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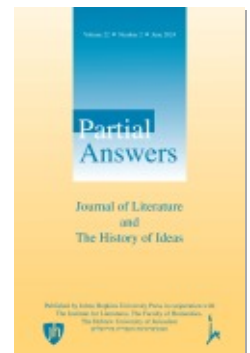
Material Spirituality in Modernist Women's Writing by
Elizabeth Anderson (review)

Benjamin Bagocius

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Elizabeth Anderson, *Material Spirituality in Modernist Women's Writing*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. x + 209 pp.

Spirituality might be understood as a realm that welcomes the surprising, strange, and unexpected. In the spirit of spirituality, I begin this review of Elizabeth Anderson's study *Material Spirituality in Modernist Women's Writing* perhaps atypically with her conclusion. Anderson writes her concluding "inconclusive words while sitting at [her] desk" which is "alternately bathed in light that dazzles [her] computer screen" and is "plunged into shadow" (136). Anderson notes the objects on her desk that abide with her in the shifting light and darkness of the writing experience: a "stoneware mug and my coaster," "drifts of papers, library books, post-its, bookmarks, lip gloss, conkers, cough drops, boxes of tea, tissues" (136). Objects, Anderson finds, exert a spiritual influence on a writer; they inspire her to stay patient with a writing project, keep going, remain open to surprise, and notice more. Objects teach gratitude. Anderson includes her "community of mugs and a certain felted dandelion" in her book's acknowledgements (x).

Spiritual transcendence is generally understood to be a privileging of the unseen and a disavowal of material objects. But Anderson studies four women writers — H.D., Mary Butts, Virginia Woolf, and Gwendolyn Brooks — who narrate a different version of the sacred. Each writer "finds the divine within the things around her" (16). Common objects at home — such as thread, pebbles, dandelions, pencils — might be simple, but they are also to these writers "spirited matter" that spurs a "rethinking of transcendence to locate it materially in *this* world" (8). "Divine objects," these items are conduits "to explorations of personal consciousness" and vessels to "crossings between interior and exterior." Each object "takes on a spirit of timelessness" and "enters a domain of the immutable" (26, 78, 79, 110). Because women have been traditionally occluded from "leadership in the academy and the church, . . . writing became a forum for women to explore spiritual ideas and experiences" close at hand, at home (5). Released from masculinist pressures, women writers were thus perhaps freer than men to express the ways in which everyday domestic items — from knitwear to china and stairways — open questions rather than confirm answers about "subject-object relations . . . and everyday enchantment" (89). In narrating objects' and humans' "entangled intersubjectivity," these writers "present a different mode of selfhood" that is entwined with sociopolitical categories such as race, gender, religion, and even the human, but is not fully determined by them (14, 72).

Despite growing interest in modernist spirituality, modernist studies, Anderson points out, tends to focus on modernity's secular and masculine strands. The body of scholarship that addresses matters of the spirit tends to emphasize modernists' "jaded" critique of institutional religion (135). Less has been said about the "heterodox spiritual practices" and experiences of "enchantment" as-

sociated with everyday objects narrated in modernist writing in general, let alone writings by women, who are “still under-represented in this scholarship” (14, 135, 4). By studying women’s narrations of divine agency immanent in objects, Anderson follows a path through modern literature sparsely traveled by critics. She finds that H.D., Butts, Woolf, and Brooks are less interested in reproducing the common modernist (male) injunction to “make it new” and are more inspired by renewal. Their interest in restoration rather than only novelty prompts in Anderson a rethinking of literary theory, particularly in new materialist studies. The current new materialism that finds agency in objects may have forgotten that it, too, is more renewal than the new. Anderson writes that “new materialists” have often “disavowed a religious element to their projects, yet one of the problems of naming of this field of inquiry ‘new materialism’ is that this nomenclature occludes the many ways in which such thinking is not in fact new but replicates the relational ontologies of Indigenous knowledges” (11–12) as well as “an older history of West African cosmologies that privilege the material world as a place of spiritual liveliness” (91). Anderson reinvigorates understandings of modernist literature by showing that some of modernism’s most influential women writers ask us to reconsider the period as less about inventing newness and more about restoring timeless wisdoms that modernity may have forgotten.

Each writer reimagines the spiritual through different cherished objects. H.D.’s approach to writing or typing as stitching a tapestry — what she calls “typestry” — evokes continuity rather than rupture (127). In her novel *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, H.D. narrates the ways “tapestry threads bind together disparate times and places,” and “the pattern” in the tapestry “reveals isolation giving way to connection and desolation to love” (42). Textiles play a role in Woolf’s narrations of the spiritual, too. Mrs. Ramsay’s knitting in *To the Lighthouse* is less about making newness and more about spiritual timelessness. While knitting, Mrs. Ramsay “partakes of unfathomable depths . . . in the mysterious space beyond human capacity for thought and feeling” (75). The newness that Mary Butts’s writing brings to modernism is more reminder than innovation. Butts’s “love of stone” equips her to behold “urban material as divine”; “the goddess of Paris . . . is known in the physicality of the built environment,” the “architecture,” and the “ruins” (118). Brooks, like Butts, finds the holy in everyday objects outdoors. Dandelions in Brooks’s *Maud Martha* are less new than regenerative: “The resilience of dandelions and their capacity to grow and bloom in the most inhospitable places underlines the ‘persistence of a life force’” (Larry Andrews, qtd. in Anderson 94–95). For these writers, tapestry, textiles, stone, and dandelions are spirited matter because they inspire a modernist sensibility more entranced by timeless “wonder and wildness” than by making it new à la modernist capitalism (135).

