6 • Abstraction and Montage in the Work of Kurt Schwitters

Perhaps no other artist has offered as comprehensive and layered an exploration of montage as Kurt Schwitters, whose imaginative engagement with strategies of disarticulation and assemblage over four decades casts a long shadow on the art of the twentieth century.[1] Working in a variety of media, Schwitters pushed the bounds of montage with a single-mindedness that is only matched by the doggedness with which he interrogated the enabling conditions of his artistic practice. Yet precisely his reflection on montage as a fundamental aesthetic principle has presented a formidable stumbling block for Schwitters scholars ever since the rediscovery of his oeuvre in the 1950s. For all the inventiveness and boldness of his work his notion of *Merz*, or abstract montage, appears curiously esoteric, seemingly revolving around a rigidly formalist understanding of autonomous art. One can hardly imagine a greater mismatch than the one separating Schwitters's idea of art as a domain that transcends quotidian affairs, especially politics, and the exuberant transgression of boundaries—of the canvas, of the text, of different media and codes—staged in his work, which rather suggests the exhilarating embrace of a messy and incoherent everyday. If one adds to this Schwitters's keen business sense and baffling willingness to deploy the same principles he saw at the heart of autonomous art in his successful commercial ventures, one will easily understand the distrust, even chagrin, expressed by some of his contemporaries, who dismissed him as a cynical self-promoter and a betrayer of the avant-gardists' ethos. Critics have openly wrestled with the uncomfortable mix of visionary boldness, naive idealism, and conceptual inconsistencies in Schwitters's profile and endeavors, often concluding that his pathbreaking work was incongruously propelled by a nostalgic understanding of art as a site of transcendence bound to offer the harmony and order sorely missing in Weimar Germany.[2]

While it is true that Schwitters's writings befuddle readers by mixing the grating irreverence of Dada with the mystical rhetoric that suffuses strands of De Stijl and Constructivism, a close examination of his work shows that his understanding of art's transcendence was not tied to belief in a metaphysical realm opposed to everyday experience. Rather it related to the possibility of realizing abstraction in art through strategies of juxtaposition and quotation that aimed at subverting the relations among objects in everyday experience. Far from forsaking the everyday, abstract art was called to explore its bounds by making its signifying structures perspicuous. This chapter examines key literary works from the 1920s and 1930s to reconstruct Schwitters's understanding of intransitive art, which hinges on separating ordinary sense-making from the linguistic structures that enable it. Intransitivity in this context is a strategy that disassociates perception from meaning in order to make its enabling structures apparent. This allows for grasping their singularity and contingency and for highlighting their being susceptible to transformative manipulation. This understanding of communication is explored in narratives that performatively enact the very structures they set out to explore. In so doing they provide test cases for a mode of storytelling that draws on montage to explore intransitivity as the negative side of ordinary meaning, in an operation that aims at embracing and expanding the reach of everyday communication.

• Schwitters's aesthetic practice turns on his program of *Merz*, a theory of montage that supplied him with both an analytic framework and a brand label for his diverse artistic pursuits.[3] He developed and promoted this program in numerous essays that appeared over the course of the 1920s in avant-garde publications and in his own journal *Merz*. These texts reflect his determination to shape the debate on contemporary art so as to create a discursive environment favorable to reception of his work.

Schwitters found himself fighting on two fronts in promoting his art in the early 1920s. On the one hand he took on the art critics associated with the cultural establishment, whose bourgeois pretentions and chauvinistic narrow-mindedness he tirelessly lampooned. On the other, he vied for the recognition of, and simultaneously competed with, the artists that belonged to the self-proclaimed progressive camp, especially Dada. With this camp he shared a marked aversion for aesthetic decorum and the desire to anchor artistic practice in everyday life. At the same time he vehemently rejected the political engagement of Dada's militant phalanx, a position that placed him on a collision course with activists like Richard Huelsenbeck and George

Grosz. Not coincidentally, Schwitters's first comprehensive discussion of *Merz* is found in a 1921 essay that sketches his response to the politicization of Dadaism following the establishment of the Berlin Club Dada in 1918. The text marks the culmination of his feud with Richard Huelsenbeck, one of the founders of Dada in Berlin who had vehemently opposed Schwitters's membership in the group. Schwitters's manifesto is a rebuttal to Huelsenbeck's charge that his championing of abstraction was at bottom an escapist position, one that failed to take a robust political stance vis-à-vis the conservative retrenchments of postwar Germany while indulging the discredited idealism of Expressionism.[4] The dispute with Huelsenbeck forced Schwitters to articulate the paradox at the heart of his project. That is, art's distinctiveness from other practices lies in its abstraction, that is, its nonreferential, noncommunicative quality; yet this very intransitive quality is the foundation of its transformative impact on experience. How can a practice that only points back to itself, one may ask, relate productively to the environment in which it unfolds and even help change it?

The 1921 *Merz* manifesto opens by detailing Schwitters's reasons for renouncing naturalistic representation in painting, which, as he maintains, is an academic skill that can be learned by anyone who is not color-blind. Art is a practice of a different order, Schwitters insists, one devoted to coordinating given elements. Its aim is not to transpose reality's semblance into illusionistic representation; it rather pursues *Ausdruck*, an absolute mode of expression that serves no purpose. With the mobilization of the term *Ausdruck* the essay moves onto conceptually unorthodox, and at times seemingly incongruous, terrain. A key term in the aesthetic discourse associated with Expressionism, *Ausdruck* had played a central role in Kandinsky's influential paean to abstract painting in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), and Schwitters seems to at first borrow from the Russian's conceptual arsenal in his own defense of abstraction. Yet if in Kandinsky's discourse "expression" was a path to disclosing a suppressed spiritual reality by translating the vibrations of the artist's soul into a pure language of color and sound, Schwitters's idiosyncratic use of the term relieves it from the task of rendering inner states of mind, or, for that matter, anything at all. As he puts it, "expression" does not translate anything and only marks an aesthetic assemblage whose intransitivity is the hallmark of all art.[5]

Such emphasis on art's intransitivity may at first resonate with the aesthetic ascetism championed by Clement Greenberg, who saw in the modernist disavowal of illusionism a token of the artist's refusal to engage with a contemporary experience defiled by materialism, greed, and corrupt power.[6] This refusal, Greenberg maintained, drove a self-reflexive inquiry into the

expressive qualities of a medium whose quest for truth pushed beyond the appearance of the material world. Yet for Schwitters art is not about exploring the possibilities of a specific medium in an ascetic quest for purity. Quite to the contrary, it endeavors to establish connections encompassing all kinds of materials, no matter how lowly or degraded their status may be in everyday life. Thus any object can be yanked out of its customary environment, divested of its purpose, and treated at a par with color and line on the canvas. This is possible because art is, fundamentally, about the operation of giving form:

> The material is as unessential as myself. The only essential thing is giving form. Because the material is unessential, I use any material the picture demands. By harmonizing different types of materials among themselves, I have an advantage over mere oil painting, for besides playing off color against color, I also play off line against line, form against form, etcetera, and even material against material, for example wood against burlap. I call the worldview from which this mode of artistic creation arose "Merz." (*pppppp* 215)[7]

Art is thus about juxtaposing all kinds of materials in order to create relational configurations. Schwitters's repeated downplaying of the properties of given elements is meant to preempt the notion that montage practice is about producing additive concoctions whose effect lies in the sum total of their component parts. Instead he insists that the works' formal configurations arise from the contrastive logic of given juxtapositions. In setting wood against canvas, for instance, the point is not to combine the physical properties of those two materials but to exploit the effect of their relational interplay. If one juxtaposes wood to a piece of metal, different aspects of woodness will come into play. Wood is thus not valuable for the absolute qualities it may possess, but rather for its ability to interact differently with different materials—in Schwitters's own words: "All values exist exclusively through the mutual relationships they establish."[8] Artistic "forming" consists of manipulating these relational interactions, as exemplified by the very term *Merz*. A syllable culled from the word *Commerzbank* ("commerce bank"), *Merz* does not possess any recognizable qualities when treated in isolation. Once inserted into Schwitters's discourse, it enters relationships with other terms that endow it with specific functions.

In creating relational patterns, montage artworks add to the web of relations that makes up reality. Their relational structures do not mirror or reproduce the semblance of the relational network of experience, but rather

possess distinctive configurations, what Schwitters calls "rhythm," appropriating a key term that circulated in the discourse of Expressionism and Constructivism. Rhythm denotes relationships that are not random or coincidental, but rather ground in a properly aesthetic logic that differs from the communicative and utilitarian dynamics that links objects in nonartistic realms. For this reason the patterns created by artistic relations are quintessentially self-referential.[9] The dispensation from having to relate to external reality grounds art's autonomy from the prescriptions of mimetic representation and the pressure to infuse the artwork with some explicit ideological message. While the artwork does not point beyond itself to an outside referent, it is not an utterly blind monad, for it presupposes recipients who are able to grasp its relational pattern at a nondiscursive, perceptual level. This blend of perceptual perspicuousness and semantic/conceptual blankness is what Schwitters calls abstraction. In his discourse, abstraction grounds an artistic practice that reassembles elements culled from experience by means of a logic that disregards the mutual relations of objects in everyday life. Its underlying montage principle allows a dramatic extension of the possibilities of any given art form, since the range of materials that can be used is virtually limitless. Within this frame, traditional boundaries among art forms become irrelevant; indeed, they come to represent an indefensible obstacle to artistic practice. Hence *Merz* allows for producing a total work of art, one that imaginatively hybridizes media and genres, while also blurring the conventional distinction between art and nonart as it lays claim to appropriating any given element of reality for artistic practice (*pppppp* 216–18).[10] Within this frame art is no longer about representation. Instead, it constitutes a concrete intervention into experience, an operation that directly adds to its fabric.

