapsation – and creation – and collapsation – and creation – and contradiction – and collapsation – and connection – and – and – and

let it be known that all bodies (human bodies, nonhuman bodies, literary bodies) are assemblages of parts: part-grammar, part-genetics, part-genre, part-synapse, part-silence, part-reader, part-remembrance, part-revelation, part-punctuation, part-quotation, part-thing, part-other, part-noun, part-nothing.

AGAINST

STABILITY IS
THE SEMBLANCE OF INSTABILITY –

AGAINST

RIGIDITY –

FOR

REFERENTIALITY –

FOR

POLYPHONY –

AGAINST

ELASTICITY –

FOR

THERE CAN BE NO POSSIBLE RETURN
TO THE ORIGINAL FORM –

AGAINST

THIS THING WE NAME
COHERENCY
IN COMMUNICATION
IS THE SEMBLANCE OF
INCOHERENCE –

FOR

THE COMPLETENESS
OF FORM –

FOR

THE POSSIBILITY
OF FORM'S DISINTEGRATION –

AGAINST

INERTIA –

FOR

TRANSFORMATION,
THAT IS,
ADAPTATION,
THAT IS,
MODIFICATION,
THAT IS,
REVOLUTION –

FOR

REPAIR –

FOR

DEVELOPMENT –

FOR

THE READY-MADE –

FOR

SOLIDITY –

AGAINST

SOLIDITY –

FOR

INSTABILITY
IS THE SEMBLANCE
OF STABILITY –

FOR

THE ACQUISITION
OF THIS FOUND MATERIAL
WE NAME LANGUAGE –

FOR

SPONTANEITY –

FOR

IN THIS THING WE NAME
INCOHERENCY

IN COMMUNICATION IS
THE SEMBLANCE
OF COHERENCE –

FOR

MATERIAL IS
MATERIAL IS
MATERIAL IS –

AGAINST

CONTRADICTION –

FOR

CONTRADICTION –

because all plasticity is intervention, is mediation, is subversion, is the relational poetics of things – we cannot name one thing without naming another, and another, and another!

> *We revel in plasticity as the reactive poetics of things, a plasticity which repairs, redacts, repeats on the synapses between things and nouns, between real and remembered things, between found and formed nouns –*

because the plastic brain hoards, catalogues ordinary matter, because the plastic text assembles, modifies ordinary matter, there can be no transformation without form!

Form, after all, is not absent but permanently altered, and these literary things, dear reader, you encounter are deviation of deviations are not deviations but deviations, nonetheless.

(The text is a plastic thing, though we are just beginning to know it.)

All texts have a functioning memory of their own, they refer back to themselves, they return to other texts, they repair, develop, modulate, they repeat absent scenes from the material world of other people, language, nonhuman objects.

And because the plastic text is a relational, reparative, reactive, referential thing, you must be responsible for its meanings – there must be synaptic junctions between its words, there must be neuronal pathways between its phrases!

~~WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH OUR BRAIN? WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH OUR TEXT?~~

1. Bring portmanteau, that is neologism, that is 'phalluspistol,' 'spinsterlollipop,' 'kissclangor,' 'amatriculate,' 'fieldadmarshmiralshall,' or 'laurellaquergreen' or the breeding words.[5]

2. Bring fragmentation. A semblance simultaneity, of splicing of slicing of synthesising form. Fragmentation is not the absence of form but the modification of form, the mutilation of form, the making of other forms. An asymmetrical arrangement of lines, which come to rest at odd, uncomfortable angles on the page.

3. The dash is a synapse – it signals connections between things.

4. Spatial notations have the power to kill or revive the relation of the word to the thing and the word to other words, other things. There are fissures in the text which sever word from phrase; the structure of the thing warrants another form of reading – another form of reader – for the phrase is a fractured thing which must be repaired, word by word. The fissures, however, resist this restorative process, for the form, though comparable to poetic verse, challenges reader assumption.

5. All texts are intertextual, that is, referential, that is formed in relation to other texts, that in response, forms other texts. To write is to sift, sunder, steal, splice materials. To write is to plunder, promise, prune, pluralise, play with plasticity.

[5] Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Cosmic Chemistry', *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,* ed. by Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), p. 153; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'A Dozen Cocktails – Please', *Body Sweats,* p. 48; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Last Gesture', *Body Sweats,* p. 134; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Ultramundanity', *Body Sweats,* p. 164; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'To Home', *Body Sweats,* p. 185; Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Haunt', *Body Sweats,* p. 232.

6. Hybridity has always been, since its inception, plastic. Hybridity transforms the genetic materials that is genre. Hybridity necessarily involves all forms of plasticity: developmental plasticity, synaptic modulation, reparative plasticity, synaptogenesis, synaptoterminus.

7. To return to, regurgitate, relapse material in repetitions is a plastic thing. To repeat is to repair is to repeat is to respond is to repeat is to redact is to repeat is to revolutionise the original. To repeat is to reform slippery habits which reappear, reconditioning themselves in the context of other fragments. To return is to relapse, but never reappear in the same condition twice.

8. Bring proper grammar and subversions of grammar and postponements of grammar suspend plastic referentially and proper grammar relies on the relations between punctuation and language and things.

