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Cedric Van Dijck, 2023. *Modernism, Material Culture and the First World War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)

Chapter 2 of this study in the current literary critical materialism, 'E.M. Forster in the Street', will clearly interest Forsterians, as will its coverage of Forster associates Virginia Woolf and Mulk Raj Anand. The other two writers in focus, French poet Guillaume Apollinaire and English poet-cum-novelist Hope Mirrlees, whose *Paris: A Poem* (1920) published by Woolf and her husband Leonard at the Hogarth Press, are put into the same orbit, with rewarding outcomes.

Readers of Forster will find in Cedric Van Dijck's monograph a thorough contextualization of his Egyptian writings as part of an argument about the cultural history of the First World War. Forster's texts of Alexandria are placed in the environment of the liminal city where they were written, filled with a mass of images and items, many of them displaced by war, and often strange multilingual utterances. Equally, they appear in a new light when put alongside what Apollinaire, Woolf, Mirrlees, and Anand did with the objects of war.

The book appears as part of the series *Edinburgh Critical Studies in Modernist Culture*. Accordingly, its goals develop from those laid out by the series editors: to offer: "a breadth of scope and an expanded sense of the canon of modernism" as opposed to "focusing on individual authors" (p. ix). The area of operation is the twenty-first-century Anglophone "new modernist studies", associated with the journal *Modernism/modernity* and names such as Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. The structure of an author per article or chapter seems the one preferred by critics in this tradition. Three of Van Dijck's four main chapters focus on a single author (Apollinaire, Forster, and Anand), the other connecting two authors, Virginia Woolf and Hope Mirrlees.

Van Dijck's key argument in the book is that "modernist encounters with the things of war – equipment, museum pieces, souvenirs, paraphernalia, commodities, curiosities served as a way to make sense of an extraordinary historical moment" (p. 1). His approach is quite strongly biographical, taking understanding of the authors' lives as keys to the textual productions under consideration; war is made sense of, above all, through personal groupings. In common with the

habits of the new modernist studies, Van Dijck does indeed pursue modernisms and modernist elements across a broader range of writing than the modernist studies of the twentieth century, focused on a relatively small vanguard of innovators and their immediate followers, did.

He does so with the further theoretical aid of the "textual materialism" or "thing theory" of American literary critics Bill Brown and Elaine Freedgood, a critical development of the new historicism dating from the late 1990s and 2000s which recalls Roland Barthes's 1968 essay "The Reality Effect", published in English translation in 1986. There, the details of the realist text connote rather than denote the real: they announce to readers that we are in the presence of the real[1]. Thing theorists pursue the seemingly random objects, brands, and substances which recur in and even clog the realist text, arguing that what seem background textures in fact point towards a sort of political unconscious, recalling Fredric Jameson, of the text.

Van Dijck uses thing theory sparingly but well as a tool for pursuing the scattered objects of the First World War through literary texts and careers. For example, he argues that attention to "trauma" and "endurance" have dominated cultural studies of World War One, underplaying the importance of "tangible objects such as helmets, shop signs, monuments and mud stained bodies" on the experience of the war (p. 2). A case in point would be examples of the printed, physical media, such as the *Palestine News*, produced in Cairo by British soldiers, a do-it-yourself newspaper which, Van Dijck speculates, Forster "must have read […] at one point or another while living out his war years in Alexandria" (p. 7).

Chapter 1, "Guillaume Apollinaire's Curiosities", covers "the French poet's experiments with the material culture of the trenches" in which he served as a soldier (p. 9). A noteworthy example of these experiments is Apollinaire's habit of sending "curiosities" from the Western Front to a correspondent, Madeleine Pagés, who worked as a teacher in French-ruled Algeria, very far from the fighting. Van Dijck's biographical orientation emerges in the account of the relationship between Apollinaire and Pagés. But it contributes to a larger-scale argument, since Apollinaire's "experiments", Van Dijck memorably claims, "disarmed the deadly products of an industrial conflict, turning them into peculiar products of everyday life at the front, which was at times precarious, at times dull". The emphasis is not on sorrow or commemoration, then, but on coping.

1 "Flaubert's barometer, Michelet's little door finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*"(Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect", in *The Rustle of Language*, tr. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1986), 141).

In his collection *Alcools*, Apollinaire exemplified this treatment of war by acting as a sort of poetic cubist, "repurposing objects so as to see their true nature" (p. 23). The war zones themselves, Van Dijck shows, were places that people situated elsewhere were intensely curious about, instilling value in objects such as the *Palestine News* or the kepi hat that Apollinaire posted to Pagés from the front. Van Dijck makes a convincing case for the importance of cataloguing, or "fragmentary enumeration" (p. 26), in the processing of war experience. In the chapter's attention to "the military press", much of it like the *Palestine News* soldier-produced and "ephemeral" (p. 33), and the multiple uses and symbolism of the helmet designed by Louis Adrian and taken into use by the French army during 1915, Van Dijck sees literary texts not as isolated artefacts but as outcomes of literary *activity*, with the author in focus, here Apollinaire, one component of a messy cultural scene.