• Schwitters's integration of sundry elements from everyday experience defuses Huelsenbeck's charge of escapism by fulfilling his demand that artistic practice embrace the cacophonous stuff of modern life. Schwitters shrewdly seizes on this central demand of militant Dadaism to portray his own principle of *Merz* as being more radical and broadminded toward contemporary experience than Huelsenbeck's exclusionary discourse, which he discredits as an attempt at constraining art's transformative potential by subjugating it to political aims (*Werk* 5:77–78). His early stories "Die Zwiebel" ("The Onion") and "Franz Müllers Drahtfrühling" ("Franz Müller's Wire Springtime") further continue the showdown with Huelsenbeck by transposing it onto the plane of grotesquely comical narratives. Notably, they probe the relation of art to politics by juxtaposing two different understand-

ings of montage, which allows Schwitters to deliver a caustic commentary on the narcissism and cynicism of politically engaged Dadaists.

"The Onion," published in 1919, is a surreal tale of disemboweling and reassemblage cheerfully told in the first person by its protagonist and sacrificial victim, Alves Bäsenstiel.[11] The event, which Bäsenstiel has helped orchestrate, transposes religious ritual and juridical execution onto a gory slaughterhouse setting. A surprising turn occurs when the king, the star guest at the event, which is also witnessed by an unspecified *Volk*, greedily ingests Bäsenstiel's eyes and dies. The king's daughter hastily orders that his scattered parts be put back together so that he can be resuscitated and save the king. The newly collaged Bäsenstiel, however, refuses to comply and seals the king's demise. His character's ambiguity in "The Onion" is dispelled in "Franz Müller's Wire Springtime," which functions as a sequel of sorts to the first narrative.[12] In three chapters, the text tells of the revolutionary uprisings unleashed by the subversive behavior of one Franz Müller, an artist whose indifference to the questioning of well-situated citizens and a policeman first sparks street riots and then prompts the convening of the country's parliament. Bäsenstiel makes his appearance as an opportunistic politician who wantonly accuses Müller of seditious conduct (*Werk* 2:41).[13] The story's various episodes, which are strung together without much regard for continuity or motivation, are capped by a happy ending of sorts consisting of Müller's erotically charged encounter with a young woman, whose white clothes he symbolically soils. Taken together, the two stories offer an erratic allegory of the turbulent months following the demise of the German Kaiserreich and the establishment of the Weimar Republic. Their stock descriptions of political actors driven by the basest human instincts—greed, dishonesty, grandstanding, and power-mongering—deliver at best a cranky and trivializing record of events during and after the war. Yet they stand out for the centrality they ascribe to montage as both an allegorical framework and a formal principle for exploring competing understandings of assembled identity.

Both narratives unfold in theatrical settings that underscore the importance of acts of watching and witnessing—the slaughterhouse/gallows/sacrificial altar in "The Onion"; the street and parliament chamber in "Franz Müller's Wire Springtime." In "The Onion" the self of the first-person narrator exists primarily as the object of an other's perception, including its own as filtered through the first-person narrative. In "Franz Müller's Wire Springtime" Müller's unwillingness to acknowledge bystanders by looking back at them becomes a transgression that ultimately sparks street riots, forming a stark contrast to the conduct of all other actors, which is patterned on a dialectics of watching and being watched in return. This prominence of the the-

atrical makes the stories into early dramatizations of the culture of exteriority that for Helmut Lethen distinguishes Weimar Germany from the Kaiserreich. In his *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte* Lethen paints a vivid portrait of postwar Germany's new culture of exteriority, which displaced the ideology of inwardness that had authorized influential cultural discourses up to Expressionism.[14] In this cultural framework subjectivity is formed through individuals' interaction with their environment and in the reciprocal gaze they exchange with others. The emphasis here lies on shaping and controlling the ways in which an individual is perceived, because perceived being is all that counts in a culture that no longer believes in essential identities. Bäsenstiel, the character that connects the two stories, is a paradigmatic example of the cold persona described by Lethen, which in his account forms the desirable cultural type bound to emerge in a social setting dominated by appearances and simmering violence. A paragon of cold conduct, Bäsenstiel embodies a mode of agency that hinges on asserting oneself by exerting the utmost control over one's body. His cold acquiescence to his dismembering empowers him to a most radical political act, namely, regicide, and contributes to subverting the tale's political order.

The implications of this befuddling turn of events become apparent if one recalls Helmut Plessner's phenomenological account of the constitution of subjectivity in the reciprocal interaction with others, which plays a key role in Lethen's reading of Weimar culture. Schwitters's story cannily dramatizes the dual role that the body plays for Plessner in the subject's constitution, as both the incarnated locus of the self and one of many tools on which the individual draws in his interaction with the environment. As an interpolation of body and environment, the self thus comes into being as a phenomenological given that is intimately tied to the body but not fully contained by it. This points to the expectation of a reciprocal interaction between individual and environment that forms the enabling condition of selfhood for Plessner.[15] In "The Onion," this expectation is illustrated by the narrator's puzzling ability to recount the process of his disemboweling even after his skull has been cracked open and he is effectively dead. The possibility of narrating his own dismembering allows him to assume the role of the observer and the observed at once, turning the narrative into a medium of reciprocal interaction that enables the observing narrator to paradoxically survive after he has witnessed his own killing. The crucial role played by reciprocity is further documented by the king's pitiful demise, which is brought about by his greedy determination to devour the narrator's eyes. This Oedipal fantasy of castration can also be read, with Plessner, as an attempt at suppressing the reciprocal interaction on which the ruler depends to constitute selfhood and

thus ground his authority. In other words, the king's cannibalistic act is an attempt at suppressing, with the narrator's gaze, the very alterity that makes reciprocity and selfhood possible. In this respect it is significant that the king's ingestion of the narrator's eyes does not so much free him from the reciprocal bond that ties him to his subject as destroy the very precondition of selfhood, killing him.

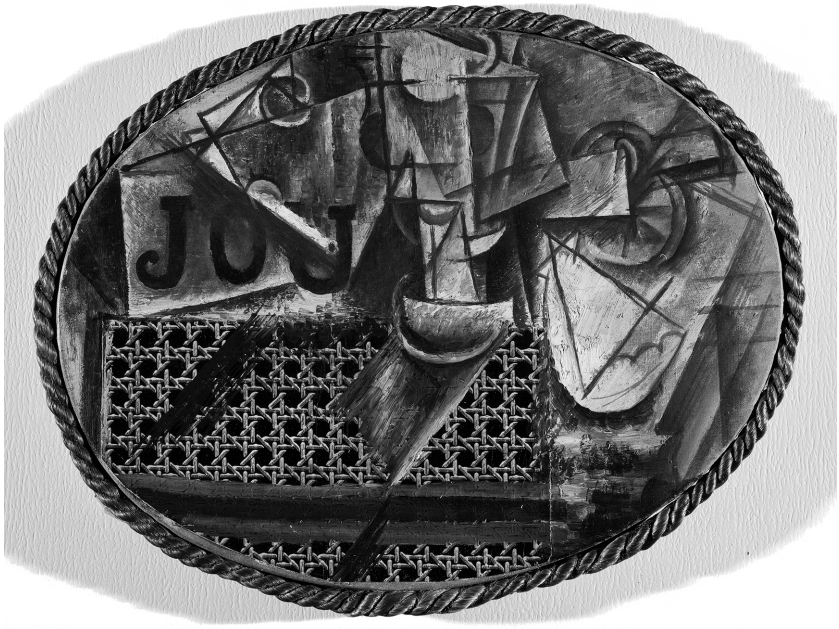
The reciprocity of seeing and the theme of bodily incorporation also play a prominent role in "Franz Müller's Wire Springtime." Müller's unwillingness to interact with bystanders can be read as a cipher for the incommunicative quality that distinguishes art for Schwitters. If his passivity winds up unleashing riots and thus recalls Bäsenstiel's lethal acquiescence, he also embodies a montage principle that is very different from the one dramatized in the earlier narrative. If Bäsenstiel's paradoxical self-assertion lies in his submission to a gory spectacle that involves being physically dismembered and reassembled, Müller's montage practice is markedly nonviolent and grounds an unorthodox, antiheroic mode of artistic agency.[16] As it turns out, Müller's attire and public persona are assembled from trash gathered from the gutter, as confirmed by his last name, which recalls the word for garbage, *Müll* (*Werk* 2:34–35). Müller's clothes even resemble the collages of refuse created by Schwitters as the self-identified narrator/author, and this makes of him a strolling *Merz* sculpture. But trash is also Müller's favorite food, a circumstance that provides for some humorously disgusting digressions. The contrast to Bäsenstiel could not be more striking. Bäsenstiel's ostensive willingness to feed the king by immolating his own body proves toxic. Müller, on the other hand, is willing to eat refuse, that is, to draw nourishment from the debased domains of everyday life. While this entails engaging experience in a nonviolent manner, the humorously repulsive description of his behavior prevents any idealization or heroization of his character. Indeed, Müller's propensity for eating rotting garbage makes him no more a point of identification than Bäsenstiel. He is neither a hero nor a savior, but simply a practitioner of *Merz*, the montage principle advocated by Schwitters. Müller's unheroic and repulsive behavior thus challenges the late-idealistic narrative that makes art into a domain for transfiguring everyday life and instead portrays both the artist and the artwork as made of the same smelly and unflattering stuff of ordinary experience.[17]

Schwitters's narratives thus put forth distinct models of montage that map on contrasting notions of subjectivity and agency. If Bäsenstiel's sacrificial montage literalizes the warmongering discourses of the 1910s that promised the birth of a new man through the violent sacrifice of the old one, Müller exemplifies the results of transposing onto the body a nonviolent, artistic

practice that operates by embracing any material from everyday life, including refuse, through physical incorporation. While violence is integral to the unnatural disassembling and reassembling of Bäsenstiel's body and is instrumental to his empowerment following the king's death, for Müller the incorporation of disparate elements, which artistic montage symbolizes, does not produce violent effects per se but rather occurs via the ordinary bodily function of eating. This recalls the material acts of incorporation Walter Benjamin described in his glosses on writing and reading, which undergird his reflection on storytelling as a practice that is not primarily centered on discerning meaning but rather hinges on mobilizing the body and its routines. The two narratives leave little doubt as to which version of montage Schwitters embraces. If Bäsenstiel, Huelsenbeck's doppelgänger,[18] comes to symbolize the self-serving and destructive conjunction of art and politics in Dada's activist groups, then Müller appears as a stand-in for Schwitters's own understanding of an abstract art, whose intransitivity is paradoxically linked to the unprejudiced embrace of experience in its entirety.[19]

• Schwitters's debunking of Huelsenbeck's position in the two narratives I just discussed helps to flesh out some of the arguments on abstract montage that unfold in his *Merz* essay but also leaves crucial questions unanswered. What do recipients get out of the abstract artworks Schwitters champions if not some conceptualizable meaning? And what is the function of intransitive art, exactly? At issue is, specifically, the transformative intervention of montage artworks.