9. Bring contradiction is tension is opposition is madness is divergence is a reparative plasticity.

10. Typographical distortions revel in the disruptive potential of a plastic language that rejects proper order – stuttering excess, screaming excess. The typographically disturbed text borders on a thinglyness that the reader cannot name, for it does not look as a text should look – it does not read, contentedly, as a text should read. Its plasticity overwhelms, in active opposition of those aged techniques and traditions that would restrict it. In plasticity, we demand reformation!

11. In the construction of metaphor or simile, the object is like subject, is, is like, is some other object or subject. In the construction of metaphor or simile, such matter is like, is, is like human or nonhuman matter, and the theoretical boundaries between matter cannot hold. In the construction of metaphor or simile, matter is relational.

Because plasticity is doing things, working, performing, and misbehaving, repealing, remembering, and not knowing, communicating, and loving, and touching, repeating, abjecting, loathing, and knowing that cessation is expiration, and dreading things, and sensing things, relating and rejecting things, accepting, and repeating, growing, parting, stuttering things, speaking, and coming and becoming and coming to acknowledge that because plasticity is composing, and reading, editing, and meaning things, punctuating, unpunctuating, and

theorising plasticity is a violent process of ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing, ing –

and things, things – the absence and presence of things incite the human cerebrum – the literary text – to glossolalia.

There could be no object without the plastic material that is language; there could be no thing without the plastic material of language, its failings. There is nothing, after all, like a thing to repel meaning, to regurgitate memory, to relate matter to something – anything – everything – nothing at all.

WE NAME THE MADNESS OF THE BRAIN PLASTICITY!

WE NAME THE MADNESS OF THE TEXT PLASTICITY!

They do doing do reiterations, returns, repairs, and the pure potentiality of language – of the literary text – is plastic in the purest sense, for language must adapt, as it once did, in modernism, and the literary text must be transformed, as it once was, in modernism, for this modern world of things – and there is nothing more plastic than interruption, that is, interference, that is, inference, that is introspection, that is, indeterminacy.

There must be synapses between the phrases, there must be neural pathways between these paragraphs.

~~WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH OUR BRAIN? WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH OUR TEXT?~~

1. Bring anthropomorphism, that is, the consideration of matter as remembrance, as relative, as resemblance, as matter is not human or nonhuman but common matter.

2. To defamiliarize matter, to make matter abject, to make matter thingly, to make matter uncanny, to deconstruct matter is to divulge the plasticity of language, that is, the plasticity of reading, that is, the plasticity of the human subject, that is the plasticity of the brain, that is the plasticity of the nonhuman object, that is the plasticity of all matter in the modern world. When it comes to the meaning of matter, there may be only the semblance of stasis.

3. An omittance of punctuation is plastic. The acceptance of punctuation is plastic. The subversion of punctuation is plastic… and here an aversion, a powerful suspension of the contradiction to come.

4. Bring polyphony is that which disquiets, that is, delights, for in music the term 'polyphonic' is simply defined as 'involving the playing of more than one note simultaneously; composed or arranged for several voices or parts' or 'consisting of several melodies combined' or 'involving the production of many sounds or voices; many-voiced.'[6] Polyphony is simply defined as that which defies singularity, that is, stability.

5. Bring rhyme, half-rhyme, assonance, alliteration, phonetic repetitions may induce plastic revelations, words resemble other words in form or colour or sound and when words are caught in the process of resembling the reader is compelled to resemble, and there can be no return to the original form.

6. Bring parenthesis.

[6] Oxford English Dictionary, *Polyphonic* (2019) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/147301?redirectedFrom=polyphonic&> [Accessed 26 August 2019].

(So much of plasticity happens in parenthesis, when matter is ousted as fallacy as if the text could doubt, as if the text could oppose, as if the text could interrupt, contextualise itself –

and you are just beginning to know that this thing you have been reading has always been plastic –

it modifies itself, brain-like, as it encounters these vital matters we name other people, language, nonhuman objects, and you are just beginning to know that the thing you have been reading has always been plastic –

it forms, excites, strengthens, modulates, repairs, and kills those neural pathways between word and meaning as you are reading –

there are habits, obsessions, between the parts.)

~~YOU ARE YOUR SYNAPSES!~~

~~THE TEXT IS ITS SYNAPSES!~~

The plastic literary text offers the potential of dissolution, that is, the potential of destruction, that is, the potential of deformation, that is, the potential detection of this other form of composition, that is, creation, that is, contradiction, that is plasticity –

and let it be known that the plastic literary text is that which destabilises, disrupts, destroys your habitual capacity to define human and nonhuman matter, inclusive of those linguistic matters we name grammar, punctuation, syntax, form, the word –

and let it be known that the plastic literary text revels in abject plurality – reveals the possibility of this thing we call language, that is, the possibility of becoming other, becoming uncanny, that is, becoming thingly, that is, the probability of bordering on excess – madness – plurality – fragmentation – repair – adaptation – apprehension – nausea – enchantment – abjection – vitality – fluidity – lucidity – transformation – distortion – revolution – plasticity – plasticity – plasticity –

TO WRITE IS TO NEGOTIATE PLASTICITY!

TO READ IS TO NEGOTIATE PLASTICITY!

Because to know plasticity, is to know that all conclusions are little deaths or arbitrary consolidations of that which continues to adapt – to acquire – to abort – to accost – to agitate – to allude – to abject – to actuate possibility in all material things.

AFTER PLASTICITY, there can be no return to the original form.

MUSEUM OF LOST AND BROKEN THINGS

EXHIBITION I

THE SLEEPING WOMAN AS A CUBIST PORTRAIT

Semblance of an unexpended artillery shell,
or unlit table lamp, shade nodding.