Chapter 2's account of Forster in Alexandria presents its urban environment as "a colonial front saturated with a babble of different tongues" (p. 9). In place of the wartime 'curiosities' central to Van Dijck's chapter on Apollinaire is a vision of urban sites as characterized by this linguistic babel which will not surprise readers of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* – or even Forster's *A Passage to India* with its "God si Love", discussed by Van Dijck in his chapter conclusion (p. 78), and "Esmiss Esmoor". The perspective on World War One here moves beyond "the familiar terrain of the Western Front" to zones in which "military personnel abroad found themselves surrounded by non-European languages and scripts, as many of them travelled for the first time in their lives" (p. 51), forging slang terms as they went.

Such a statement does not apply to Forster, who had two years before taking ship for Alexandria in late 1915 finished his first extended trip to India, and who had been a classicist familiar with Ancient Greek script since early in childhood. As in the Apollinaire chapter, biography figures strongly, Van Dijck inviting readers to "follow E.M. Forster through wartime Egypt" (p. 52). It was the materiality of script or, put another way, "words as "dead" and "mute" things" (p. 52) which intrigued Forster there, Van Dijck argues, somewhat clashing with another biographical reading referenced by him in which Forster's relationship with the English-speaking Egyptian tram conductor Mohammed El Adl was the most important happening during the Alexandria years for the writer.

A well-informed, scholarly, and deft account of Forster's relationship with "found" words in Alexandria follows. This includes those of the local English-language press (Forster wrote for the *Egyptian Mail* while he was there) and

shop signs on which local shopkeepers attempted to attract custom from the many foreigners the war had brought to Egypt. Van Dijck proves himself well-versed in Forster scholarship as well as in accounts of modernism and the media, developing a lively account of the ("incredibly rich") "media landscape" (p. 55) of wartime Egypt, which included numerous publications in Arabic, French, and Italian alongside the Anglophone *Egyptian Mail*, its rival newspaper the *Gazette*, and many "small-scale, short-lived ventures" in English (p. 55).

The physicality of print and the complex realities of multilingualism both come to the fore as rarely before in Forster studies, *inter alia* casting light on Forster's repeated forays into the guidebook genre which culminated in *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* as well as a textual site not mentioned by Van Dijck, the first chapter of *A Passage to India*. Forster's view of Alexandrian street signs is explained via an essay whose title, Van Dijck rightly points out, has "clear racist undertones" (p. 62): "Gippo English". Not least, this must be because it seems to seek a colonial picturesque in Alexandria. In his chapter conclusion (p. 77), Van Dijck considers that in fact the greatest legacy of Forster's stay in Egypt could be the nuanced portrait of "East" and "West" as not entirely constructed opposing poles which appears in *A Passage to India*.

Forster's alertness to different registers of English emerges clearly in Van Dijck's account of another article he wrote, "Army English", highlighting the alienation effect of the wartime Egyptian streets on Forster. A second case study starts with visuality in the shape of photographs and moves to a view of "Ancient Inscriptions" in the perception of wartime travellers to Egypt as demonstrating the quality of writing as visual object. While implicitly deconstructionist, this section of Van Dijck's argument remains closer to the implicitly critical but detached historicism of Fredric Jameson than to Jacques Derrida's unpacking of hierarchical binaries, with Edward W. Said's politically engaged account of Europeans' construction of the Middle East even further away. An interest in visuality, including textuality as a sort of visuality, is one of the hallmark interests of new modernist studies, reflected here in Van Dijck's eagerness to claim that "faced with the material remains of Ancient Egypt, the soldier's imperative was to look rather than to read" (p. 75).

Chapter 3 turns from streets to monuments. Van Dijck moves here deftly between Woolf's canonical fiction, specifically *Jacob's Room* (1922) – often read as marking her transition to fully modernist status – and the Woolfs' activities as proprietors of a hand press, recalling the soldiers' publications of Chapters 1

and 2. At the Hogarth Press, for instance, in the living room of their home on the edge of London, they printed Mirrlees's *Paris: A Poem* (1920). Temporally speaking, we here move beyond the war years themselves to the immediate postwar period, the era when, according to Paul Fussell in the title of his classic 1978 study, the "Great War" dominated "modern memory".

The chapter's monuments include literal war memorials such as that in Cookham, Berkshire, the opening of which was itself memorialised in a painting by Stanley Spencer, whose brother had been killed in the war, reproduced by Van Dijck (p. 89). In *Jacob's Room* and *Paris*, Van Dijck argues, Woolf and Mirrlees "probed scenes of tactile contact with memorial objects – monuments, gravestones, statues *and* books – as a way of mediating loss" (p. 92). It is a point that is elegantly and convincingly made. At the Hogarth Press, the Woolf's established enduring memorials to the war and those lost in it through Mirrlees's poem and others, authored by the war dead: Rupert Brooke; Leonard Woolf's brother Cecil.