Paraphrasing a 1925 remark by German art historian Franz Roh, Christopher Phillips describes the impact of visual montage as the confluence of two crucial tendencies in modern visual culture, namely, modernist abstraction and the realism of the incorporated fragments.[20] Phillips's remark also echoes Clement Greenberg's discussion of Picasso's and Braque's turn to collage in their cubist work, which for Greenberg revolves around staging a contrast between the abstraction of cubist painting and the literalness of the collated elements. One may think in this context of Picasso's iconic *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), which juxtaposes painted objects made unrecognizable by cubist stylization to a hyperrealist, faux chair caning glued directly onto the canvas. The possibility for playing abstraction off against realism relies on the double signification engendered by montage techniques, which operate via a transfer of materials from one context to another. In this transfer, materials become functional parts of the new context while maintaining allusions to the previous one(s). Hence, Picasso's fragment of chair caning, while being



Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning* (Spring 1912). Oil on oilcloth over canvas edged with rope. Photo: R. G. Ojeda. Musée Picasso.
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one of several still-life objects on the canvas, exceeds the painting's frame of reference by metonymically evoking the chair from which it was taken. This metonymic reference to the "real object" playfully mocks the conventions of illusionistic representation, which are brought into sharp relief through contrast with the cubist rendering of objects that make up the rest of the composition.[21] In short, the hyperrealism of the chair caning accentuates the anti-illusionism, or abstraction, of the overall composition. At the same time, the unsublimated fragment explodes the boundedness of the canvas by stubbornly pointing back to the whole to which it once belonged. In this way it dramatizes the ability of montage fragments to evoke the contexts out of which they were extracted as though they were affected by an incurable semantic cross-eyedness.[22]

This semantic and referential double-coding makes for the jarring quality and lack of closure of montage artifacts and accounts for their critical potential in the practice of Dada. Yet this subversive moment is distinctively absent

in Schwitters's discourse on *Merz*. His understanding of art's intransitivity is predicated on stripping materials of former contextual valences so as to make them fit the artwork's self-contained relations. This entails suppressing the realist orientation of the collated elements, that is, their ability to point to a context extrinsic to the artwork.[23] As it turns out, Schwitters's radicalization of the hybridity and messiness of montage has the paradoxical effect of buttressing a most intransigent claim to artistic autonomy, and it is not difficult to imagine the chagrin of artists like Huelsenbeck and Grosz, who cringed at witnessing a most incisive avant-garde practice being appropriated for a position that was indistinguishable in their eyes from the academic elitism Schwitters claimed to despise. But Schwitters's position seems to be untenable at an even more fundamental level, which has to do with his apparent determination to suppress the double talk of montage by blocking the outward orientation of the incorporated materials. If one were to take his claims about the artist's ability to "dematerialize" materials at face value, one would have to conclude that the fragment of the cigarette ad used in his collage *Miss Blanche* can completely sever its ties to the world of advertisement and act as a blank signifier whose function derives solely from the relationships it enters into with other collaged elements.[24] Yet it appears doubtful that the cross-eyedness of montage fragments can ever be entirely suppressed. The simple-mindedness of Schwitters's pronouncements in this regard has stymied many scholars, lending credence to his reputation, bolstered already by many contemporaries, as an artist whose collage practices are boldly experimental, but whose concept of art as a self-contained realm of order and harmony is at bottom escapist and nostalgic.[25]

Upon closer scrutiny, the essay on *Merz* offers a more nuanced analysis than the contention that one can fully divest materials of their allusions to previous contexts. Key to this more layered understanding of montage is Schwitters's discussion of *Merz-Dichtung*, that is, the unfolding of *Merz* in language. Schwitters's engagement with literature has received far less attention in English-language criticism than his work in visual media in spite of the fact that it was as important to him as the latter, witness his copious literary output over four decades. Indeed, while his 1921 manifesto starts out with a narrative outlining his development as a visual artist, the text shifts to the domain of language when it comes to explaining in detail the functioning of *Merz*, both as a word fragment and the label for abstract montage. This leads to thematizing the insuppressible semantic ambivalence of montage:

> Poetry arises from the playing off of these elements against each other. Meaning is only essential if it is to be used as one such factor. I play off

Kurt Schwitters, *Mz 231. Miss Blanche* (1923). Collage. *(Collection Dr. Werner Schmalenbach, Düsseldorf. Copyright 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.)*

> sense against nonsense. I prefer nonsense, but that is a purely personal matter. I pity nonsense, because until now it has been so neglected in the making of art, and that's why I love it. (*pppppp* 215)[26]

Much like *Merz* painting, *Merz* poetry is abstract in the sense that it aims at establishing unconventional relationships among the broadest range of materials. This is obtained by playing words off against each other, as well as any available, preformed linguistic units, which represent the equivalent of the sundry materials Schwitters used for his visual collages. Schwitters implicitly acknowledges that such materials—phrases, slogans, clichés—come with attached, contextual meaning. After all, it is their very formulaic character that makes them into discrete units to be treated as ready-made objects. While it is not possible to fully desemanticize words and phrases, that is, to completely suppress the meanings that adhere to them, one can treat such meanings as one factor among others in assembling linguistic units. Since the priority lies in expanding the range of artistic expression, non-sense is as good a material for *Merz* poetry as is sense. Indeed, what Schwitters terms *Unsinn*

can be seen as the linguistic counterpart of the refuse Schwitters fervently collected for use in his collages.[27] It is precisely the juxtaposition of *Unsinn* with conventionally signifying language that accounts for the production of abstraction in literature. Abstract montage thus understood serves to disclose the fundamental mechanisms that govern everyday communication by scrutinizing its flip side, namely, linguistic intransitivity. This is to say that *Merz* literature does not represent processes of communication by summoning virtual worlds that simulate real-life communication, but rather mimics the structure of communication through a parodic performance that calculatingly refuses to replicate the logic of conventional meaning production. I now turn to examining the reach of this parodic play by focusing on some of Schwitters's early essays and short stories.

• Schwitters's programmatic description of *Merz* in literature suggests that literary abstraction lies in suppressing the ties that conventionally bind linguistic materials by establishing new connections in which the common meanings attaching to linguistic units are played off against the non-sense produced by unconventional combinations. An enlightening example of this practice is found in his *Tran-Texte* (literally, "fish-oil texts"), the caustic essays Schwitters wrote in response to negative reviews of his works. These are more than personal attempts at getting even with pesky critics. If the *Merz* essay from 1921 discussed above marks a key moment in Schwitters's campaign against the exclusionary sanctimoniousness of politically engaged artists, then the *Tran* essays engage the other main front line of the discursive warfare Schwitters conducted in the early 1920s, which targeted the smugness and incomprehension of those art critics who belittled contemporary art in the pages of established literary and cultural magazines. These early prose texts weave humorous patchworks collaging Schwitters's attacks on the critics, quotations from the critics' own reviews, and seemingly unrelated linguistic material ranging from simple phrases to complete sentences, which are usually set off by parentheses—their bold linguistic and textual experimentation amply documenting the influence of futurism and Dada. The following passage, which is drawn from an essay published in the Berlin avant-garde journal *Der Sturm* in 1920, exemplifies their primary textual strategy:

> For a moment today, let us "take up" Mr. Felix Neumann. "Nothing kills faster than ridiculousness," he writes. But dear Sir, you are committing suicide! Didn't you read your article of January 6, 1920, in the Post? Sheer suicide! (Nothing kills faster than ridiculousness.) . . . You

> say I'm gnawing with a thousand like-minded comrades at the roots of our strength. (A pretty picture.) Don't you mean: your strength? No, a million times, no, I'm not gnawing, put your mind at ease. I am no rat and you are no tree. I wouldn't have the first clue where to find the roots of your strength. Besides, I would prefer to gnaw my way alone, if you please, without thousands of co-gnawers. But I am no rodent. On the contrary; I am the one being gnawed on. Undoubtedly you will cease gnawing on me any moment now; otherwise I will make you ridiculous, rest assured! Otherwise I will make you ridiculous. Don't you know, that kills. . . . All I need to do is copy what you yourself have written; that is enough.[28]

This passage seizes on two offhand remarks in the critic's review, the proverb-like motto "Nothing kills faster than ridicule," used to disparage Schwitters's poetry in the volume *Anna Blume Dichtungen* (*Anna Blossom Poems*, 1919), and the charge regarding Schwitters's presumed detrimental influence on contemporary audiences: "He gnaws at the roots of our strength with a thousand like-minded souls." The critic's hyperbolic style is mocked by Schwitters, who seizes on the metaphorical "pretty image" of the harmful rodent gnawing away at the roots of a tree, and humorously unfolds it as though it had been meant literally. This allows him to debunk the chauvinistic insinuation entailed in the critic's image of a hoard of rats chipping away at the healthy roots of "our" strength, by suggesting that at issue must rather be the critic's own strength: "You mean your strength?" Second, Schwitters turns the degrading image of the gnawing rodent against the critic himself, claiming that, if anything, he is the one being attacked in a parasitic and insidious way ("gnawed on"), while also protesting the suggestion that he is just one of an entire hoard of artists who are doing exactly the same things he does. Finally, the text makes its own strategies manifest in the last comic death threat launched against the critic. If, as the critic had pompously stipulated in reviewing Schwitters's collages, "nothing kills faster than ridiculousness," then Schwitters threatens to simply reuse a few sentences from the critic's own review, whose preposterousness renders them a lethal weapon. The whole review, Schwitters establishes at the beginning, is tantamount to suicide by the critic's own standard that "nothing kills faster than ridiculousness."