She has come apart, a soiled dinner plate –
shattered, stinking, spilling geometric shapes
from the single bed frame.

Her members are pure assemblage:
rivet, tongue, and cane.

A plastic butter knife
detaches
reattaches itself
at an obscene angle –

one pinion limp beneath the sheets,
the other hailing the thing beyond the ceiling.

BAGLESS CYLINDER VACUUM

feed it coins for the gullet is crush-proof cordless space of devoid matter tonguing cat hair lurching its vociferations for the gullet is choke-proof feed it pins to pick its teeth and hold lock button to easy empty gut of human fingernails or hosiery omnivorous space of devoid matter churning spiders mount the gullet when you lap or strip legs from the body is a black ball to plug the gut is con-proof feed it pen caps bottle caps battery packs balloon clips or six loose teeth from a comb pull along your quenchless space of devoid matter trundling three-year warranty bottom feeder can you stomach it

CATALOGUE ITEM: 24

bear with glass eyes
cataracts are a sure sign of age

PLAY-DOH MAN

He cuts a big red tongue,
sticks it to his jaw and sets it flapping –

a fat orange eye (yellow yolk)
lolling in his bony cup.

When he hoots, soft green teeth
slip out and the plaque tastes like salt.

THE EYELESS BIRDS

Lithe-winged bodies snagged
on the silver head of a pin;

they flee from death at obscene angles –

do not remember
the motion of flight,

belly-up, hindlimbs cinched in sisal twine.

Scissor-beaked
and dried like pitted fruit –

their eyes are black pips, plugged with cotton wool,

so children do not think
of death in cabinets,

pointing at the nothing on the other side of the glass.

CATALOGUE ITEM: 137

chain of paperclips
red orange pink and blue
the pattern loops

CRUISE SHIP

At the lip of the sea,
a fat white body
is snagged on capstone,
flank slick with algae.

A boy prods
its belly with a stick,
and swears
he sees it flinch.

CUBIST PORTRAIT OF A THREE-FACED DOLL

when it cries baby's head spins right round to match the face to the keening baby is a simple oscillation of sleep and mirth and oh the wailing pity the pretty little thing which cannot match name to body to three mouths six eyes four good for seeing baby which does not know its own face from a thing in a mirror and baby's head spins right round to match its face to gurgling and a baby is a monstrous little thing with joins around its edges where baby comes apart the cranium is soft a half-formed cap and baby does not like it when you shake its head gets stuck between sleep and mirth and gurgling imperfect symmetry of bulging face the thing a mother could not love with six eyes and a nose for every pair to name a baby is to name an oscillation and when it cries its head spins right round to match a face to name to a pretty monstrous thing

DREAM HOUSE
after Gaston Bachelard

she slams the door so hard
the knob flies off

where tacky carpets pluck
the shoes from your feet

and black mould eats
orange matte emulsion

wipe it down with foggy water
grey dishcloth in a pail

watch shadows flit
between rooms

where sheets make
ghosts of cabinets

you slice the line of tape
to let things breathe

and dare not use her flannel
for fear of smelling lavender

where clingfilm wraps
the body of the tub

an uncapped drain
dribbles yellow

and squirrels gnaw wires
in the crawlspace

she keeps the house awake
at night chattering

carboard chipboard
cupboard clipboard

paint your name beside the others
beneath the wallpaper

watch hot breath
leave her body

and know that in this cavity
there was once a wall

BEEHIVE (THIMBLE FOREST)
after Joseph Cornell

Shrink your eye
to match the aperture of a pinhole
and tally pitted tankers
snagged on pylons –
lurching over badlands,
where planets rove in circles
in the cambered pit of a mirrored drum.

Hold your tongue
and the pylons reverberate –
the silver whine of a carillon bell
slicing *ad infinitum*
through the blankness.

CATALOGUE ITEM: 7

chatter telephone
rolls its eyes
no body
on the line’s
other end

SOFT-BOILED EGG

With the silver comes
a splitting –
white yawning flaps
begin to spit
their yellow pus.

Nestled at the core,
a grey and steaming thing

is sheathed
in porous film –
unblinking
achromatic
eye.

THE OTHER SIDE OF AN APPLE

imagine the other face is flat or blue in a bowl of other fruits with various other names split the apple clean in half and in the ovary there are pits for such pits on the hot wet mound of your tongue things resemble apples pregnant apples in form or colour on the other face is there a knife in its back is there a tooth or bot fly feasting shrunken head or abstract flatness god do not bash it imagine god is an apple you would spit god into the palm of your right hand and let god plunge the lapse might kill it spill its pips the push would make it flat on its other face

CATALOGUE ITEM: 283

silver bell cannot know
where it left its tongue

HIGH-RISE
after Joseph Cornell's Compartmented Box

what keeps the boy
at his window
is the ball on its sill
rocking

as if the ball believed
it could not fall
and the body believed
it would not follow

HOW TO SMOOTH PINK ANAGLYPTA

Scratch papule-heads
from epidermis;

between thumb and forefinger
make a paste;

then, dig the reek of damp
from your nailbeds;

(if you licked it,
the tang of salt)

plug the pores
with Calamine, No. 230;

(it will form a crust,
like cradle cap)

file it down,
inhale the dust;

then, repeat
for the wall.

