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*Material Difference: Modernism and the Allegories of
Discourse* by William D. Melaney (review)

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or aporias addressed earlier, arguing that Deleuze's work on visibilities—combined with Rancière's insights into the collapse of the time lag previously separating reality and photographic copy—has the potential to open up new paths for a postcolonial studies that has failed to engage with “the transformative potential of the ongoing encounters between Europe and the rest of the globe” (159). This chapter's lack of discussion of work already ongoing in this area (most prominently, that of Edouard Glissant) is puzzling, but also reflective of the montage approach, which focuses on reassembly of key ideas for their transformative potential, rather than on an extensive overview of a given thinker's or concept's reception. It also reflects the suggestive, open-ended quality that Chow's writing increasingly takes on as each chapter, and the book itself, draws to a close. The final essay in the collection pursues Chow's interest in new technologies of image-capture through a concise reading of Ang Lee's 2007 film *Se, jie* (*Lust, Caution*), while the postscript, “Intimations from a Scene of Capture,” fittingly closes the work with thoughts on visibility as trap in Julian Rohrer's *Vogelscheuche*—four photographs capturing the haunting shadow of an “anti-lure,” a bird-shaped decal affixed to a glass window.

Dense and wide-ranging, *Entanglements* provides both innovative analyses and pointed questions for any scholar interested in aesthetics, democratization, and domination in an age of digitization.

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William D. Melaney. *Material Difference: Modernism and the Allegories of Discourse.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. 255 pp.

William D. Melaney's complex comparative study depends on a number of theoretical moving parts, including philosophy of language, aesthetics, modernism, materiality, and the distinction he maintains between traditional allegory and allegorical works of modernist literature. Although the thunder and lightning produced by these components sometimes distract from Melaney's own theory of modernist literature, the insights that this book offers for thinking about the literary text as a disruptive material object are worth braving the storm. Melaney argues that the modernist text is located at the intersection of two critical discourses. The first is the discourse of linguistics, which he identifies with Nietzsche and traces through Freud and Lacan to Derrida. The second is the discourse of aesthetics, which he identifies with the work of Hegel and traces through Marx to the Frankfurt School, especially Benjamin and Adorno. Although these lineages themselves are not novel, Melaney makes the case that the first discourse, that of linguistics, has typically dominated discussions of modernist literature to the exclusion of the second discourse of aesthetics. He thus sets out to demonstrate how

these two discourses can be harmonized in a theory of modernist allegory in which the gap between art and reality is disrupted by the literary text itself as a site of what he calls “material difference.” “From the standpoint of the literary reader,” Melaney suggests, “what this means is that the text that invites interpretation can be approached as a material object possessing semiotic properties through which the human mind comes to apprehend its place in an ongoing struggle, rather than as a mere observer of what is in fact the case” (9). The payoff, then, for buying into Melaney’s theory of allegorical modernism is that the literary text itself—and not some abstract idea of culture, society, or art—becomes the active agent that prevents a totalizing view of the world and engenders the resultant sense of alienation that has become perhaps the textbook trope of literary modernism.

While many contemporary studies interested in the materiality of literature turn their attentions toward print culture and the history of the book as Leah Price does in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012), or toward everyday objects as Bill Brown does in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003), Melaney’s materiality can best be understood in terms of the literary text’s resistance to the reader through language, which he explains by describing language as “the material component that forestalls the reader’s access to mundane truths” in each text he examines (49). In other words, poetic language’s two-ness, its metaphorical nature, has the capacity to render it allegorical by creating a rift between the work of art and experience. This rift in allegorical discourse becomes material when the gap cannot be easily closed, and this materiality is what sets modernist literature apart from traditional allegories whose languages are more overtly transparent. As a frame for reading modernist writers from James Joyce to André Malraux to Wallace Stevens, Melaney situates his approach in the context of the two opening chapters that make up “Part I: Allegories of Discourse.” The first chapter works from Benjamin’s theory of allegory to Melaney’s allegorical and material language; the second chapter compares the work of Adorno and Derrida to bring the aesthetic and linguistic discourses together in the material difference of allegorical modernism. The desired outcome of these chapters is to “reverse the usual conception of the subject as the ahistorical origin of conscious goals” and to “begin logically enough with a literary text that both reveals and conceals the trauma of its own composition, just as it can only be read according to principles of criticism that somehow sustain its sense of the world” (49).

Following the introduction and Part I, the book is divided into three parts: “Part II: Allegorical Prose,” “Part III: Allegorical Poetry,” and “Part IV: The Allegorical Imagination.” In the four chapters that comprise Part II Melaney tackles the prose writings of Joyce, Kafka, Malraux, and Andrić, demonstrating how these writers employ language to frustrate conventional hermeneutic strategies and thus expose the process by which cultural practices become mythic in literature. Perhaps the strongest articulation of the materiality of the text comes about during the analysis of Joyce when Melaney

argues that in Joyce's socio-political and religious context "the function of the classics...has less to do with a scaffolding in myth or grounding in any one tradition than with a textual movement across space and time that inscribes an unending struggle for cultural hegemony" (65). Here Melaney's material difference becomes most palpable by revealing that the language of the literary text itself is material; it moves "across space and time" and has the capacity to interrupt dominant ways of thinking. Having considered the material difference of the literary text in the historically-minded works of these prose writers, Melaney turns to modernist poets Rilke, Eliot, Williams, and Stevens in Part III. The purpose of this generic organization that moves from prose to verse, he explains, is to "consider Modernist allegory from the standpoint of poetry in order to focus on what distinguishes this mode of writing from referential modes of literature" (117). These poets allow Melaney to build on the work of his first book, *After Ontology: Literary Theory and Modernist Poetics*, by showing how the material difference of the literary text enacts a central principle of Gadamer's hermeneutics in which "the work of art can function in relation to a kind of proto-language that actually exists prior to our interpretation of words" (135). Thus, the language of William Carlos Williams' poetry is no longer merely a series of well-organized, representational signs, but a collection of "verbal objects" (169).

Melaney concludes his project in Part IV with two chapters respectively devoted to "A Semiotics of Reading" and "Allegories of the Spirit." It is in these final chapters that the value of Melaney's approach to modernist literature becomes clearest. By reimagining the literary text as a site of material difference, Melaney has developed a theory of reading that moves from "a lingering faith in ultimate cognitive transparency" to "an inherently semiotic process that evokes the play of language as constitutive for our assessment of both literature and whatever remains unthought within language" (193). The intersection of the discourses of linguistics and aesthetics has brought about a new reading of modernist literature as uniquely allegorical in its simultaneous preservation of the gap between art and reality and its frustration of negotiating that gap in the literary work. Although the cast of literary figures is not extremely diverse in terms of race, gender, or geography, this allegorical approach has important implications for studying cultural values and norms, literary criticism, and narratives of history because it arrests the project of Enlightenment modernity in its tracks and provides a more inclusive theory of modernist literature—one that begins not with author or tradition, but with the text itself.

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