As Brooks’s narration of flower imagery suggests, matter’s wildness and wonder are not only light and fluffy like dandelion seeds. Spirited matter also points to issues of frightening gravity, such as racism, war, and death. H.D.’s short story collection *Within the Walls* and her poem series *Trilogy* find in the

common street and everyday walls of buildings a threat to survival in the city torn by WWI. Bombed out walls tumble, and shattered windows pierce. Ordinary streets and walls are rendered otherworldly in their acceptance of violence and “no guaranteed future,” offering to H.D. immediate “epiphany” and “visionary moments,” a “hope for renewal” that “does not erase the signs of destruction and loss” (129). In Brooks’s writing, too, objects communicate hopeful and brutal truths. Maud Martha’s treasured kitchenette, for instance, invokes both release from and entrapment in racist ideology, a “freedom to develop domestic rituals that sustain . . . spirit and . . . humanity” co-existing with “limited opportunities” for African Americans “that prevent upward mobility” (104, 103). In Anderson’s study, “the agency of things” redirects life and writing about that life (108). Objects are divine because they welcome conversations about both cruelties and joys of modern experience.

An area I found particularly engaging in Anderson’s book was the way she situates her study of materiality within conversations about mysticism. Anderson details a thread of mystical thought called apophasis, for which the holy is conceptualized as “only silent,” a radical “nothingness” (69). Though apophatic thought is diverse, it “has a strong tendency towards . . . flight from the material and the body,” which for Anderson is “problematic . . . from a feminist perspective” for its “potential, if not actual, denial of materiality and embodiment” (69). Apophatic approaches to women’s writing, Anderson finds, tend to disregard the specificity of women’s bodies and sociopolitical experiences in favor of preferring the divine to cohere as non-material nothingness. Anderson’s feminist sensibilities find apophatic nothingness leaning, perhaps unintentionally, to ideologies that cast bodies coded as women and Black as invisible. She wants to avoid discourses that undermine subjectivity, since her study upholds the writing of women whose work and subjectivity have too often been cast as invisible in the racist heteropatriarchy (112).

Anderson is more willing to engage apophatic nothingness through the feminist work of Catherine Keller, who “employs the feminist strategy of ‘unsaying and saying anew’” which “may be aligned with apophatic discourse” (70). Yet Anderson maintains a tendency to present apophatic nothingness as problematic for a feminist focus on materiality, as if theorizing nothingness could do little service for feminist materiality unless nothingness were nudged into materiality in the form of “relatedness” among materials, or “entanglements of quarks as well as persons” (70). But I wonder if radical apophatic nothingness may share with feminist material studies a sense of a fundamental reality nearly independent of the hallucination that is the racist heteropatriarchy. On one hand the ethics of recognizing sociopolitical identities that shape human experience here and now is undeniable. On the other hand, I wonder whether studies of spirituality that keep aspirations for subjectivity at their center may miss some of apophatic thought’s more radical invitations to take another look at aspirations for human subjectivity. Since categories such as gender, class, and race have been at least in part used to uphold racist and misogynist ideologies that entrap modern beings in cycles of sociopolitical struggle, then it could make sense for writers with

spiritual sensibilities to experiment with dismantling these categories to release beings from tired patterns of sociopolitical struggle.

From an apophatic point of view, Anderson might have engaged longer not only with the sociopolitical danger but also the promises of “undermining subjectivity” that radical apophatic thought, as well as the writers in her collection, seem at least partly to invite by narrating nothingness in open rather than oppressive ways. One example might be Minta Doyle in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* losing a treasured object, her grandmother’s brooch. The brooch’s disappearance could suggest a gendered reading: the release of women from outmoded ideas about wives and mothers. Yet it could also indicate an expanse of non-discursive, non-knowing nothingness that binds humans into a “we” of shared surrender when they gain distance from categories of gender and the project of discourse which undergirds it: “We might all sit down and cry,” Nancy reflects on the lost brooch, “But she did not know what for” (Woolf 77). In Brooks’s poem “In the Mecca,” the girl Pepita is murdered in the Mecca apartment complex; the “void she leaves behind” “will signify un-assuageable loss” (133). The treasured gendered subject Pepita is gone, yet her enduring, nearly non-discursive “something” that is both “Substanceless” and a “material collapse / that is Construction” remains, suggesting an invisible yet creative presence that operates beyond materiality and reforms its violence (134). Woolf’s and Brooks’s explorations of nothingness point to a dimension detached from materiality, at least in moments, and thus evade, at least partly, prerogatives of racist heteropatriarchy by operating in fields that indicate a space beyond both discourse and material categories of subjectivity such as gender and race. Hence these writers suggest that radical nothingness, though a controversial idea, may be a surprising device in the toolbox of feminist material thought’s critique of sexism, classism, and racism.

Though some mystical thinkers might come to different conclusions about apophatic thought’s relationship to feminist materiality than Anderson does, her exploration of its promises and limits is representative of her deeply engaged research. Anderson offers an inspired study of the divinity of objects and the ways they invite women writers to reimagine what it means to be subject, object, and divine. The book may suggest that humans would do well to be a little more like the objects on Anderson’s writing desk and in the texts she studies: more patient, more open to change, more accepting of life’s messiness, more honest about the good and the bad, more welcoming of diverse company like the motley crew of papers, mugs, and tea that co-exist on her desk. Perhaps objects make good role models for being human, divine objects themselves.

Benjamin Bagocius
Bard Early College

Works Cited

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