CATALOGUE ITEM: 579

pencil nibs
in a sandwich bag
would not be made
to sharpen

EVERGREEN CREMATORIUM

white cottage on a wooded hill flue burning white seeping from an open window when the door is locked white cottage leaks the breath it had been holding lidded boxes wait in lines their fearful symmetry flue smoking flesh in boxes bone to white grit and other boxes wait in line for bodies trouble other bodies when cardboard is cheaper than wood cottage cheaper than grave and flowers give their bodies to names the body cannot know their sagging forms diggers breaking ground they dare not think of bodies and the thing on the wooded hill is just a cottage white light flue burning

WORRY DOLLS

We are six
little bodies
in a pouch –

peg-legged,

we wear straitjackets,

black dots
for eyes.

Behemoth,
you come by moonlight –
wet tongue

flapping
testaments

we will not tell,

because our lips
are sutured
shut.

Loosen the cord
and let us slip,

headfirst

into your palm.

or shrunken head (partially severed
cord) or amorphous glove (no holes to insert
digits) or cut of uterine endometrium (raw
cochineal gristle) or contraceptive diaphragm
(silicone dome) or blood moon (remote prophetic
disk) or congealed soup (gelatinous skin) or

CATALOGUE ITEM: 33

heap of wax fruits in a bowl
unsuited to human consumption

BEACHCOMBING IN THE TORRES STRAIT

Washed-up fishing net
slumps on hot sand –

a half-buried bottle
lies uncapped,
bottom-up
in the dune grass.

The flesh-footed shearwater
is on its back, rocking –
belly sliced at the core.

These are the sticky fragments
of sharp, discarded things:

ring pull; leg of a clothes peg; seaglass; pen cap; bottle cap; pipe cap;
balloon clip; six loose teeth from a comb.

Its trachea
is a bendy straw
half-crushed
underfoot.

TRAMPING THE SODS WITH UNCLE MELLIE

Three metal shacks
piled on a yellow mound,
silent and hulking.

You stand on tip-toes, poke
your fingers through the slats –

push your nose
against wet sheets
and gape.

Uncle Mellie jabs one with his stick,
makes the whole thing judder.

He will not let you close
enough to pet
their bald red heads,

or ask them how
they lost their tongues.

BÉBÉ MARIE
after Joseph Cornell

When Marie's dress turns
the sour yellow of bad milk,

I take her out to the thicket
at the foot of our apple tree.

Because Marie's head goes around and around,
she wears her collar high to hide the deep black slit

where her swan's neck
and pretty head should meet.

When night falls, Marie taps at my window –
begging to come home.

But the grinding of her joints keeps me up,
and I pull Marie's arms from their sockets

to put them in a box,
should she ever need them again

and I take her out to the thicket
at the foot of our apple tree.

Marie's eyes are black craters in a full moon,
and she is gone by morning.

Because she is not sorry,
I lop Marie's hair with scissors

and when she weeps, I kiss her little nose –
poke flowers through her straw hat.

I bury Marie, face-down, in the thicket
at the foot of our apple tree.

CATALOGUE ITEM: 1

unfinished birdbox
no roof
no windows
no door

EXHIBITION II

THE TAXIDERMIST'S DAUGHTER

She grooms its plump white belly –
collar to tail, cooing.

To peel the coat from a naked mammal,
part the pelt, make a slit along the spine.

Shuck the body from its husk; rub
curdled fat and offal from the hide.

Your hands should be clean,
and quick to bathe the coat in fixer.

The bald head should be detached,
dipped in hot wax to make a cast.

Once set, cleave the halves like a walnut shell,
and dispose of the meat, let plaster take its form.

To make a body, use the bones; to firm the belly,
stuff with wood excelsior and bind in sisal twine.

Your hands should be steady
to set glass eyes, to dress the dummy to taste.

She loops a yellow scarf
beneath its little chin, cooing.

PUNCH POCKET

diaphanous apparition
of value copy paper

you will not do
for reproducing

glossolalia

flaccid and translucent
thing of non-appearance

you do asphyxiation

because the text
is not for arbitration

grasp absence
in polypropylene

THE AUTOMATIC CAR WASH AS A CUBIST PAINTING

spit a whip antenna from a hole and flatten glass to body wake and whir and whoosh the apparatus into neutral a wan blue whining where bristles whip and whistle automation for the tunnel is a cyclone it circulates spittle in pulling wheels and pounding doors in neat analogous whips it wants for nothing in propelling bodies through a hole and in the semblance of whooshing or wailing or whirring android splutters blue and swallows bodies spinning wants and nothing wants in cycles where beads where beads fly off at obscene angles wailing when the body goes beyond automaton and whirs and waits to veer beyond the track to spit a whip antenna from its hole and the tunnel is no more a cyclone in the absence of another body's neutral apparatus to whine and whip and whistle and wheel and whoosh and wail and want

CATALOGUE ITEM: 754

damp white mound
of torsos in maxi skip

spew padding
make beds for lice

TOWARD THE BLUE PENINUSLA
after Joseph Cornell

The fourth wall is float glass
and behind, a sterile room lies

vacant save the furniture
the eye assembles

and the small, blue window
is an abstract painting,

where the stumbling buzz
of a horsefly thumps the pane.

HORMONAL CONTRACEPTIVE PILL

The neck of the womb is red and slick –
perimetrium, myometrium, endometrium,
breeding thick phlegm.

