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The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous by Erin E. Edwards

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**The “Corpse-power” of Becoming:
(After)Lives of the Modernist Corpse**

***The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and
the Posthumous* by ERIN E. EDWARDS**

University of Minnesota Press, 2018
\$27.00 USD

Reviewed by **A. IRENE MANGOUTAS**

Erin E. Edwards opens *The Modernist Corpse* with what she calls a “modernist body count”:

The decomposing corpse of Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*. The radically dehumanized, lynched bodies in *Cane*. The defenestration of Clare Kendry in *Passing*. Tea Cake Woods, infected with a zoonotic disease in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Vicente Girones, gored by a bull, “All for sport. All for pleasure,” in *The Sun Also Rises*. Myrtle Wilson, hit-and-run victim in *The Great Gatsby*, and Gatsby’s own corpse, leaving only the strangely geometric trace of “a thin red circle” in his West Egg swimming pool. The self-organizing “crowd” of corpses flowing ethereally through the city in *The Waste Land*. The corpses of Bessie Mears and Mary Dalton, reported and circulated by the news media in *Native Son*. The “nothing-at-all” corpse of William Carlos Williams’s bluntly titled “Death,” which offers no consolation, only the pragmatic advice: “just bury it.” (1)

This roll-call of the dead names corpses of diverse origin. Murder, war, illness, sport, accident: all are progenitors for the corpse

protagonists that populate the Modernist canon. Edwards offers their names at the outset of her study, not as an elegy for the fallen, but as a point of departure for their fruitful and multivalent afterlives. Unlike the more conventional perspective of the Modernist project, which mourns the decomposition and fragmentation of the body as a loss—these corpses are so many sites for mourning the passing of a shared pre-War mythology of peace, prosperity, and progress, and are rife with melancholia for the increasingly industrial, mechanized, *unhuman* conditions of the twentieth-century—Edwards offers these corpses as a beginning, a launching point, a becoming.

Relying heavily on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Edwards’s study “maintains a radical skepticism toward the concept of the fully human” (2). In “seeking to undo this autonomous human subject, this book regards the corpse as a site of ‘becoming-earth’” (*Ibid*). Indeed, Edwards’s resistance to the elegiac approach to the corpse body proposes a reading of Modernist literature that resists an engagement with death as an ending. Reading against the grain of the Modernist desire for wholeness—for a gathering up of the fragmented bodies of War, be it the Great, Civil, class, sex, or otherwise—Edwards’s discussion offers a perspective that revels in the generative possibilities of the corpse body:

far from signifying the mortal limits of the human, the corpse in modernism functions ‘autopoietically’ as a generative site from which to rewrite the living body and its relations to putatively dead or lifeless things. (3)

Through her posthumanist approach, Edwards infuses new life into the Modernist canon. In the four chapters and the coda of *The Modernist Corpse*, she tackles the most canonical of Modernist texts, and, true to Pound's maxim, 'make[s] [them] new.' She proposes the site of the corpse body as a generative space, focalizing what Bill Brown, following Adorno, calls "accepting the otherness of things" (qtd. in Edwards 33). "[T]his book," she observes,

argues that accepting the otherness of the corpse is the condition for accepting an array of differences that yield a more expansive understanding of life. (33)

The first chapter, "Inhuman Remains," responds to the question, "what remains of the human once it becomes a corpse?" (35), using as case studies William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and *Absalom! Absalom!* to posit that the dead body "leaves behind . . . its own *corpse-power*" (38). The chapter explores the *corpse-power* of the bodies of Addie Bundren and Charles Bon, othered in life by gender and race, respectively, and offers, through the narrative of their corpse bodies, such possibilities of becoming from which they were excluded in their animate lives. This chapter and the next, "Autopsy-Optics," focuses on othered corpses of the American South: a discussion, in Faulkner's terms, of "the long silence of notpeople in notlanguage" (qtd. in Edwards 75).

"Autopsy-Optics" juxtaposes racialized bodies in Jean Toomer's *Cane* with W.E.B. DuBois's "Georgia Negro Exhibit," a photo-collection first presented at the 1900 Paris Exposition. Edwards frames her reading of the bodies of *Cane*

and "Exhibit" through the lynching photograph of William Brown. Where Brown's mutilated body represents "not killing a living person but redundantly killing a corpse—killing what has already been disqualified from life" (77), the bodies in *Cane* and "Exhibit" reintegrate the corpse into a generative space—a reconstitution, as it were, into what *qualifies* as life. Using the autoptic gaze, a variant on the gaze of the camera, to "visually penetrate the 'dead husk' of the other," Edwards posits that Toomer and DuBois invite their viewers to "'discover' ethnographic typologies and more generalized 'truths' about the South" (84).

The third and fourth chapters shift into an exploration of other types of becoming. "Sutures and Grooves" posits an aesthetics of 'becoming-machine' that emerges from the mass production of corpses as the key export of the First World War. Focusing on "the materiality of the corpse—and, more specifically, the human skull" (113), this chapter offers readings of Rilke and Mina Loy's engagement with the coronal suture in their poetry and essays, James Whales's "iconic skull-face of *Frankenstein*" (115), Man Ray's "rayographs," and Baroness Elsa's use of her living skull as "humachine, humaterial, humanimal" (142) to "[bear] witness to the atrocities of war and its unassimilated trauma" (145). As such, the corpse body functions as a generative site of production—of skull-music, skull-photos, skull-machines—that resists the impulse of mourning, instead using the corpse as "media through which [to engage] with technology and a consequently rearranged material world" (142).

"Love and Corpses," a study of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, focuses on a queer posthumanism that culminates in the

generative space of ‘becoming-animal,’ overturning the heteronormative “myth of the ‘Family of Man’” (156) that restricts entry to queer and non-human bodies alike. This chapter addresses protagonist Robin’s “reciprocal engagements with corpses, animals, plants, and other forms of nonhuman life,” which “exceed a bounded emphasis upon the species perpetuation of the human,” and define Robin’s body as the “generative source of life that flourishes where traditional forms of reproduction fail” (158).

In the coda, Edwards performs a reading of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, asking, “what kind of body is a text?” (185). In her reading of “ROASTBEEF,” Edwards proposes that Stein “relentlessly probes the species differences in ‘kind’ between humans and animals, living and nonliving” (188), tracing the intricate relationships between animal-corpse, food item, and linguistic assembly into the body of the poem. This final study assimilates much of Edwards’s reading of the corpse body in the first four chapters, proposing that

Tender Buttons evokes the processes by which the bodies of objects and corpses are invisibly nested in one another such that material culture is corpse culture. (193)

The Modernist Corpse offers a re-entry into the Modernist canon from the focal point of the corpse body, recontextualizing the elegiac approach to the dead human by addressing the *corpse-power* inherent in the “modernist body count” with which the text begins (1). In her study of Faulkner, Toomer, DuBois, Rilke, Mina Loy, James Whales, Man Ray, Baroness Elsa, Djuna Barnes, and Stein, among others—a roll-call of veritable giants in the Modernist genre—Edwards proposes the Modernist corpse as a generative site of posthuman becomings, and, true to the key maxim of Modernist aesthetic, ‘makes new’ the American Modernist canon.

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