Between Perception and Description in British Modernist Fiction

Dissertation Prospectus

Jonathan Reeve

Theories of modernism in English-language literature—by which I mean, literary-historical theories that argue for a verifiably distinct group of texts or writers, termed "modernist,"[1] and possessing certain qualities—have been proliferating exponentially in the past thirty years.[2] A short list would still have to mention modernism as defined by its relation to myth[3], as seen in its fragmentation[4] or its formal innovations; as the work of a particular social network[5], as a break with religion[6] or tradition[7], or in its relation to the trauma of the first world war. This is by no means an exhaustive list, of course, and neither are these competing or mutually exclusive theories: they extend and compliment one another. Among the lesser-known of these theories is that which highlights the sensory qualities of modernist writing: specificities of sight and sound that distinguish those works we call modernist from others. This theory is noticeably under-discussed, and under-theorized.

But the implications of sensory theory, for our understanding of modernism as a period or literary movement, are far-reaching. In fact, most of the existing theories of modernism may be reconceived through this lens. The theory that conceives of modernism as the

[1] Of course, "modernism" is by no means a stable category, as critics have often noted. To some, it refers to a particular epoch of literary history: 1880–1930 for Simon Joyce and Ronald Schliefer, 1880-1922 for Ann Ardis, and 1880-1940 for Brooker, Bru, and Thacker (Joyce; Ardis; Schleifer; Brooker and Thacker). To others, it is an artistic movement, overlapping, if not synonymous with the avant-garde, but not one which is, necessarily, temporally bounded. Many critics agree with Michael Levinson, who admits to the protean quality of "modernism" as a concept, concluding that "vague terms still signify. Such is the case with modernism.: it is at once vague and unavoidable" (Levenson). Although it is not my aim to settle, or even really enter, this debate, these are serious considerations, especially with respect to the selection of texts to be examined.

[2] While Google N-Grams Viewer searches are not always considered reliable, searches for "modernism," "theory of modernism," and related queries show exponential growth in the proportions of these terms in the period following 1980.

[3] (Shea; Surette; Bell; Norris)

[4] (Varley-Winter; Haslam and European Networks)

[5] See the many books written on the Bloomsbury Group, or on Pound and his circle (Kenner).

[6] (Lewis)

[7] Frank Kermode, for one, has an ambivalent stance here, where he argues that "modern" implies "a serious relationship with the past ... that requires criticism and indeed radical re-imagining." (Kermode 27).

work of Pound's circle would certainly benefit from a literal understanding of imagism as the poetics of the visual experience. Modernism-as-fragmentation is more cogent when seen as a compression artifact of the process of multiplexing, in a linear text, the auditory experience of many simultaneous channels. Modernism as a renewed interest in classical myth takes on new meaning if we see the modernist project, if one could be identified, as an attempt to reconnect with a mythic mode of magical thinking which, in James Frazer's term, finds "sympathetic magic" operating between visually rhyming entities (Frazer).

At least two critics, Karen Jacobs and Sara Danius, take this stance concerning literary modernism, arguing that the sensory experiences presented by works of modernist literature—sights, sounds, smells, and touch, for instance—are more prominent in modernist fiction than otherwise, and are considerably less mediated, digested, or narrativized (Jacobs; Danius). As Jacobs puts it, "what distinguishes the *modernist* literary response from its predecessors stems from a *crisis* of belief in the continuity between seeing and knowing" (19). I intend to explore this continuity, and develop and extend the theory that seeks to understand it, using quantitative methods.

