

Therapeutic Modernisms

Fifth International Conference of the French Society for Modernist Studies
Université Grenoble Alpes

19-21 June 2024

Organizers:

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In the final pages of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), when the novel's eponymous hero is about to be buried, James Gatz's father pulls from his pocket an old copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* in which his deceased son once wrote a schedule of daily self-improvement. In echo of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791), and in a trope of nineteenth-century conduct manuals on both sides of the Atlantic—from William Ellery Channing's *Self-Culture* (1838) to Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help; with Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (1859)—the young man who will become Jay Gatsby resolves to “read one improving book or magazine per week.”

Emerging out of nineteenth-century Victorian and Unitarian ethics, this resolution has as its silent background the immense outgrowth, in the early decades of the twentieth century, of a popular therapeutic literature existing in parallel to high modernist production. Of course, modernist literatures and manuals of personal development may initially seem to represent starkly opposing worldviews. Seen within the context, however, of a wider “therapeutic culture” in full expansion since at least the mid nineteenth-century, Fitzgerald's case may begin to seem less unique. In a 1956 interview for instance, William Faulkner affirmed: “Always dream and shoot higher than you know you can do. Do not bother just to be better than your contemporaries or predecessors. Try to be better than yourself.” If this affirmation, with its rhetoric of melioristic exceptionalism, might seem at home in any syllabus of popular psychology, it may also seem unusual coming from the author of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Faulkner's ideal of self-betterment is not, however, an anomaly in declarations by modernist authors.

Though there exists an enduring mythology of anglo-american modernism as primarily invested in values of dynamism, energy, affirmation and its related violence—with, in this vein, such avatars as Ezra Pound or Wyndham Lewis—there has recently emerged, from critical fields as diverse as affect theory, feminist ethics, queer theory, and the philosophy of care, a decidedly different possibility: namely, an alternate modernism which both values and aesthetically explores such curative and custodial values as empathy, healing, growth or care.

In this sense, the desire to interrogate, as this Fifth International Conference of the French Society for Modernist Studies aims to do, the diverse forms of potentially therapeutic modernisms and modernist therapeutics—in the pluralized sense of both of these terms—aims to contribute to the writing of an alternate history of modernist production from 1900 to 1960. Such a history may seek to integrate and value figures such as Djuna Barnes, H.D., Robert Duncan, or Zora Neale Hurston as fundamentally engaged in explorations of the promises and failures of art and literature as a therapeutic enterprise. It may also seek to view the work of canonical modernist authors—such as Virginia Woolf or W.B. Yeats—in a new light, as being intimately (though often ambivalently) involved in the potentialities of a therapeutic vision or project.

Indeed, a similar case of intricate parallelism is provided by American poetry in the first decades of the twentieth century. Early self-help authors such as James Allen turned to popular authorship after unsuccessful literary careers. Known as “failed” poets, they nevertheless did not hesitate to formulate their maxims in rhyming verse. Extraordinarily popular texts even gave rise to their own spin-off anthologies of curative poetry, as with Napoleon Hill's 1937 bestseller *Think and Grow Rich*, which inspired the subsequent volume of verse: *Poems That Inspire You To Think and Grow Rich* (2010). What, then, does the fact that self-help founders—following in many ways the Emersonian model of the philosopher-poet—not only frequently wrote poetry, but integrated

their own verse and others' into their therapeutic manuals, tell us about the porosity of these genres at the heart of modernist experimentation? From inspirational booklets of poetic quotations to the use of poetry in the speeches of New Age gurus, therapeutic ideologies have helped promote a post-Romantic vision of poetry as subjective affirmation, personal exploration, and a vehicle of timeless truths. Though insisting on its usefulness for self-improvement, such a vision effectively depoliticizes the poetic, situating it within the confines of the autonomous self, beyond the borders of the body politic.

In this context, it becomes relevant to ask: what poetry is quoted in self-help texts? How are poets such as T. S. Eliot or W. H. Auden transformed into inspirational authorities? How is their work framed and talked about, far from the analytic imperatives of the classroom and the academy? Given that such bestsellers are consumed in the millions of copies—over 15 million of Dave Carnegie's 1936 classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, with its plethora of poetic quotations—we must reckon with the uncomfortable truth that these texts perhaps provide American modernist verse with its most numerically significant audience. Can we thus ignore that which has perhaps been one of modern poetry's primary modes of consumption?