This excerpt well illustrates Schwitters's strategy of seizing on words and phrases from the critic's review and recycling them by "merz-ing" them, that is, adapting them for a new context. One strategy exemplified above includes removing a term, "gnawing," from its syntagmatic context and exploring its paradigmatic relations to other terms. This forms an equivalent to exploiting

the cross-eyedness of collaged fragments in Picasso's *Still Life*, for the semantic valence of the verb "gnawing" is not allowed to exhaust itself in the actualization of the meaning suggested by the critic's sentence. Rather, the word is made to look outside the sentence in search for other meanings that could be actualized within the linguistic context of the citation. This leads to a slippage from metaphorical to literal meaning, so that "gnawing" is interpreted as concretely pointing to the activity of rodents. A whole new context is constructed around the sentence to support this new, actualized meaning, giving way to a humorous juxtaposition between the new literal image (this painter is a rodent who is eating away at the roots of our tree) and the charge entailed in the critic's puffed-up metaphor (this painter is a persistent, though not immediately visible threat to the health of our nation's art and culture). Arguably, the non-sense that is produced in this way makes a lot of sense as a weapon of ridicule turned against the critic. The humor is compounded by the fact that it is the critic's own claims, in their recycled form, that help to expose his pompousness and smugness.[29]

Schwitters's montage principle entails an assault on the linear unfolding of discourse, which is constantly interrupted by parenthetical inserts that either provide a commentary or contain seemingly unrelated linguistic material. This practice casts into sharp relief Schwitters's understanding of montage as a process that establishes novel, unconventional relations among linguistic elements that are treated as found material. The nonsense produced in this way does not make the impression of chaos but unfolds in a highly methodical fashion, engendering a coherent, parallel universe to sense.[30] This is very different from the assault on poetic coherence that marks the *Wortkunst* ("word art") tradition endorsed by the avant-garde circle around Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm*, which Schwitters had initially followed. This poetic model revolved around stripping language to the bones, allowing for an ecstatic feeling to replace grammatical structure. The result is texts dominated by paratactic constructions and word chains, as exemplified by the poetry of August Stramm, its most celebrated representative. If Stramm's language is set in motion by releasing the unstructured intensity of feeling, then Schwitters's linguistic experimentation hinges on exploring alternatives to its ordinary use, which is thus exposed as conventional. In this context nonsense does not represent a negation of sense through the polemical display of gibberish. Rather non-sense appears contiguous to sense, as a parodic manipulation of available material that is close enough to sense to be deciphered as the other of conventional meaning, but outlandish enough to be recognized as lying outside of the established automatism of signification.[31]

• Schwitters's description of how *Merz* functions in the domain of literature resonates closely with Helmut Lethen's account of the cultural shift that shook postwar Germany, away from a conception of meaning as essentially given and toward understanding communication as grounding in models of conduct designed to protect individuals in a potentially hostile social arena. Within this frame communication is not about expression of some inward substance. Rather, as suggested by Schwitters's juxtaposition of sense and non-sense, it is an outward practice that functions through the manipulation of existing materials and signs. In this context, one should note the dispassionate, cold terminology, to use another of Lethen's categories, that structures Schwitters's discourse on art, and that decisively sets it off from the "incandescent," late-idealistic pathos of Expressionism. "Evaluate," "play off," "given parts," "materials," "factors" are the central concepts denoting artistic practice. This language conveys an understanding of experience as a relational network defined by contingent, shifting practices rather than as organic totality. Art represents an intervention on these practices that playfully manipulates existing elements to obtain different relational configurations. In so doing, it prides itself with recycling even those elements that have lost their original purpose, such as refuse, or those linguistic segments that do not make sense in the conventional system of communication, and are thus designated as non-sense.

Lethen's discussion also accounts for the unapologetic agonism that distinguishes Schwitters's replies to his critics, which can easily cross into the vituperative. They can be seen as carrying out the exteriorized "shaming rituals" that took the place of the inner control of conscience in the new "culture of shame" described by Lethen.[32] Schwitters's texts stage these rituals by drawing on the tool of parody. That is, their main shaming strategy lies in debunking the critics' credibility and authority by repeating their statements with some key modification so as to cast ridicule on them, a strategy that is explicitly thematized in the passage quoted above. Yet parody for Schwitters is not simply a strategy of mocking criticism, but rather discloses the fundamental way in which communication functions and as such plays a key role in his understanding of montage, as documented by its ubiquity in his oeuvre. Bernd Scheffer has extensively discussed Schwitters's use of parodic practices of (self-)quotation, which is especially conspicuous in his early literary work and finds a paradigmatic example in his "An Anna Blume" ("Anna Blossom"), one of the most successful poems of the Weimar Republic. The text does not just parody the tradition of erotic poetry, mocking yet also embracing the Western discourse that celebrates erotic experience as an ecstatic moment of subversive unboundedness while domesticating it through senti-

mental clichés so as to render it morally palatable. Anna Blossom is a protean trope that gains a life of its own in Schwitters's texts, returning in a variety of incarnations that traverse his early oeuvre. That is, Schwitters reuses Anna Blossom as a conceptual image, a linguistic pun, an emblem of poetic practice, and an ideogram in visual compositions.[33] This practice is not limited to Anna Blossom, the phantasmagoria of erotic love to whom Schwitters owed an unexpected celebrity and which he unabashedly exploited. Schwitters systematically recycled elements from his own works ranging from single characters to titles of prose texts and entire textual fragments.[34] What makes this practice notable is the extent to which the recycled materials remain fully recognizable as inserts, never completely losing their tie to the context from which they were extracted.

The link that ties Schwitters's parodic practice to montage can best be elucidated by drawing on Linda Hutcheon's nonderogative understanding of parody. For Hutcheon, parody goes well beyond the traditional practice of imitating a text or an object while injecting the imitation with some humorous difference aimed at casting ridicule on the original. To be sure, Hutcheon echoes the traditional definition of parody in seeing the relation between the model and the parodied text as one of "ironic inversion." However, she stresses that the irony is "not always at the expense of the parodied text," but rather serves to mark the moment of difference, that is, to make clear that the imitation is at variance with the original. Hence parody consists for her of a "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity."[35] When considered within the context of Schwitters's montage practices, parody is a strategy for recycling materials where the moment of recycling or imitation is made explicit by the ironic variation on the original. Reusing materials derived both from his own work and that of others, Schwitters weaves a complex patchwork of relations in which texts are never fully contained in themselves, but always point outside their contingent boundaries to allude to other texts. In its manifest double-coding, parody functions as an overt intertextual strategy that foregrounds the signifying mechanism proper to montage. This practice challenges conventional notions of authorship and the bounded text while at the same time establishing a high degree of coherence in Schwitters's oeuvre. It is a type of coherence that is predicated not so much on the repetition of specific content or materials as on the formal relations that repetition establishes.

This understanding of parody is paradigmatically enacted in "Schacko," a story from 1926 that probes the reach of abstraction in literature.[36] The story's title refers to its central figure, a parrot whose illness and untimely death constitute the narrative's primary focus. Most of the story is told in the first

person by the parrot's owner, a woman mourning the recent death of her husband. "Such a naked tiny animal," she repeats tirelessly. As she explains, the bird compulsively pulled all its feathers during the time spent with the ailing man (*Werk* 2:289). The vet has now been summoned to save the bird, who becomes afflicted in tight sequence by constipation due to a hernia, a sudden, disastrous attack of diarrhea, and, finally, by fluid in its lungs, which causes its ultimate demise. The story ends, quite humorously, with the fearless woman performing an improvised autopsy to ascertain the bird's cause of death. She then lovingly buries its corpse at the feet of her husband's grave, thus fulfilling his last wish.