There will be no sowing in the hollow.

Meat is thinning, *atrophic epithelium,*
there is a logic to the pattern, monophasic,
and in the lull, a shedding.

SLEEPING IN THE RIVER AMSTEL

autopsy of five nylon triangles
no runner
stretchers
ribs
nor shaft

blunted scissors

split furcula
will not speak of wishes
toothpaste marble chip

30-volt
incandescent
bulb
pit of a peach
brain-like
blow into the plastic comb and it hums

various arms
of various other jugs
burnt-out sockets
in a black hard-shell case
there should be ringing

axe-head or planchette
smooth and cold to the touch

handgun

cranium of a baby doll
look through one ear and inside

a terminal strip

a door-hinge
open white headless effigy
Mickey Mouse of Christ Child with a Dove

I. DUMMY BOARD FIGURE OF A MAIDSERVANT PEELING AN APPLE

She makes a slit, there, at the core, shears bruised flesh –
the strand coils (like a loose mattress spring)
around the cutting edge and drops into her aproned lap.

When it forms an ‘O’
the kettle spits, shrieks.

Her lithe fingers whiten at the knife-hilt,
make a fist; it is cold and smooth to the touch.

II. DUMMY BOARD FIGURE OF A WOMAN WITH TWO CHILDREN

When the house is still, she'll shake the curtains out
to air the reek of cigarettes and boiled meat from split halves:

one limp puce rag (like a soiled handkerchief) –
the other spotless, save the needlework at the hem,
unbinding itself, snaking towards the door.

Sometimes,
they dare to make a whole.

Her gut swells (like a bedsheet on a washing line) –
ripples something like a face.

Soon, the progeny will play marbles
at her feet; she will think how easy it would be,
to let them choke.

III. DUMMY BOARD FIGURE OF A LADY IN QUEEN ANNE DRESS

Beneath the weight of her crinoline,
she does not know where she left her feet –

they must be somewhere warm, nesting
with the other token things he gave her:

one looking glass,
three tambour clocks,
eight silk gowns,
a pair of silver sewing shears,
two ivory combs,
one gold wheat chain,
a girl child,
one still life study
of veronica
and tuberoses in a vase.

By night, she dreams of plucking teeth
from learned men –

yellow pearls bumping
the soft pale flesh beneath her shift.

They would be cold
and smooth to the touch.

BLOOD ORANGE

The copses swell with sacs
of dimpled flesh, like cellulite –

hunching over mongrel fruit
which gorged itself on our water.

You must palm the swelling –
roll your wrist to sever cord.

Dig a nail into the bastard crease,
and its meat will be lung-shaped;

split the pustules with your bite –
let bitter plasma drain

into the red, wet hole
of your throat.

CATALOGUE ITEM: 89

coarse dry flannel
a cat’s lick

A HYPOCHONDRIAC CONSULTS THE MAGIC 8-BALL

Better not tell you now.

Outlook not so good.

Ask again later.

Outlook good.

Don’t count on it.

Yes – definitely.

My sources say no.

You may rely on it.

Without a doubt.

Better not tell you now.

Better not tell you now.

Signs point to yes.

It is certain.

Without a doubt.

Very doubtful.

Concentrate and ask again.

CUBIST PAINTING OF A SELFIE STICK

Semblance of a carbon whip antenna,
prosthetic arm, or telescopic soup ladle –

multi-axis,
omni-directional,
compact
trekking pole

salutes the firmament,

but dare not point
to something more
than itself.

ORLANDO

begin
in a white hallway bedroom door pulled to

bathroom

beyond
an imitation blue
peninsula

four suitcases
line up

the pool deck
in desperate want
of loungers

but the water is a black hole
and the filter comes alive at night

babbling

say
goodbye
house

WE BUY UGLY HOUSES

Bluebell tastes just like
the good old days

Dodge Grand Caravan

I can't stop the
I can't stop the
I can't stop the

Terms and conditions may apply

FLEA MARKET

BUFFET

GIFT SHOP

say
goodbye
Mickey

see you real soon

World of Orchids

Orange World

World Showcase

Lighthouse Sculpture Honours Tot
Killed by Gator at Walt Disney World

we the people

Pulse

overhead the traffic lights swing
a thin black cord around their necks

TEES $1.99

Spiderman spins
a sign for Subway
perspiration colouring
his morphsuit

a local woman
tallies cents in her tollbooth

the desk fan tips its head
in her direction

Orlando International Departures

the husk of an armadillo
rocking on the edge line

say
goodbye
car

planes taxi

images
cannot hold
themselves
together

carry-on

say
goodbye

and the smoking deck is a wire pen

scattered nubs
infertile seeds

the ground could not swallow

CLAW CRANE

Gangling phalanges
in a coop

wag,
plunge,
snatch

at the puerile whim
of some despotic thing –

revelling
in the gospel

that a metacarpus
cannot bear
the body’s weight.

THE BLACKBERRY BUSH

when the drupelets burst violaceous and aphids feast and a little girl slits her fat white wrists and howls and howls for a white apron mother turns the spicules to parable to wash well and do not thrust your fist into a bramble and little girls should not pick drupelets for fear of growing fat or feasting aphids or slitting wrists or bursting poison in violaceous fruit should the white apron mother spray the brush with pesticide and howl and howl when a girl becomes a parable

ROLLING CIGARETTES WITH AUNTIE FAYE

She tells me, stuff the hammock
with its pillow and pall –
just a pinch of moist, brown hair.