A few examples may help to illustrate this literary phenomenon, one which I see as fundamentally changing around the end of the 19th century. Where the narrator's voice in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* describes sounds, she does so abstractly: famously, with "the roar that lies on the other side of silence." James Joyce's narrator, in contrast, opens the Sirens episode of *Ulysses* with a sequence of onomatopoeia, and does nothing more than present or transcribe them: he neither explains, narrates, nor comments upon them. Compare this with Tennyson's work of the same title, "Ulysses," which, while not bereft of sensory imagery, is more verb- than noun-heavy, more concerned with abstract functions, exemplified by the string of infinitives that end the poem: "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Abstract emotional representations are still present in modernist poems, of course, but they have become hypostasized: there is fear, for instance, in Eliot's "The Waste Land," but it is presented to us "in a handful of dust." Similarily, instead of being *told* of the music in a parlor, we hear "that Shakespeherian Rag" directly. Where, in *Jane Eyre*, the narrator tells us, "reader, I married him," we might hear, in modernist novels, the dull and distant toll of cracked wedding bells.

Comparisons like these are easy to find, of course, and it is not my goal merely to use computational tools archaeologically, to dig up more of them (although that will certainly be a by-product of this proposed study). Rather, I hope to show that they operate in very particular ways. Sensory experiences, as related in modernist literature, are more than rich descriptions, ekphrastic modes, or objective correlatives. They represent a reconfiguration of the narrativistic mechanism that translates (or filters, categorizes, condenses, serializes) sensory experience into language. Not only is that mechanism less constructed, and less mediated in modernist literature than in other modes, but it is more aware of its own epistemological problems.

Most of these sensory manifestations occur in literary description: in the scene-settings that typically begin the chapters of novels, and in the tableaux that sometimes end

them. As such, this study will benefit from the literary theory surrounding description as a phenomenon. In his influential essay of 1968, "The Reality Effect," Roland Barthes calls literary description an "insignificant notation" that contrasts with the "predictive" quality of narration (Barthes and Howard 142). The significance of this insignificance, he argues, is to gesture towards "concreteness," "objectivity," or authenticity (146). I will argue that these effects, although Barthes identifies them in Flaubert and other realist novelists writing in the mid-19th century, appear much more often in modernist fiction, and this is directly attributable to the detail and specificity necessarily provided by descriptions of sensory experience.

A 2012 pamphlet from the Stanford Literary Lab shows that abstract nouns—*life*, *love*, and *soul*, among others—have been declining in their use in fiction since the second half of the 19th century (Heuser and Le-Khac). I see this as a symptom of a much larger phenomenon in fin-de-siecle literary history. Modernist literature shows, rather than tells: to paraphrase William Carlos Williams, ideas appear only as things. But this is not a matter that may be encapsulated in an aphorism, and as critics, it is not enough for us merely to acknowledge this phenomenon in passing. I hope to show the interoperabilities, in fiction, between the modes of abstraction, perception, and description.

Since theories of the sensory in literature hinge on linguistic representations that are measurable (this is less true of with more abstract notions, like modernism-as-fragmentation), this is an unusually appropriate target for quantitative analysis. Using new methods currently used in computational linguistics, information science, and the branch of computer science known as natural language processing, I will explore a corpus of fiction from roughly 1870–1923, described in detail below, that represents modernist and non-modernist literature. These methods will allow me to go beyond simply contributing to this theory's body of evidence, but they will allow me to show precisely how the phenomenon operates: with which grammatical constructions, with which words, and along what frequencies of visible light. In particular, I hope to examine the mechanisms by which sensory experiences are digested and verbalized: the inextricably linguistic mental categorization of raw visual and auditory input.

It is not the purpose of this dissertation to defend the practice of computational literary analysis, or the existence of the discipline of digital humanities. That has been done more than adequately elsewhere. However, I should say a few words about why this approach is appropriate for a study such as this. The first concerns scale: algorithmic approaches to the study of a single text may easily be applied to thousands more, without much more work. I avoid some of the dangers of cherry-picking examples if I use some of the largest corpora I can find. Furthermore, many of the works I hope to study appear in what Franco Moretti calls "the great unread"—works outside the accepted canon that have rarely, if ever, been discussed by literary critics. (Most of these are, most likely, deservedly unread, but many might hold interest, if not for their literary value, then their function, generically or otherwise, in literary history.) A second reason is experimental reproducibility. Anyone with access to the code and the corpora, which I will make freely available online, can easily reproduce my experiments, and improve them if necessary.