In a preface to the 1933 reprint of the story Schwitters explicitly thematizes the role of abstraction in literature:

> It is very difficult to realize abstraction in literature. I would like to point to the structure of "**Schacko**," to its abstract law of **composition**. I have heard Schacko's story myself told from a woman, **word for word, the whole tale** . . . this brought the material closer to me from a human standpoint; but **as such** it was not yet an artwork. **The matter became an artwork only through form**: how the woman's statements are juxtaposed to each other, how they are repeated, complement each other, how they anticipate or confirm each other, how they hang together as a whole so as to make ever more manifest the woman's love for her husband, **an abstract concept**, and her desperation, **yet again an abstract concept**, and this is **the content of this story**. You can analyze all my texts in this way and you will have to admit that their form is always abstract in this way: statements are juxtaposed to each other. (*Werk* 2:431–32)[37]

According to this passage, the narrative is based on a true story its protagonist related to the writer of the preface. While the story is not made up, it is also not a faithful recording of the tale told by the woman. Rather the narrative recycles materials supplied by the model by rearranging them within the medium of literature. Its artistic attributes, that which distinguishes it from the woman's narration, lie in its distinctive form, what Schwitters calls its abstract law of composition. Form in this context concerns the way in which the woman's statements, which are made more poignant by their disarming ordinariness, are merzed/collaged, that is, repeated and juxtaposed so as to bring to the fore what are essentially abstract constructs, namely, her feelings of love and desperation. This abstract content calls for the deployment of formal abstraction, which in this case denotes the refusal

von nebenan durch die Wand ohne sich groß was dabei zu denken. Morgens war ihr erster Weg zur Küche; sie mußte waten, denn die ganze Wohnung stand unter Wasser. Tische und Stühle kamen ihr entgegengeschwommen. Die Schränke waren dick aufgequollen, wie Pappe. Von den Wänden waren die Nägel abgerostet, und alle Bilder nebst Wandschmücken lagen unten im Wasser, das ihr bis ans Knie ging. Sie dachte: „Wenn's nur dem Tierchen gut geht, dann bin ich's ja gern zufrieden!" – Aber dieser Schreck. Denken Sie, wie sie in die Küche kommt, **liegt das Tier tot.** Es ist ganz dick aufgequollen und muß wohl ertrunken sein. Den Kopf hatte es hoch unter den Gaskandelaber gehängt, aber das Wasser mußte in der Nacht wohl höher gestanden haben, und da war es offenbar zu lange unter Wasser gewesen. Und nun das aufgequollene Tier wieder herauszukriegen! Frau Schönwetter stellte gleich den Wasserhahn ab, denn nun hatte es keinen Zweck mehr, das Wasser laufen zu lassen. Und nun sah man erst, wie die Türen gequollen waren, und als das Wasser abgelaufen war, waren die Fußböden so schlammig und weich, wie die Feldwege im Winter. Und dann das Gewicht des Tieres! Ein normales Flußpferd wiegt nach Herders Konversationslexikon, dritte Auflage, reich illustriert durch Textabbildungen, Tafeln und Karten, dritter Band, Elea bis Gyuilay, Freiburg im Breisgau, Berlin, Karlsruhe, München, Straßburg, Wien und St. Louis, Mo. Seite 675, **bis 2500 Kilogramm.** Aber Frau Schönwetter war helle. **Sie schnitt einfach das Tier von hinten in kleine Scheiben,** die sie selbst bequem tragen konnte, und trug es dann scheibenweise mit dem Mülleimer in den Wechselsack. So sparte sie wenigstens den Dienstmann.

Und nun die Steinböcke? Angangs schliefen sie ganz ruhig auf dem Fußende von Gleiwitzens Bett. Aber mitten in der Nacht mußten doch wohl Meinungsverschiedenheiten entstanden sein, und nun ging's aber los! Sie rasten hintereinander her, und Gleiwitz war aufgewacht und pfiff mit seiner schrillen Pfeife dazwischen. Und die vier Steinböcke rasten an den Wänden hoch und warfen aber auch alles um. Da wußte sich Gleiwitz nicht zu helfen, **er nahm sein Taschenmesser und erstach einen nach dem anderen.** Und wie nun die vier tot dalagen, schnitt sich Gleiwitz die Pulsadern auf und legte sich daneben; denn er hätte das wertvolle Porzellan nie im Leben wieder bezahlen können.

Warnung:
Schreiber dieses hat so ausführlich geschrieben, um die eminente Gefahr einer Zoologischen-Garten-Lotterie deutlich zu demonstrieren. Man sollte die außerordentliche Gefahr nicht verkennen und die zoologischen Gärten so stellen, daß sie ihre Insassen standesgemäß beherbergen können: **dem Löwen eine Wüste, dem Nilpferd einen Strom, den Steinböcken ein Hochgebirge.** Das ist soziale Tierpflege, und das ist standesgemäß für die Tiere.

Schacko Jacco

Sie werden sicher denken: **„Son nackiges Tierche",** isser auch. Der hat sich nämlich alle Federn ausgerissen. Weil unser Vater doch so hat leiden müssen, ehr daß der starb; und da hat der abends immer Licht angehabt, **weil der nicht hat schlafen können;** und da hat dann das Tierche auch nicht schlafen können, **weil der immer Licht angehabt hat,** son armes Tierche; und da hat der sich aus Kummer vor lauter Langerweile alle Federn ausgerissen. Auf seinem kleinen Kopfe, da hatter ja noch welche, **schön siehter ja nicht grade aus,** son nackiges Tierche. Pfui schäm dich, Schacko, dreh dich mal um, und der schämt sich noch nicht emal!

Aber ich denke: „Gehster mal mit zum Tierarzt, der kann ja auch nichts machen." Und da sagich: „Herr Doktor, Sie werden sicher denken, son nackiges Tierche, **isser auch.** Der hat sich nämlich alle Federn ausgerissen. Weil unser Vater doch so hat leiden müssen, **ehr daß der starb;** und da hat der abends immer Licht angehabt, weil der nicht hat schlafen können, und da hat das Tierche auch nicht schlafen können, weil der immer Licht angehabt hat, **son armes Tierche;** Und da hat der sich aus lauter Kummer **vor Langerweile** alle Federn ausgerissen. Auf seinem kleinen Kopfe, da hatter ja noch welche, schön siehter ja nicht grade aus, son nackiges Tierche. **Pfui, schäm dich, Schacko,** dreh dich mal um, und der schämt sich noch nicht emal!"

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Kurt Schwitters, "Schacko," 1926; *Merz* 21 (1931): 110.
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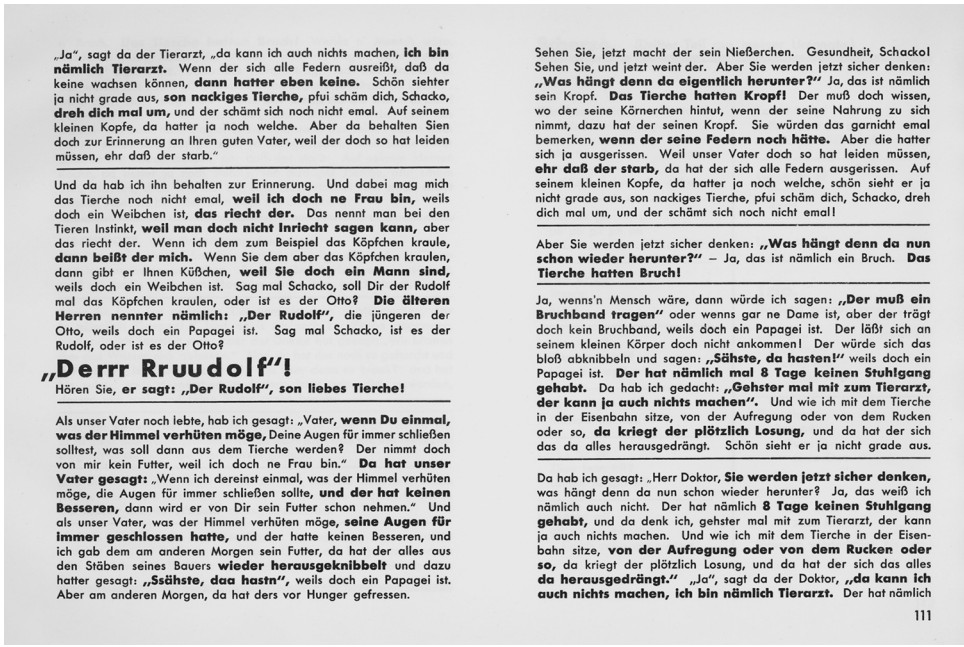
to render the woman's state of mind through a mimetic narrative that would draw on conventional psychological observation. Hence, the terms love and desperation are never used in reference to her. Yet the narrative enacts these abstract concepts through its structure and linguistic form, which thus bear further scrutiny.

The story is composed of thirteen sections typographically set off by horizontal lines. The first nine sections contain the woman's first-person account; the tenth segment bears the title "POSTSCRIPT, for the Reader's Orientation" and introduces segments told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, who claims to have heard the story from the woman herself (*Werk* 2:291). The narrative is patterned after the rapid back-and-forth of vernacular dialogue, which at times contains short descriptive inserts providing a bare minimum of background information. Each section reintroduces and juxtaposes phrases and idioms from the previous sections in an almost compulsive manner, which at once foregrounds the formulaic character of the linguistic



„Ja", sagt da der Tierarzt, „da kann ich auch nichts machen, **ich bin nämlich Tierarzt.** Wenn der sich alle Federn ausreißt, daß da keine wachsen können, **dann hatter eben keine.** Schön siehter ja nicht grade aus, **son nackiges Tierche,** pfui schäm dich, Schacko, **dreh dich mal um,** und der schämt sich noch nicht emal. Auf seinem kleinen Kopfe, da hatter ja noch welche. Aber da behalten Sien doch zur Erinnerung an Ihren guten Vater, weil der doch so hat leiden müssen, ehr daß der starb."

Und da hab ich ihn behalten zur Erinnerung. Und dabei mag mich das Tierche noch nicht emal, **weil ich doch ne Frau bin,** weils doch ein Weibchen ist, **das riecht der.** Das nennt man bei den Tieren Instinkt, **weil man doch nicht Inriecht sagen kann,** aber das riecht der. Wenn ich dem zum Beispiel das Köpfchen kraule, **dann beißt der mich.** Wenn Sie dem aber das Köpfchen kraulen, dann gibt er Ihnen Küßchen, **weil Sie doch ein Mann sind,** weils doch ein Weibchen ist. Sag mal Schacko, soll Dir der Rudolf mal das Köpfchen kraulen, oder ist es der Otto? **Die älteren Herren nennter nämlich: „Der Rudolf",** die jüngeren der Otto, weils doch ein Papagei ist. Sag mal Schacko, ist es der Rudolf, oder ist es der Otto?