The caddy chatters
when you make it go –

spits a wrinkled sleeping bag,
little tuft sticking out.

Auntie Faye picks at it,
yanks its hair and rolls its body
on the arm of the settee.

She makes its thin, white skin
sit straight for licking –

tells me it's a dirty thing,
a bad thing, to make do.

A PREGNANT FEMALE WITH SOME REMOVABLE PARTS

Her belly is a firm, white cyst,
and there must be a gleaning –

a plexus of worms,
a walnut husk, a thin red rope
throttling a shrunken head,
and various other heaps of meat
abstracted from the hollow.

Things
are done
to her.

There is comfort
in the knowledge
that nothing lies
beyond the ceiling –
her achromatic eyes.

CATALOGUE ITEM: 13

in the absence of a body
six loose teeth have little bite

CUBIST PAINTING OF A THING IN THE ROAD

Inflate it with a foot pump,
and it would roll (a leather ball or floatie ring)
into the central reservation.

Crush it between your knees,
and it would froth (a burst chew-toy).

Greet it with a nod,
and it will wave (a fly swat or rubber glove) –
plumules fanning in the crosswind.

PHARMACY
after Joseph Cornell

When the volume of the neck
does not equal headspace

sift copper hair,
the pit of a peach,
mountains,
cities,
six glass shards,
and an orange
butterfly wing
into pillboxes.

To ease your ail,
swallow dry
the mirror image
of anthropoid eyes,
lips, and teeth –

lose your other face to the vials,
rattling in neat, analogous lines.

DOLLY

Dolly’s nightdress reeks of smoke
when she hobbles
room to blackened room
it snags on the hole
where the window should be
the staircase trips over itself
and Dolly’s mouth is red stitch
she cannot scream without undoing
a hatch that leads nowhere
and nobody
but Dolly dare shunt
into the garret
where sheets make ghosts of cabinets
to dust the bundle in its lidded crib
one milk tooth
an orange butterfly wing
a terminal strip
one plastic butter knife
that Dolly cannot grip
for lacking thumbs
Dolly’s kitchen reeks of glue
and the hob will not light
to boil parsnips
in a copper pot
because Dolly’s legs will not bend
she sleeps face-down on the parlour rug
and when we knock on the roof
Dolly plays dead

CUBIST PORTRAIT OF AN OLD MAN WHO IS NOT GRANDAD

When one bloodhound eye snags the pavement,
the other is a glass prothesis, goggling skyward.

And the fist poking out is for hosing toms and the fist poking out is for stewing cauliflower to a jelly is for ailing little girls or potting lavender and the fist poking out is for drubbing holes in stud partition walls or wagging buses to hum at the terminus.

He mounts the stairs like a nursling mammal –
slacks loose, peeling at the knees.

CATALOGUE ITEM: 1087

loop of artificial hair
in a shoebox

one facsimile
memento mori

MACERATOR

Do not thrust your fist inside the mouth
to feed it boneless meat, soured
cream cakes or soft root vegetables.

The grinding of its teeth will shake
your countertops for wanting more.

Do not thrust your fist inside the mouth
to feed it yellow curds of belly fat,
colonic links or kidneys.

The maw might feign a gagging –
sate its appetite with a finger or two.

DANIEL'S MUG AS A CUBIST PAINTING

partial rings whiter at the lip rings partially deconstructed

brown sediment becoming menstrual blood

at the bottom mottled becoming

bleeding brown dehydrated clots

rings darker in the dregs cyclic white brown and the lip is parched

becoming is there a logic to it logic

blood rings in the centre an intersection cyclic rings

dead stump becoming brown soot bleeding

sludge or crude oil in brown clots rehydrating logic dead blood

partial deconstructed rings dead stump partial rings whiter at the lip

in the dregs there is a logic to it

brown soot becoming crude oil deconstructed menstrual

partial rings

soil soot sediment swimming in rehydrated blood

and if the mug was white it could not say

MRS PERCY'S MOURNING PENDANT

She stokes the flaxen ringlet in its husk –
follicle to tip, simpering.

To harvest down from a human head,
you must first acquire a willing specimen.

Groom the coiffure with a wide-tooth comb
and clip a lock with sewing shears.

Then, wrap the tress around the hot slim barrel
of a rolling tong; let the coil stiffen.

Your hands should be clean
and quick to seal the curl with beeswax.

Once set, mount the crescent moon
on ivory; administer gum arabic to fix the shape.

She thumbs the oval casing into place,
hangs Mr Percy on a gold wheat chain.

THE GIRL WHO RECEIVES GIFTS FROM CROWS

Bring pearl buttons to my ledge –
one glass eye (blue), an axe head or planchette,
one yellow bead (heart-shaped),
a wishbone, or the tawny blade of a pocketknife (bent).

Bring the leg of a clothes peg to my door –
a spray of nightshade (black in fruit), one milk tooth,
and fowl heads (three) to freeze in sandwich bags.
A crow is always loyal until it's not.

INDESRUCTIBLE OBJECT
after Man Ray

Snagged on the silver hook of a pendulum,
the iris lolls and beats.

You imagine it omniscient,
wind the bony cup with a key –

when it won't bat cilia for looking square,
crack the pupil with a mallet.

You imagine it blind,
ticking in abstract caliginosity.