Finally, there is the potential for statistical rigor. With a large enough data set, I can test some of my hypotheses using statistical hypothesis testing. That's to say, I can find p-values for certain literary phenomena, to determine whether they are statistically significant. Although common in scientific work, this kind of rigorous hypothesis testing is very unusual in the humanities, and would constitute a methodological innovation.

Of course, computational literary analysis is never performed entirely by a computer, but requires the intervention of the human analyst, not only in the interpretation of the results, but in recontextualizing them, in service of refining the computational model. This is a process known in statistics as Box's Loop: a continual process of refining the computational model according to its performance on a given task. This process will necessarily involve traditional methods of literary study, such as close reading. So-called distant reading, or computational analysis of a large corpus, could be used to identify passages worthy of traditional close reading, and these close readings could then be used to design distant, or somewhat less distant, algorithmic readings, informed by domain-specific linguistic knowledge.

Corpora

Most of the primary sources I will analyze will be British and Irish modernist prose fiction, somewhat roughly defined. While modernist literature is a much more diverse field, encompassing literatures from around the world, I will largely restrict my corpora to anglophone texts published in Britain and Ireland, or written by writers born, naturalized in, or living on those islands. This risks a narrow view of modernism, but provides several advantages for computational analysis: the standardized spelling of British English, for instance, allows for word frequency analyses without necessitating an initial translation among orthographic conventions.

The corpora that I will analyze will include prose fiction that critics consider to be modernist, as well as earlier works, and contemporaneous works that critics do not typically associate with modernism. Of course, there is no wholly complete and uncontroversial modernist canon, but I will make an informed attempt to create one, both positively and negatively: that is, using information about what works are considered modernist, and about which works are not. In this way, I hope to discover properties of modernist works that stand in contradistinction to pre-modernist or otherwise non-modernist works. My corpora, then, will likely contain primarily works written and/or published roughly from 1870 to 1923, the upper bound determined by copyright restrictions.

Toward this end, I'll prepare several overlapping corpora, each designed according to a different methodology. One such algorithm might be to find the most-cited critics publishing in, for instance, *Modernism/Modernity*, and find the top n writers most discussed by those critics. Once that list is created, I might generate two subcorpora: a conservative corpus, representing the set intersection of the writers discussed by each critic (those writers discussed by each of the n critics), and a liberal corpus, representing

the set union (all of the writers discussed by these critics).

Another algorithm will start by identifying the writers that appear in the most "little magazines," as chosen by the Modernist Journals Project. Since the Modernist Journals Project does not maintain digital copies of all journals discussed in the Oxford Critical History, I may travel to an archive or two, in order to digitize a few more journals (Brooker and Thacker). Another algorithm yet will mine the editorial and critical discussions in these journals, to identify those writers that are the most discussed there.

I might generate another set of corpora which would define modernist literature, as Hugh Kenner almost seems to do in *The Pound Era*, as the works written by the writers who have a "Pound number" of 1-3 (Kenner). A "Pound number" would be defined as the publication distance to Ezra Pound, not unlike the "Erdős number" of mathematics: Pound himself would have a Pound number of zero, those who have published in journals alongside Pound, or under his direct editorship, would have a Pound number of one, and those who have been published in journals alongside those with a Pound number of one would themselves have Pound numbers of two. It would be easy to replace Pound with other writers, as well—Katherine Mansfield, for instance, or H.G. Wells.

I may also decide to add a corpus of genre fiction, compiled from the Pulp Magazines Project, an archive of popular fiction magazines published between 1896 and 1946. In all, I expect to have between 5-10 corpora. The texts will be assembled from electronic text archives such as Project Gutenberg, the Oxford Text Archive, the Modernist Journals Project, the British Library's electronic text holdings, the Internet Archive, and more, for a total, I imagine, of between 50,000 and 200,000 texts.