„Derrr Rruudolf"!

Hören Sie, **er sagt: „Der Rudolf", son liebes Tierche!**

Als unser Vater noch lebte, hab ich gesagt: „Vater, **wenn Du einmal, was der Himmel verhüten möge,** Deine Augen für immer schließen solltest, was soll dann aus dem Tierche werden? Der nimmt doch von mir kein Futter, weil ich doch ne Frau bin." **Da hat unser Vater gesagt:** „Wenn ich dereinst einmal, was der Himmel verhüten möge, die Augen für immer schließen sollte, **und der hat keinen Besseren,** dann wird er von Dir sein Futter schon nehmen." Und als unser Vater, was der Himmel verhüten möge, **seine Augen für immer geschlossen hatte,** und der hatte keinen Besseren, und ich gab dem am anderen Morgen sein Futter, da hat der alles aus den Stäben seines Bauers **wieder herausgeknibbelt** und dazu hatter gesagt: **„Ssähste, daa hastn",** weils doch ein Papagei ist. Aber am anderen Morgen, da hat ders vor Hunger gefressen.

Sehen Sie, jetzt macht der sein Nießerchen. Gesundheit, Schacko! Sehen Sie, und jetzt weint der. Aber Sie werden jetzt sicher denken: **„Was hängt denn da eigentlich herunter?"** Ja, das ist nämlich sein Kropf. **Das Tierche hatten Kropf!** Der muß doch wissen, wo der seine Körnerchen hintut, wenn der seine Nahrung zu sich nimmt, dazu hat der seinen Kropf. Sie würden das garnicht emal bemerken, **wenn der seine Federn noch hätte.** Aber die hatter sich ja ausgerissen. Weil unser Vater doch so hat leiden müssen, **ehr daß der starb,** da hat der sich alle Federn ausgerissen. Auf seinem kleinen Kopfe, da hatter ja noch welche, schön sieht er ja nicht grade aus, son nackiges Tierche, pfui schäm dich, Schacko, dreh dich mal um, und der schämt sich noch nicht emal!

Aber Sie werden jetzt sicher denken: **„Was hängt denn da nun schon wieder herunter?"** – Ja, das ist nämlich ein Bruch. **Das Tierche hatten Bruch!**

Ja, wenns'n Mensch wäre, dann würde ich sagen: **„Der muß ein Bruchband tragen"** oder wenns gar ne Dame ist, aber der trägt doch kein Bruchband, weils doch ein Papagei ist. Der läßt sich an seinem kleinen Körper doch nicht ankommen! Der würde sich das bloß abknibbeln und sagen: **„Sähste, da hasten!"** weils doch ein Papagei ist. **Der hat nämlich mal 8 Tage keinen Stuhlgang gehabt.** Da hab ich gedacht: **„Gehster mal mit zum Tierarzt, der kann ja auch nichts machen".** Und wie ich mit dem Tierche in der Eisenbahn sitze, von der Aufregung oder von dem Rucken oder so, **da kriegt der plötzlich Losung,** und da hat der sich das da alles herausgedrängt. Schön sieht er ja nicht grade aus.

Da hab ich gesagt: „Herr Doktor, **Sie werden jetzt sicher denken,** was hängt denn da nun schon wieder herunter? Ja, das weiß ich nämlich auch nicht. Der hat nämlich **8 Tage keinen Stuhlgang gehabt,** und da denk ich, gehster mal mit zum Tierarzt, der kann ja auch nichts machen. Und wie ich mit dem Tierche in der Eisenbahn sitze, **von der Aufregung oder von dem Rucken oder so,** da kriegt der plötzlich Losung, und da hat der sich das alles **da herausgedrängt."** „Ja", sagt da der Doktor, **„da kann ich auch nichts machen, ich bin nämlich Tierarzt.** Der hat nämlich

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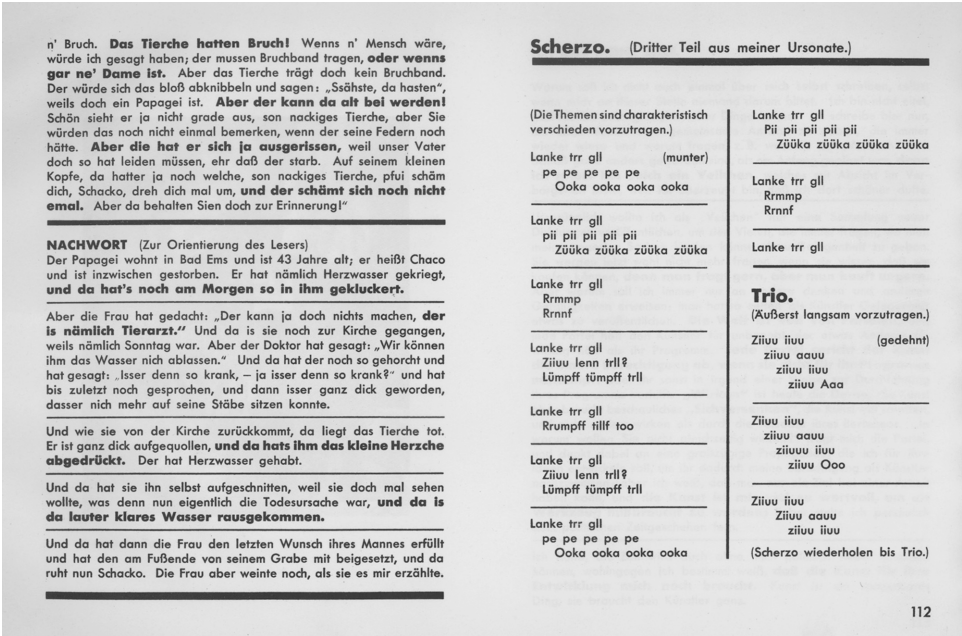
Kurt Schwitters, "Schacko," 1926; *Merz* 21 (1931): 111.
(Courtesy of the International Dada Archive, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries. Copyright 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.)

material and the intensity of feeling that underlies its use. The repetition of and variation on utterly banal, yet affectionate phrases such as "such a naked tiny animal," "turn around now," "shame on you, Schacko!" (referring to the parrot's missing plumage and wretched looks) drive the story on toward its poignant, grotesque ending. The parrot's own ability to repeat phrases with small variations provides further insight into the imitative patterns that structure communication in the story. The woman tells the doctor that the bird does not just mimic the sounds it hears, but uses the words it repeats in a deliberate manner. Her apparent delusion adds a humorous and poignant touch to the narration while also drawing attention to the pattern of repetition that structures the communication between the actors of the dialogue. Indeed, the speakers feed off each other's verbal input in ways that recall the communication modeled by the parrot. In their repetitions these speakers do not just "parrot" each other, that is, mindlessly reproduce fragments of sonoric sequences, but rather they modulate them, adding new touches.



n' Bruch. **Das Tierche hatten Bruch!** Wenns n' Mensch wäre, würde ich gesagt haben; der mussen Bruchband tragen, **oder wenns gar ne' Dame ist.** Aber das Tierche trägt doch kein Bruchband. Der würde sich das bloß abknibbeln und sagen: „Ssähste, da hasten", weils doch ein Papagei ist. **Aber der kann da alt bei werden!** Schön sieht er ja nicht grade aus, son nackiges Tierche, aber Sie würden das noch nicht einmal bemerken, wenn der seine Federn noch hätte. **Aber die hat er sich ja ausgerissen,** weil unser Vater doch so hat leiden müssen, ehr daß der starb. Auf seinem kleinen Kopfe, da hatter ja noch welche, son nackiges Tierche, pfui schäm dich, Schacko, dreh dich mal um, **und der schämt sich noch nicht emal.** Aber da behalten Sien doch zur Erinnerung!"

NACHWORT (Zur Orientierung des Lesers)
Der Papagei wohnt in Bad Ems und ist 43 Jahre alt; er heißt Chaco und ist inzwischen gestorben. Er hat nämlich Herzwasser gekriegt, **und da hat's noch am Morgen so in ihm gekluckert.**

Aber die Frau hat gedacht: „Der kann ja doch nichts machen, **der is nämlich Tierarzt."** Und da is sie noch zur Kirche gegangen, weils nämlich Sonntag war. Aber der Doktor hat gesagt: „Wir können ihm das Wasser nich ablassen." Und da hat der noch so gehorcht und hat gesagt: „Isser denn so krank, – ja isser denn so krank?" und hat bis zuletzt noch gesprochen, und dann isser ganz dick geworden, dasser nich mehr auf seine Stäbe sitzen konnte.

Und wie sie von der Kirche zurückkommt, da liegt das Tierche tot. Er ist ganz dick aufgequollen, **und da hats ihm das kleine Herzche abgedrückt.** Der hat Herzwasser gehabt.

Und da hat sie ihn selbst aufgeschnitten, weil sie doch mal sehen wollte, was denn nun eigentlich die Todesursache war, **und da is da lauter klares Wasser rausgekommen.**

Und da hat dann die Frau den letzten Wunsch ihres Mannes erfüllt und hat den am Fußende von seinem Grabe mit beigesetzt, und da ruht nun Schacko. Die Frau aber weinte noch, als sie es mir erzählte.

Scherzo. (Dritter Teil aus meiner Ursonate.)

(Die Themen sind charakteristisch verschieden vorzutragen.)

Lanke trr gll (munter)
pe pe pe pe pe
Ooka ooka ooka ooka

Lanke trr gll
pii pii pii pii
Züüka züüka züüka züüka

Lanke trr gll
Rrmmp
Rrnnf

Lanke trr gll
Ziiuu lenn trll?
Lümpff tümpff trll

Lanke trr gll
Rrumpff tillf too

Lanke trr gll
Ziiuu lenn trll?
Lümpff tümpff trll

Lanke trr gll
pe pe pe pe pe
Ooka ooka ooka ooka

Lanke trr gll
Pii pii pii pii pii
Züüka züüka züüka züüka

Lanke trr gll
Rrmmp
Rrnnf

Lanke trr gll

Trio.
(Äußerst langsam vorzutragen.)