CATALOGUE ITEM: 395

paper crane prayed for symmetry
to be an acrobat on hammock silk

TWO MOTHERS

Beneath the skull cap is a white pith,
a thickness of parchment, *dura mater*,
meaning tough mother –

when she splits there will be pulp,
and if you licked it, the taste of salt.

Beneath the pith is a gossamer veil,
thickness of a latex glove, *pia mater*,
meaning tender mother –

her translucent hold stretches over
soft grey matter, over soft white matter.

It names itself into being:
cerebrum, cerebellum,
corpus callosum.

THE THESIS IS A PLASTIC THING:
A CURATORIAL STATEMENT

Like the modernist object, this thesis slips between formal categories, encompassing scholarly chapters, poetic compositions, and a critical-creative manifesto. Above all else, it is a plastic thing which synthesises, modulates, repairs, and terminates its inter-disciplinary methodology through the operations of reading and writing – responding to encounters with material, theoretical, and literary objects. Furthermore, this thesis formally and linguistically enacts the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of neuroplasticity as the 'ability of the nervous system to form and reorganize connections and pathways, as during development and learning or following injury.'[7] This plasticity is not only examined in my close readings of modernist objects, but is also executed in the formal and linguistic experiments of – and between – my scholarly chapters and poetic compositions. Moreover, it is at work throughout 'The Text is a Plastic Thing: A Manifesto,' in which I offer a collection of numbered aphorisms and directives which herald portmanteaux, anthropomorphism, fragmentation, the dash-as-synapse, intertextuality, spatial notation, polyphony, hybridity, grammatical distortion, contradiction, typographic innovation, punctuation, and repetition as the fundamental criterions of plastic writing.[8] The components of this thesis appropriate these techniques to explore the radical potentiality of plastic writing to articulate physical and psychological slippages between human subjects and nonhuman objects in the material world. The purpose of this curatorial statement is, therefore, to demonstrate how the neuronal pathways or synaptic junctions of this thesis synthesise, modulate, repair, and terminate connections between my critical and creative praxes – revelling in the affectivity of matter.

Throughout the thesis, repetition performs a substantial role in its plastic methodology as linguistic habits and nonhuman objects compulsively recur in disparate conditions or contexts. For example, the refrain of 'six loose teeth from a comb' is established in the opening paragraph of the introduction – a list of nonhuman objects, critical theories, and modernist poets, whose principles will be analysed, appropriated, and adapted.[9] This refrain returns in 'Museum of Lost and Broken Things,' where 'six loose teeth from a comb' litter the sandbanks of 'Beachcombing in the Torres Strait' – subsequently reunited with their maw when the comb

[7] Oxford English Dictionary, *Neuroplasticity* (2021) <oed.com/view/Entry/50933187?redirectedFrom=neuroplasticity#eid> [Accessed 1 March 2021].
[8] See 'The Text is a Plastic Thing: A Manifesto', pp. 119 – 120 and pp. 122 – 123 for further analyses and explication of these techniques.
[9] See 'Modernist Objects: A Critical Inventory or Introduction', p. 1.

is dredged up from the riverbeds of 'Sleeping in the River Amstel'.[10] In 'Catalogue Item: 13,' the teeth of the comb are extracted once more, anthropomorphised by the couplet: 'in the absence of a body / six loose teeth have little bite'.[11] These repetitions explicate the nonhuman object's capacity for plastic modulation, experiencing physical and psychological transformation in direct response to its encounters with other people, language, and things. There is, after all, a confusion between what is plastic and what is human material; the teeth in our mouths are objectified as those of the comb are aligned with the process of mastication. Furthermore, these plastic replications synthesise and repair connotations, however arbitrary, between my scholarly chapters and poetic compositions – heralding the commonality of matter.

Another significant example of repetition manifests in my critical prose. Between my analyses of the materiality of language in Mina Loy's alphabet puzzle and the plasticity of language in the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's sound compositions, there is an active synapse. In Chapter 2, I explain Loy's desire to release language from the tyranny of automatic cognition:

> In playing Loy's alphabet games, the player or reader is compelled to relive their earliest acquisition of the found material that is language in childhood, when the shapes and sounds of letters were strange, their order negotiable – when human subjects and nonhuman objects were liberated from ontological classification, things with infinite possibilities.[12]

In Chapter 3, this phrase is modified in direct response to its encounters with the theory of plasticity:

> Finally, the Baroness compels the reader to relive their earliest requisitions of the plastic material that is language in childhood, when the shapes and sounds of letters were strange, their order negotiable – when those neuronal pathways between sign, sound, and sense were not absolutely formed, but still in the abstract process of formation.[13]

These compulsive repetitions expose the self-referentiality of my chapters, offering not only a commentary on the materiality of language, but on the plasticity of thesis production in which hypotheses are synthesised, modulated, repaired, and terminated during research.[14] Moreover,