A full-text corpus of this size would be enormous, and would require a well-engineered software infrastructure to maintain and manipulate it. I have already built, or am currently building, software to merge these text archives. In 2015, my collaborators and I working on the Git-Lit project parsed around 50,000 books from the British Library's corpus, transforming them from ALTO-XML to a human- and machine-readable Markdown format. For my 2017-2018 project, Corpus-DB, I created an API for Project Gutenberg texts, and enhanced their metadata using DBPedia and other data sources. In some cases, as with the British Library corpus, this proposed dissertation will be among the first sustained analyses of the corpora in question. This alone makes the analysis worthwhile, as an exploratory task. But what I hope to find with this study will make it even more valuable.

Of course, there are caveats to each of these corpus-generating procedures. The works discussed in *Modernism/Modernity*, for instance, do not comprise the totality of the modernist canon (if one could be said to exist at all); nor do those published in modernist journals. Using texts from different sources may also vary the text quality, especially if they are scanned texts that have been digitized with OCR. Some of these problems do not have easy solutions, but knowledge of these imperfections will help to mitigate them somewhat. In other words, I will approach the question of corpus generation, and of the canon/archive distinction, as complex, but not irreducibly so.

Chapter 1: Color / Description

In 1858, British prime minister and amateur classicist William Gladstone published *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age,* a philological work that quantifies the color descriptions in Homer and contemporaneous texts, concluding that a concept of the color blue was unknown to this era of Greek culture. He attributes this in part to the arbitrariness of color categories, and in part to the scarcity of blue dyes and blue flora and fauna (the sea, as we are reminded in *Ulysses*, is not blue, but "wine-dark"). Regardless of how cogent his argument might be considered by today's classicists, this demonstrates a method for deriving cultural theories from textual data which might be applied to more recent literature, as well. And needless to say, Gladstone's analysis itself, one which involves counting hundreds of words, is much easier to accomplish using today's technology. Colors in language are markers of deeply encoded cultural values, and ones that are eminently measurable.

More recently, colors and color words have been at the center of debates in linguistics and linguistic philosophy, over a weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in which a language's customary color categories condition, if not control, the actual perception of those colors[8]. In fact, color words are often considered the only test-case in which the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is partially verifiable. Colors in language are therefore the fulcrum at which language, knowledge, and perception intersect. The linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein discusses this in his *Remarks on Color*, where he points out the ways in which color words serve as categories that reflect the language and daily practices of a people.

The first chapter of my dissertation will deal with color, color language, and instabilities of visual description. There is a deep epistemological problem inherent in linguistic representations of colors, which is one that is ripe for quantitative analysis. English-language color terminology has a relatively fixed set of first-level categories, such as *red*, *green*, and *blue*, that nonetheless vary across time, place, and culture. That we have a color category such as "pink" for light red, but no widely accepted single word for light green, or light brown, speaks to both the arbitrariness of color categories, and the primacy of red, in English culture, at least. By studying the colors used in a novel, then, we might not only learn about the favorite colors that a writer uses to paint his or her literary landscapes, but we might also discover patterns in changes of those colorscapes over time. For instance, I suspect that the increased availability of certain dyes, such as the 1856 invention of synthetic mauve pigment, may be shown to correlate with an increase in mauve color terms in fiction (Blaszczyk et al.). I hypothesize that literary modernism will also show an increase in the variety of color terms used.

I will design two algorithms for detecting color expressions in a text: one deterministic, based on pattern-matching, and the other probabilistic, created using supervised machine learning methods. This process alone should provide some insight into the varieties

[8](See McWhorter; and Rosch, among others.)

of color expressions used in fiction and in literary description. In addition to color expressions, I will also track noun phrases that are likely to evoke particular colors: *grass* as a proxy for *green,* for instance, and *sky* for blue. Using color dictionaries and similar lexicons, I should be able to translate most nouns, and some adjectives into visual information. In a sense, this constitutes teaching a computer to read with the visual imagination of a human reader.