Ziiuu iiuu (gedehnt)
ziiuu aauu
ziiuu iiuu
ziiuu Aaa

Ziiuu iiuu
ziiuu aauu
ziiuuu iiuu
ziiuu Ooo

Ziiuu iiuu
Ziiuu aauu
ziiuu iiuu

(Scherzo wiederholen bis Trio.)

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Kurt Schwitters, "Schacko," 1926; *Merz* 21 (1931): 112.
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The principle of repetition likewise extends to the larger segments that make up the narrative. For instance, sections 7, 8, and 9 each appear to be an expansion of the previous. In barely two lines, section 7 describes the woman's discovery that the parrot's intestines bulge out as a result of the hernia. Section 8 picks up on this description, while identifying constipation as the cause of the parrot's bulging parts and recounting the disastrous resolution of the parrot's problem when the bird relieves itself on the train that takes the woman to the vet. In section 9, the scene is relived and amplified in the woman's dramatic retelling to the doctor. When considered within the story's overall structure, the sections appear to parrot each other, repeating and modulating elements from the previous ones while also adding new detail. While suggesting a clear sequence of events, the overlapping repetitions disrupt the sense of closure and sequential unfolding of traditional narrative. The exuberance and vividness of this seemingly incontrollable repetition harness the text's impact on the recipient. Though the expectation of logically unfolding communication is frustrated at every turn, a different kind of in-

telligibility emerges, one that hinges on understanding communication as a parodic montage of materials. Communication, in other words, is about recycling materials that are already out there by inserting them into different contexts and establishing new connections among them. As an enactment of abstract literature, the text parrots the operations of ordinary language by imitating them in an ironic mode. In so doing, it shows that the building blocks of communication are never new, original, untainted, but always encumbered with resonances from other contexts. Imitation thus understood is self-referential in that it does not revolve around representing a content that would make the story's narrative backbone conspicuous, but rather enacts the mechanism of communication by mimicking it in a distorted mode.

The text's inquiry into the mechanism of communication furthermore enacts the fundamental setting of storytelling in ways that uncannily recall Benjamin's account in "The Storyteller." For Benjamin, storytelling is about transmission of a practical knowledge that presupposes material contiguity and shared bodily routines between storyteller and recipient.[38] Much like in Benjamin's antihermeneutic account, storytelling in "Schacko" is about retelling a story one has once heard, not to elucidate its meaning but rather to relay a content—the woman's love for her husband—by establishing new formal relations among its component parts. This is what makes the story into literature, according to the narrator. His way of recounting the story makes clear that the focus of storytelling is not on interpretation understood as the excavation of a character's psyche or the construction of narrative causality and motivation—for instance, what would explain the woman's devotion to an unwanted pet, how her behavior helps understand her love for her deceased husband, and so on. Rather at issue is the possibility of presenting her feelings of love and desperation through parodic imitation of her linguistic behavior. This does not mean that the story has no plot or that one cannot ascribe meaning to it. What is at stake, however, is not so much the story as an artifact that holds a sense to be disclosed, but rather storytelling as a specific mode of linguistic behavior that can provide insight into the woman's broader conduct and experience. In other words, the widow as the story's main character is presented as a storyteller whose dialogical, narrative practice in her encounters with the doctor is conveyed by the narrator through parodic manipulation. This focus on storytelling as a specific mode of behavior foregrounds the basic framework of storytelling enacted by the text, placing not only the narrator, but also the recipient front and center. As Schwitters's preface makes clear, as the text's narrator he has occupied both positions, first having served as the listener to the woman, and then as a storyteller for the reader of the present text. This helps understand the text's structure as

centered on the woman's own dialogical act of narration, in which she formally addresses a recipient that turns out to be the narrator in whose voice the postscript concludes.

Finally, the text's abstract content—the woman's love as dramatized by her behavior as storyteller—calls for a presentation that shifts the emphasis away from a traditional interpretive framework by drawing on material devices that foreground the separatedness of perception and meaning. This emphasis on perception as a distinct moment helps foreground the material dimension of storytelling as a mode of conduct—material is here understood in the sense used by Katherine Hayles, as the interplay between relevant physical aspects of a given medium and available signifying practices. The text was one of Schwitters's most favorite *Vortragsdichtungen* (performance poems), the pieces he declaimed with exuberant physicality at his soirees. As often suggested by eyewitness accounts, these performances pointedly exceeded whatever "content" the piece was about, and this excess enhanced, rather than trivialized, this very "content," frequently eliciting the audience's spirited response (*Werk* 2:432). In the text's printed version Schwitters took pains to use various typographical devices to visually mark the interplay and simultaneous separatedness of perceptual and semiotic levels, for instance by placing individual words and phrases in bold typeface and marking paragraph breaks through horizontal lines that rupture the text's linearity. This helps to emphasize the structure of repetition that frames the narrative and foregrounds the narrator's intervention in manipulating textual relations. That is to say, the narrative act of manipulation is underscored at a perceptual level through visual, nondiscursive devices and is thus set off from the woman's linguistic behavior, which provides the building blocks for the textual montage. By the same token, one can picture Schwitters's own corporeal performance as marking a perceptual plus to the materials he presented, a device that reinforced the act of storytelling by presenting it as marked behavior.[39]

• Understanding communication as depsychologized behavior that relies on the imitative manipulation of found linguistic material suggests a parallel to Helmuth Plessner's notion of expressivity as marking a spiraling modality of interaction between individual and environment through which both are mutually constituted. But it also recalls Marcel Duchamp's experimentation with the readymade and the found object in the 1910s and 1920s, with which Schwitters was well familiar.[40] While there is much ground shared by the two artists, for the purpose of my analysis it will be instructive to briefly outline the different assumptions that undergird their deployment

of preformed materials. Whereas Duchamp's recycling of found objects was guided by the question "Under which conditions can this object be presented as an art object?"[41]—that is, aimed to test the conventions of art by probing the boundary between art and nonart—Schwitters was never interested in placing the status of art in question. In fact, while ransacking all possible media and idioms for his work, he never wavered in his belief in the autonomy of the artistic medium, defined as the possibility of establishing nonconventional relations among everyday objects, which recipients would readily identify as art. If Duchamp sought to challenge the self-adjudicated, exceptionalist ontology of art by exposing its dependence on contextual and institutional factors, Schwitters was more interested in the claim to ordinariness of everyday life. In other words, one could describe Schwitters's practice by inverting Duchamp's questions, "What makes art into art? What grounds art's claim to an extraordinary status?" so as to ask, "How ordinary is the nonartistic? What lies behind the ordinariness of everyday objects?"

This focus on the ordinary quality of everyday experience recalls Marjorie Perloff's discussion of two competing modernist paradigms for engaging poetic language. The dominant model, Perloff maintains, is defined by belief in a fundamental "distinction between the 'practical' language of 'ordinary' communication and the 'autonomous' language of poetry."[42] This distinction is sustained by a centuries-old reflection on language, conceptual thinking, and art that has been encoded through a variety of oppositions: scientific versus artistic, cognitive versus emotive, denotative versus connotative, literal versus figural, ordinary versus defamiliarizing. Perloff draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein's exploration of linguistic practice in the *Philosophical Investigations* to describe a second strain of modernist poetics. This latter model rejects the distinction between literary and ordinary language and rather views the aesthetic as a realm for scrutinizing ordinary language use, that is, the everyday practices by which we communicate and produce meaning. This examination helps expose the fundamental strangeness of these practices, that is, their situatedness and conventional nature, the fact that they could be organized differently and be just as meaningful. From this vantage point art appears as a medium for grasping ordinary signifying practices by means of a performance that makes them appear unfamiliar. This is the modernist strain that grounds Schwitters's interrogation of the "ordinariness of the ordinary" via a manipulation of its materials.[43]

Wittgenstein's exploration of language as a rule-guided practice, a set of games whose conventions are rooted in the shared way of life of speakers offers an enlightening perspective for assessing Schwitters's manipulation of nonsense in the response to the critic's review discussed above. If, according

to Wittgenstein, meaning is produced by manipulating signifying elements according to the rules of a game, then Schwitters's strategies in this excerpt consist in engaging the critic's language game while tweaking with its rules.[44] Specifically, Schwitters refuses to interpret the image of the "gnawing critter" in the metaphorical sense in which it was intended and instead unfolds its literal meaning, so as to debunk its chauvinistic and debasing implications. This operation raises questions about the ordinariness of this kind of metaphor. Should the disparaging allusion to pest-bringing rodents be treated as a commonplace way of critiquing artistic experiments one finds objectionable? How innocuous is this mode of critique? And how much does one learn about the object at stake from this kind of insinuation? Schwitters's attack on the critic's uninformative and belittling mode of criticism does not marshal reasoned arguments to make its point, but rather unfolds via a linguistic performance that debunks the claim to ordinariness of a slandering metaphor.