These examples are just several cases of the interaction between modernist art and literature and the practices and discourses of diverse therapeutic cultures, which run the gamut from welcoming to violently antagonistic. Though psychoanalysis—from H.D.'s sessions with Freud in Vienna during the 1930s, later explored in *Tribute to Freud* (1956), to the influence of the New Psychology on the work of a writer such as Ralph Ellison or James Joyce—will not be excluded from this conference's scope, participants are invited to forge original approaches to these questions, and above all to expand their purview into therapeutic cultures and methods which are less often the subject of analysis, encompassing a far broader spectrum of clinical to non-clinical contexts.

In contrast to other approaches to the literary-therapeutics interaction—and notably those motivated by purely optimistic convictions regarding literature's healing power—participants to the conference are invited to take a critical view of these historical and contemporary dynamics, especially as they pertain to the modernist skepticism of utilitarian, functionalist or pragmatic visions of art and its value, especially applicable to the question of literary texts as a curative apparatus. Counter to initiatives that take a purely positive view of literature's ties to therapeutic ideologies, papers will explore whether the identification of literature as a healing technology was not also seen by modernist authors and critics as potentially detrimental to its cultural status.

This conference thus also seeks to decenter the literature-psychology relationship from the traditional binary figures of the Writer and the Therapist. Historically male, Anglo-European, and invested with power, this duo has often dominated studies of this interaction. In line with the present expansions of modernist canons, the question of therapeutics also takes on a unique aspect when it concerns women, LGBTQ+ and BIPOC writers and artists, many of whom, despite explicit intentions of care and inclusion, often remain excluded from therapeutic institutions and ideologies. In this way, modernist African-American, Hispanic and LatinX, queer and feminist writers both explore the potentialities of language as a healing tool, while expressing explicit reticence with regard to therapeutic ideologies, which frequently remain vectors of the norms of a white male middle-class. Such perspectives thus expose the ways in which such therapeutic ideals are often primarily accessible to, and weaponized by, privileged groups, rather than those struggling against inequities.

Proposals for individual papers, joint panels, and roundtable discussions are invited on the following (non-exclusive) fields of enquiry:

- the valuation, or on the contrary the rejection or satire, of therapeutic visions of literature and art in modernist works

- the role of literature and art as curative tools in the face of the repeated historical catastrophes of early modernity, from the Russian Revolution to the Shoah, Totalitarianisms, WWI and WWII.
- the complex relationship, throughout the modernist era, between literary studies and psychology as emergent academic disciplines with competing claims to cultural value
- the neglected ties between modernist texts and emergent psychological disciplines, methods and protocols such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapies, Gestalt, or discourses like self-help
- the shifting representations of psy cultures, sites, and professionals in modernist texts
- the depiction of psychotherapy in modernist fiction, theatre, or poetics
- modernist authors' engagement, in both autobiographical and fictionalized texts, with psychotherapeutic experiences (as in H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud*)
- the ties between therapeutic discourses and the modernist loss or questioning of religious values
- therapeutic cultures' contributions to modernist experimentations in form and the creation of new literary genres (such as the sanatorium novel)
- re-readings or novel approaches to the interactions between literature and psychoanalysis, beyond more traditional theoretical frameworks
- the increasingly widespread cultural trope of literature as a "healing" art, including the early emergence, in modernist contexts, of clinical practices such as bibliotherapy
- paradigms of reception and readers' responses to the blurring of boundaries between therapeutic and literary discourses

This brief list is merely indicative, and proposals will be considered across a wide range of subjects related to the ties between American literary and therapeutic cultures, in the broadest senses of both of these categories.

Proposals of 300 words maximum for individual papers, and 1000 words maximum for joint panels and roundtable discussions, must be sent for consideration before September 15 2023 to the following addresses : helene.aji@ens.psl.eu ; benoit.tadie@parisnanterre.fr ; nicholas.manning@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr

A response as to the proposal's acceptance will be given before October 15 2023 at the latest.