Since much of the visual description in fiction does not constitute description, necessarily, of something real to the world of the novel, but could be imagined by a character, or used metaphorically, I'll also develop a method for distinguishing between colors used in these functions: for instance, between "a yellow banana" and "yellow journalism." The frequencies with which visually-translatable metaphors appear in the work of a given writer may tell us something new about that writer's style.

Once I've translated fictional representations of the visual into numeric entities, I can manipulate these. For instance, after translating color expressions into hexadecimal codes, I can average these to compute the average color of a given text. This will constitute a data visualization in the most literal possible sense. I'll test whether novels set in, or written in, certain latitudes show correlations among themselves, and whether novels appear more green, according to this metric, if most of their action happens outdoors. I'll also look for correlations between particular colors and other nouns and verbs.

My hypothesis throughout all of this remains that modernist literary works will distinguish themselves by presenting sensory experiences that are more unfiltered than pre- or non-modernist texts, more granular, and less conventional. I expect to find that modernist works, therefore, are lexically more colorful. Determining whether they are, however, is not the only goal of this study. Rather, I want to investigate color as an axis by which to understand the mechanism of literary description, and that of description's selectivities.

Chapter 2: Body / Gaze / Vision

The taxonomical problem of color segmentation shares many properties with that of body segmentation, especially as manifested in physical descriptions of characters in novels. Just as precise boundaries between *blue* and *green* in a full spectrum of color are impossible to find, so, too, are the precise boundaries between, say, *forearm* and *elbow.* Descriptions of bodies, like descriptions of rooms or landscapes, are always already incomplete, and they are selective in ways that reveal the desires, preoccupations, and/or cultural conditioning of the narrator, or maybe even the writer. Furthermore, since descriptions of characters appear often in novels, they are a fitting subject for quantitative analysis.

In this chapter, I will examine whether contemporary feminist theory, in particular writings about the male gaze in fiction, may help to explain the paths of the narrator's gaze with respect to the bodies they describe (Kupper, for instance, would be useful).

Theories of literature- and cinema-as-voyeurism, as well, might provide ways to explain the intimacy, however one-sided, implied in some physical descriptions (Hawthorn). Also, psychological writings of the period, such as those of Sigmund Freud on sexual fetishism, would be helpful in investigating the ways in which bodies are segmented in description. The centerpiece of this chapter, however, will be a computational experiment.

For this chapter, I plan to use data I've manually annotated, denoting passages of physical character descriptions, to train a neural network to recognize these descriptions in a much larger corpus. I'll hold back another annotated dataset with which to test the results, and keep refining this model with new feature types until it reaches a satisfactory precision/recall rate. With the resulting categorizer, I should be able to compile a set of character descriptions from a large number of novels, spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Quantifying descriptions of characters would allow for the answers to a number of questions, such as:

- Which writer is most concerned with the body, as operationalized in this way? Which novel?
- Which body parts are most described by certain writers? How do these correlate with the gender of the narrator, the gender of the writer, or the time of writing?
- What is the path that the narrator's eyes take across a character's body? How does this path differ from the narrator's descriptions of his or her own body? As a physical act, reading involves a movement of the eyes. Bodies, too, are "read" in this way, and that linear movement of eyes is often what is imitated or replicated in literary descriptions of bodies.
- What properties does narrative proprioception possess that are distinct from those of exteroception?

My hypothesis is that modernist fiction is more embodied, as far as this may be measured computationally, than non-modernist works. This is primarily an effect, as I see it, of the trend that I outline here in my introduction, i.e. that of a greater attention to sensory experience in the modernist novel. But I also see this as a function of a more liberal expression of sexual desire in modernist fiction.