Woolf's Jacob Flanders, Van Dijck shows, is a ghostly figure in the novel which includes his first name in its title. Through memorializing him, she memorialized dead contemporaries such as Brooke, Cecil Woolf, and (lost to illness a decade before the war), her brother Thoby Stephen. The ghostliness is meaningful. "At the time of writing the book, in 1921", Van Dijck points out, "300,000 British and Imperial servicemen were still missing in action" (p. 95). Overall, Van Dijck skilfully recounts the balance of spectral and enduringly monumental in *Jacob's Room*, drawing on noteworthy critics in new modernist studies such as Paul K. Saint-Amour and Elaine Scarry. The gendered ambivalence of monumentality is central: physical monuments aestheticize the bodies of young men killed in battle as a result of other men's decisions.

Mirrlees's *Paris*, like the city of its title in 1919, the year in which it is set, is haunted by the vast numbers of French soldiers killed during the war. The Woolfs' action in publishing the poem, Van Dijck claims, is that of executing a "*material turn* to the book – as an object that lasts and outlasts us" (p. 104), as a contribution to World War One remembrance culture. The "physicality of memorial objects such as gravestones and plaques" (p. 108) is conveyed in the Hogarth Press *Paris* through typographical distinctions which Virginia Woolf's hand typesetting personally established. Van Dijck gives a powerful sense of the hand-printed Hogarth Press books, including Paris and Woolf's own *Kew Gardens* (1918) as "curiously affective objects" (p. 110). The chapter closes with

a sensitive account of how printing *Poems by C.N. Sidney Woolf* at the Hogarth Press worked as "a therapy" (p. 113) for the dead man's brother, Philip, inseparable from him in life and with him when he was killed. Overall, the chapter gives a touching sense of how books could function as a form of consolation, humanising the horrors of war and honouring by recalling and preserving the memory (as people of culture) of those who senselessly died in World War One.

Chapter 4 uses Mulk Raj Anand's 1930s–40s First World War trilogy of novels to grasp "affective moments of contact with the soil" in relation to the "power imbalances" (p. 128) involved when Britain brought hundreds of thousands of Indians to fight in the war on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918. Van Dijck reads Anand's "encounter with the land, and with the documents that determined its ownership" (p. 128) as an implicitly anti-imperial critique, in which the materiality of the soil as tilled by agricultural workers tallies, paradoxically perhaps, with the modernist turn towards "the *mind within* rather than the *world without*" (p. 130), considering how Woolf rejected the Victorian-Edwardian novel as something filled with mere externalities.

Anand came from a postwar generation in that he was still a child when World War One ended. But, as Van Dijck puts it, the war "gave" him "his subject" (p. 132), specifically that of poor peasants from the Punjab who go to Europe in the effort to pay off debts which British colonists insisted they had incurred on the land they worked. Anand's modernist turn "*within*" is exemplified by an account of his protagonist Lalu's experience of manual labour breaking the earth of a field, a sense of the moment and of the muscular activity of the human body rather than, say, a reflection on the past as many of Woolf's essays in internality are.

Van Dijck's skilful reading of Anand's trilogy connects it with the interests of his monograph overall, linking the mud of the trenches with the earth that the bodies of the killed, abandoned on the battlefield, will become. In the process, Forster's perspectives on the earth and rolling landscape of the part of central India where he spent most time often come into view. After an interlude considering the burials of soldiers who dies far from home which connects Brooke and Thomas Hardy with Anand, the latter's treatment in various writings of the materiality of wartime paperwork comes into focus. The section also rounds up clerical activities of the other writers covered in the monograph, to make one of Van Dijck's overall arguments, namely that "the war prompted a more material understanding of the text" (p. 146). Anand's postwar anticolonial politics then come to the fore in a chapter conclusion.

Van Dijck ends the book with a "Coda" focused on the War Reserve Collection of political ephemera established at Cambridge University Library early in the First World War, comparing it with efforts to memorialise the war in other countries that it touched. Personal aspects of Van Dijck's research quest enter this epilogue. The use of objects "to make sense of the war's defining experiences" (p. 167) is the mantra. Objects mediate: this is the claim.

Overall, Van Dijck offers numerous strong arguments in this admirable and thorough study: on Forster "that language itself might be material" (p. 70), for instance. The quarry is cultural history, with literary biography and thing theory methods used in the pursuit. Throughout, his footnotes provide an excellent guide to scholarship, both on the writers covered and the question of war in relation to modernism more broadly. His chapters on Woolf, Mirrlees, and Anand in particular contain much that will benefit Forsterians – as much as the chapter which directly addresses Forster, in fact – and these include their insights into diverse connections of Forster's such as J.R. Ackerley, Malcolm Darling, and Mohammed El Adl.

As Van Dijck subtly shows, literature's contribution to handling the effects of war is often dislocated and indirect, certainly compared to what nurses, surgeons, and psychologists do for those affected. It allows contradictions to emerge, like Apollinaire's "curiosities" and the uses of English which Forster saw in Alexandria. Still, at times, thinking of how the suffering inflicted by those who initiated and directed World War One are revealed by the anger of a Siegfried Sassoon or the heard-rending grief of a Wilfred Own, I found myself willing Van Dijck to move beyond critical detachment towards public engagement.