In "Schacko," the ordinariness of phrases like "Such a naked tiny animal" mutates into its opposite by way of exuberant repetition, which is made to express the intense feeling that propels the utterance. The banal vernacular phrase thus becomes a touching cipher for the tender, inarticulate love that ties the woman to an unpleasant pet she cherishes as a remnant of life with her husband. Furthermore, the linguistic behavior of the characters in "Schacko" presents close affinities to Wittgenstein's understanding of language games. Their communication unfolds as a chain of overlapping repetitions based on mimicking each other's utterances while also infusing them with difference so as to adapt them to their needs. The impression one gains is that of a disorderly patchwork of exchanges that lack a discernible pattern or recognizable rules, but are nonetheless effective in negotiating communication. This is because the speakers are willing to take their cues from their interlocutors; that is, they appropriate each other's phrases while modifying them as needed. Drawing on a central Wittgensteinian trope, one could say that they play a game whose rules they do not just follow, but also adapt and expand in response to contingent configurations.[45] The point I want to stress here regards the distinctive understanding of language and communication Schwitters shares with Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Communication in this context is not about choosing one option over another from some deep structure of language that would function as a blueprint for possible games. As Stanley Cavell has noted, the novelty and profundity of Wittgenstein's inquiry reside in the realization "that everyday language does not, in fact or in essence, depend upon such a structure and conception of rules, and yet that the absence of such a structure in no way impairs its functioning" (48).

This well describes Schwitters's antipsychological understanding of communication as an aggregate of contingent modes of behavior that bind individuals via a parodic mechanism of repetition. That these individuals are seemingly bereft of an inward space by no means curtails their agency, that is, their ability to engage in meaningful practices.

• What good is the realization that making and trading sense is not about actualizing some systematic properties of language? What kind of artistic intervention does this realization make possible and call for? In other words, what is the relationship between art and the practices of meaning-production that harness everyday experience in a productively disorderly, unpredictable, open-ended network? To answer these questions in closing, I would like to examine a short story, a parable of sorts that Schwitters wrote in an ironic attempt to educate art critics, and that was published in 1920. The story is titled after its unlikely heroine, Augusta Bolte, an eager young woman whose life becomes unhinged one day when she decides to follow ten people she sees walking on the street. Though they at first seem to be mere strangers, the fact that they walk in the same direction and the sheer roundness of the number ten convince Augusta that the ten are involved in a mysterious operation that promises the disclosure of life's wisdom. Certain that her life now depends on solving this riddle, Augusta embarks on a series of adventures that prove to be every bit as absurd as the reasoning that triggered her initial pursuit.

The narrative unfolds along a multilayered pattern of repetitions that are enacted at various levels. One such layer consists of the methodic repetitiveness of Augusta's thought processes, which the narration meticulously renders. Yet the more the narrator praises the young woman for her intelligence, talent, and methodical thinking, the clearer it becomes that Augusta's systematic approach is of absolutely no help in dealing with the events that confront her. For instance, Augusta becomes comically hung up on the recurring rhyme patterns of her own interior monologue and feels compelled to discern in them some mysterious sense:

> And now? How now? A scandalous rhyme! How rhymed with now. Beyond that it seemed especially peculiar to Miss Augusta that not only did how rhyme with now, but now also rhymed with how. . . . The rhyme came up her throat like cod-liver oil. . . . For when something's happening then the most unrhymed things happen to happen. Then all of a sudden what never rhymed before, rhymes. Let's sum up! 1, 2,

> 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 people were walking in one and the same direction, now rhymed with how. Something obviously had to be going on. How should Augusta find out? (*pppppp* 141)[46]

Augusta's reasoning in this passage is based on a pun involving the German *sich reimen*, to rhyme, which also means "making sense," "hanging together in a meaningful way"; by the same token, *ungereimt* ("unrhymed") means inconsistent. So when Augusta detects unexpected rhymes in her self-monologue, she concludes that they must be cues for some deeper meaning. However, the literal rhymes that are involved here are really only a sound pattern.[47] They exhibit recognizable formal relationships that are endowed with a specific perceptual distinctiveness, but have no inherent meaning.

Even if Augusta ultimately fails to learn the secret of life, her experiences have not been in vain. Every turn of her oddball story is a step forward in an educational trajectory that earns her ever higher academic degrees. In the end she realizes that experience is structured by relationships that have no inherent meaning. One has to invest them with meaning by deciding what to care about, and what to interpret (*pppppp* 162). This is not at all a nihilistic insight but rather has a liberating effect because it relieves Augusta from the anxious quest for the hidden meaning she believes to glimpse in the random patterns that structure experience. This realization prompts her to make a clean break with her previous life and concentrate on pursuing a young man, who she is convinced makes a worthy husband. This pursuit, however, comes to an abrupt end when the driver of the cab she has enlisted in the chase abandons her in a remote location because she cannot pay the fare. In this way the narrative averts not only a happy ending, but any kind of ending. The only measure of closure is offered by the narrator, who polemically takes center stage in the last paragraph and addresses the readers so as to preempt their anticipated criticism:

> The reader might have thought that something would be happening here. . . . Certainly the reader will think that Miss Dr. Lif would find out who or what is going on, but she finds out nothing. The reader believes that he has the right to find out, but the reader has no right to find out anything in a work of art. . . . Nope. It's just that the story is over, simply over, no matter how sorry I am no matter how brutal it must sound, there's nothing else I can do. (*pppppp* 163–64)[48]

This declaration by the narrator effectively turns the tables on the reader. It becomes apparent that the reader has been tricked into having fun at Au-

gusta's expense only to find out that he or she has been performing operations similar to Augusta's in reading the story. Like Augusta, the reader has tried to make sense of the narrated events by deciphering narrative cues, by ruling out possible readings, and by making predictions on how the story would continue or end. In foreclosing any conclusion that could tie the narrative together in a meaningful way, the narrator admonishes the reader that one does not have the right to expect to learn anything from an artwork. There is nothing to understand or learn from this story, because there is nothing to learn or understand from art. In this way, the story establishes a parallel between the contingent structure of experience and art. Everyday experience comprises an array of events one navigates without subjecting them to a systematic logic. Many of them exhibit contingent connections, but do not necessarily make sense. Art is just this kind of event or object. Its connections have no intrinsic sense and yet are not without structure.

In spite of the narrator's refusal to supply a meaningful conclusion for the story, the reader does have something to take away at the end. In a way, the story provides a lesson in conduct as described by Helmut Lethen. Specifically, it presents meaning as negotiated through Augusta's linguistic behavior. Augusta's conduct is, however, a negative example, a model of how not to negotiate meaning in everyday experience. As it becomes clear, the flip side of her obsession with random structures is her inability to interact productively with the individuals who cross her path. Her solipsistic determination to decode structures that supposedly hold the meaning of life is precisely the opposite of the cooperative behavior of speakers who negotiate communication based on games whose rules are constantly remade through playing. Rather than actively play by ear in the ever-shifting game of signification, Augusta is played by the structure and therefore loses. In the end she may well understand that the structures one encounters in experience have no inherent meaning, but she never learns to interact effectively with others, including the cab driver who abandons her in the middle of nowhere. With Augusta, the reader comes to see that the practice of ascribing meaning to patterns solely based on their structural regularity is misguided. Meaning is based on patterns, but does not automatically flow from them. In a similar way, art's formal relations do not produce meaning in any ordinary sense of the word, but unfold contiguously to ordinary processes of meaning-production, which they present in a defamiliarizing form that questions their ordinariness and thus makes them perspicuous. Schwitters, who has been accused of reducing art to formalist play, delivers a powerful indictment of formalism understood as an empty manipulation of structure all the while providing a compelling enactment of the mode of artistic abstraction he championed.

Schwitters's montage principle envisions art as a realm for playing with the contingent practices of meaning-production. The abstraction of artistic practice places non-sense alongside sense, not to deny the possibility of meaning but to make the operations of communication apparent by marking at once the separatedness and entwinement of pattern and perception, structure and signification. This is crucial for assessing the value of Schwitters's belief in abstraction and his distinctive brand of formalism. When seen from this perspective, Schwitters's abstraction turns out to be the opposite of the refusal of narrativity that for Rosalind Krauss informs the modernist tendency to abstraction. According to Krauss, the quest for formal purity and compulsion of repetition that drives the avant-garde obsession with the grid foregrounds the structure of permanent deferral that characterizes signification. Put in terms of the Saussurian distinction between langue and parole, Krauss focuses on langue as a systematic network of relations that stages an ultimate absence.[49] Schwitters's formalism, by contrast, is about the parole aspect of language, about its being a playground for the contingent games of signification. Hence, Schwitters's hybrid verbal and visual collages veer toward the messiness of everyday communication rather than toward the purity of a system. By the same token, Schwitters holds on to an emphatic understanding of artistic agency. The artist is not played by structure or beholden to the unfolding of chance, but rather is actively engaged in the game of meaning.

This engagement does not translate into a critical practice that aims to redress perceived injustices by challenging established hierarchies of power. Richard Huelsenbeck was right to find Schwitters wanting in this respect and to point to the affirmative impulse sustaining his work. What Schwitters's work affirms, however, is not the bourgeois order that it fails to condemn, but rather the possibility of an experience whose meaning is constructed and ever-shifting, yet can nonetheless be perceived as whole and consequential. This affirmative moment helps place into perspective Schwitters's emphatic insistence on the autonomy of artistic practice, which is held to stand in an intransitive relation to everyday signifying practices while paradoxically feeding off them. While shunning overt political engagement, Schwitters's avant-garde impulse does nonetheless actualize one strong meaning of critique, conceived as the task of probing the presuppositions and boundaries that delimit a given practice. In this sense, art is understood to be a distinct cognitive medium for testing ordinary signifying practices via an investigation that makes them appear unfamiliar. This investigation exposes their lack of a supratemporal structure and being driven by parodic repetition instead, which highlights their contingency and manipulability.

Such insights are optimistically framed as an opportunity for expanding signification, an agenda Schwitters relentlessly pursued in a range of practices that pushed the bounds of established genres and media. *Merz*, the principle of abstract montage that undergirds his work, rests on the realization that the intersubjective practice we call meaning is but a restricted set of possible games. Its playful challenge to the "ordinariness of the ordinary" tampers with the ways these games are conventionally played, exhorting players to expand the range of possible moves that will allow them to stay in the game.