Chapter 3: Sound / Phonetics / Dialect

This chapter will focus on problems of translation between sound and text—an analogous function to the translation between visual experience and color expressions. Just as individual color hues are categorized into largely predetermined linguistic hierarchies, so sounds are categorized into phonemes, and into words. The English language has had standardized spellings for longer than the pronunciations of its words have remained constant, and so despite the ostensibly phonetic rendering of words in the English alphabet, an act of translation occurs between phonemes and standardized symbols. In

rare cases, however, this translation does not occur with the same regularity, and language is spelled somewhat phonetically, to indicate a rupture in conventional phonetics, or a kind of narratorial distance: an onomatopoeia, a style of singing, or a regional dialect, for instance. This phenomenon is unusually well-suited to computational analysis, since these patterns (non-standard orthographies) are easily detectable.

The functions that translate between the modes of vernacular and rhetoric are analogous to, if not predicated on, the cognitive function which translates from sound to word and back again. Theories that surround the rise of vernaculars in modernist literature, then, will help to explain modernism's processing of sound, and vice-versa.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, too, will be of great use here. His notion that the modern novel "can be defined as a diversity of speech types ... and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized," will help to chart the interrelations of dialects and idiolects of a novel's many voices. I hypothesize that many of these voices may be computationally identified by treating words as phonetic and rhythmic, rather than semantic signifiers. In a sense, this is the ultimate "surface reading," to extend a term from Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus: one which translates a words to their most immediate effects in the reader's minds—their sounds (Best and Marcus).

One method I might use to find patterns of phonetic distinction would be to combine a language detector and spell-checker. The language detector would be able to find passages written in, for example, French, which appear in otherwise English-language novels. This in itself would constitute a study of the first level of heteroglossia. It would be useful to know, for instance, what kinds of French words appear in British novels, spoken by which kinds of characters, and where they appear in the narrative time of their novels.

From there, I would use a spell checker to identify nonstandard orthographic forms that don't belong to foreign languages. I could determine their similarities to English words, and therefore their most likely lemmas, by computing Levenshtein distance ratios with their most similar dictionary forms.

Another method I might use here would adapt the technique described in the Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlet, "Loudness in the Novel," which quantifies words such as *shouted*, *cried*, and *exclaimed*, as well as emphasis markers, such as exclamation points (Katsma). By quantifing the sounds that are represented in prose, I might be able to analyze precisely how sonic or auditory a novel, or a chapter in a novel, might be.

My primary hypothesis here is that modernist literature follows the trend I suggest above, of heightened representations of the senses in modernism, here manifested as sounds that are less digitized or categorized, and more unmediated by narrators. I expect to see more onomatopoeia in modernist literature, more phonetic representations of dialect, and more sounds, in general. Along the way, I also hope to answer questions such as:

- What is heard in novels? That is, what are the objects of sentences that begin "she heard," "he heard," and so on?

- Are modernist novels noisier than Victorian novels? What is the noisiest novel in the corpus? The most silent?
- Which phonemes are most common in onomatopoeia? What do onomatopoeia in novels tend to represent?
- What are the total distributions of phonemes in novels? Do these distributions differ, according to whether they are dialogue or narration? Which is the novel that has the most "ch-" sounds, for instance, and what could that tell us?
- What correlations are there between the social status of a character, the gender of a character, and the likelihood that his or her speech is rendered in nonstandard spelling? Are characters that speak in dialect more likely to be used for comedic effect?
- Where, in the narrative time of a chapter or novel, is nonstandard dialect most likely to occur, and what does this tell us about the framing structures of the novel?

Timeline

- September–October 2018: Create corpora, and related infrastructure.
- November 2018–May 2019: Write the color/description chapter.
- May 2019: Submit color/description chapter for publication.
- May 2019–September 2019: Travel to archives, to digitize modernist journals.
- September 2019–May 2020: Write the body/gaze chapter.
- May 2020: Submit the body/gaze chapter for publication.
- May 2020–November 2020: Write the sound/phonetics chapter.
- November 2020: Submit the sound/phonetics chapter for publication.
- November 2020–May 2021: Write the introduction.
- May 2021: Defend dissertation.

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