[10] 'Beachcombing in the Torres Strait', p. 148; 'Sleeping in the River Amstel', p. 159.
[11] 'Catalogue Item: 13', p. 173.
[12] Chapter 2, p. 53.
[13] Chapter 3, p. 105.
[14] Another significant example of this technique is manifested via my examinations of the anthropomorphic doll in Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 1, the doll's silent anthropoid body is explored as an uncanny materiality in Lola

this engagement with the materiality of language is developed by my analyses and subsequent appropriation of the portmanteau. Accompanying my exploration of the modernist portmanteau in Chapter 3 is a specimen of my own formation: the word 'synaptoterminus'. Though 'synaptogenesis' can be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* – simply defined as 'the formation of synapses between nerve cells,' 'synaptoterminus' is a composite noun which describes the expiration of a neuronal pathway, following apoptosis or cell death.[15] After its conception, this portmanteau materialises on four additional occasions across the chapter and manifesto. As I argue in Chapter 3, the portmanteau revels in plasticity as its 'type-set manifestation on the white matter of the page resists polymorphism' even as the primary terms are assimilated or 'affixed to one and other in such a way that their psychological meaning is permanently mutated.'[16] Here, I appropriate the experimental praxes of my modernist poets, executing the philosophy that plasticity is not the absence of form, but the possibility of its transformation –identifying the plasticity of language as that which grants both modern and modernist practitioners the capability to articulate the material world in all its plurality.

These experiments culminate in my own collection of plastic compositions, which appropriate the miscellany of criterions explicated in my scholarly chapters and manifesto. For example, in 'Bébé Marie' the cognitive processes through which we ontologically classify human and nonhuman matter are distorted by its experiments with anthropomorphism and spatial notation, alongside a slippage of prosaic and poetic matter. As a piece of ekphrasis, the poem responds to a composition by the pioneer of modernist assemblage art, Joseph Cornell. In Chapter 1, I foreground modernism's compulsive returns to the doll through a description of this work: a shadow box which holds a porcelain doll in a cloth dress and straw hat, peering out from behind a knot of twigs, unblinking.[17] The poem not only resumes my critical analyses of the anthropoid doll's silence in Chapters 1 and 2, but offers an amendment or extension of Marie's story – describing how she came to be immortalised in Cornell's box. Here, Marie is afforded the physical agency to spin her head 'around and around' – to reappear long after she

Ridge's 'Sun-Up' – revelling in slippage between the human and nonhuman. In Chapter 2, I explicate the anthropomorphic doll as abject, whose stasis maintains an unbearable likeness to a human corpse, in Mina Loy's 'Magasins du Louvre'. Here, I employ the same descriptors for the doll, 'who has a human-like mouth but cannot speak' (p. 28, 66) – formally articulating the productive continuums between these chapters, demonstrating the plasticity of my meditations, which developed sequentially in direct response to my encounters with critical theorists and modernist poets. It should also be acknowledged that I return to the silence of the anthropomorphic doll in my poetic compositions.

[15] Oxford English Dictionary, *Synaptogenesis* (2021) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/196361?redirectedFrom=synaptogenesis#eid19352551> [Accessed 1 March 2021].

[16] Chapter 3, p. 106.

[17] Chapter 1, p. 27.

has been abandoned at the foot of an apple tree, to rap at the child's window by nightfall. Formally mimicking those unintelligible passages of time which disturb the narrative arc of Lola Ridge's 'Sun-Up', silence materialises in the spatial notations between its couplets. In these moments of stillness, we cannot know for certain whether hours, days, weeks, or months pass between its couplets, or where Marie – rendered limbless and hairless by the child – might hide. 'Bébé Marie' (like Ridge's 'Sun-Up') is an incomplete chronicle, articulated simultaneously through typescript and the terrible whiteness of the page. With its exploration of the latent physical and psychological agency of the anthropomorphic doll, 'Bébé Marie' becomes a compelling rumination on what strange matter the human subject and nonhuman object may, after all, have in common.

Another neuronal pathway or synaptic junction between my critical and creative praxes is synthesised by 'The Other Side of an Apple,' which offers a commentary on our propensity to anticipate the other side of objects – to learn and remember the arbitrary relationships between shapes, colours, functions, words, and things. It is a poetic meditation on what happens when these plastic operations are rendered obsolete, and the unnameability of the nonhuman object stimulates physical and psychological transformation in the human cerebrum. In Chapter 3, I investigate Gertrude Stein's experiments in apprehending, however momentarily, the plastic referentiality of object recognition with the following analogy:

> when sight fails us, when our ability to hear, touch, smell, or taste fails us, the plastic brain anticipates, associating the object at hand with some connected, retained memory. When we encounter an apple in a bowl, for example, we assume that the other side is round simply because this is what we have learnt from turning over other apples.

This analogy was the neuronal genesis of my composition, which appropriates Stein's formal and linguistic habits – an omittance of punctuation, obsessive reparations of repetitions, grammatically distorted phrasing – as the human subject struggles, however fruitlessly, to master the object.[18] Here, I apprehend the plastic materiality of the composition, which may suspend the reader's ability to ontologically classify matter with its negation of literary genre and proper syntax, facilitating a radical reconceptualisation of this thing we name a poem.

In the plastic brain of this thesis, there are neuronal pathways or synaptic junctions between the critical prose, manifesto, and poetic compositions, which are continually synthesised, modulated, repaired, and terminated in the operation of reading. Furthermore, the

[18] Chapter 3, p. 95.

components of *Becoming Plastic: Modernist Poetics, (Neuro)Psychoanalysis, and the Material Object* demonstrate the radical affectivity of matter, heralding the modernist axiom that if we are, at last, to render obsolete the reductive systems by which we ontologically classify human subjects and nonhuman objects, we must begin by disturbing the language through which they are named. Here, this thesis explores the plasticity of the material world in which we all participate, revelling in the physical and psychological slippages between human subjects and nonhuman objects, between modernist and modern composition, between critical and creative praxes.

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