



Book Review

Rosenberg, Joseph Elkanah. *Wastepaper Modernism: Twentieth-century Fiction and the Ruins of Print*. Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 240. \$80. ISBN: 9780198852445

Megh Raj Adhikari PhD

Literature/Media/Culture, Florida State University

With new means of communication related to recorded voices and mass-produced images aggressively coming to the forefront, modernist writers remained obsessed and haunted by their alienated, estranged, and disjunct selves reflected in meta-textual forms. Destroyed images of paper in modernist fiction and their connection to growing anxieties about the material form of textual matter provide the focus of Joseph Elkanah Rosenberg's book *Wastepaper Modernism: Twentieth Century Fiction and the Ruins of Print*. The book explores premonitions of the 'death of the paper' debates well before the invention of the high-tech gadgets that fascinate, and some would say vex contemporary readers via virtual technologies in the digitized e-books and audio books. Having traced its roots to the late nineteenth century, Rosenberg connects anxieties about the imminent breakdown of print and printed matter to the epitome of high-modernist literary experimentation such as typified by James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

Rosenberg has established the relationship between literary style and the material form of the book in modernist literature. He explores how images of destroyed books and damaged print versions that appear and reappear recurrently obsess particularly the modernist novels. He shows that the writers' incessant interest towards the new and emerging media such as radio, cinema, photography, impel them to reflect on the materiality of the paper on which their ideas are printed in the form of the book. These novels do not merely discern the tattered papers of the books, but they also bring attention to other paper products such as pamphlets, junk mails, and even citizenship and passports. These images of tattered and useless papers recur in the fictions of Henry James, Elizabeth Bowen, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, Graham Greene, and Rose Macaulay. Although modernism stakes its initial claim to fame on new modes and new methods, innovations to change old arts and invent a new unrecognizable, these writers however, along with appreciating and adopting the techniques, remained obsessed with the pages of the book and historicity of paper. Rosenberg is not picturing the authors in front of screen or speaker, but he finds them startled by the scrap of papers.

The introductory chapter explores the wasted and ruined print as an exposition of communicative failure with reference to the writing of D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce. Disclosing the origin of wastepaper modernism at the end of the Victorian era, Rosenberg further conveys Henry James' concentration on Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee where media spectacle features the transition of age with the debris of paper. Rosenberg concentrates on Henry James autobiographical writings where the recurring scenes of notebooks, pilling bills, and theatrical posters draws readers attention in the second chapter. The focus is how James, by transferring the intangible objects of memory to tangible objects of desire, is speaking through books as a material object in *The Wings of the Dove* (79). Similarly, third chapter is devoted to how Elizabeth Bowen characterizes the protagonist Portia and her fascination with junk mail. Whether it is in the *A World of Love* or *The House in Paris*, junk mail plays an ominous role that breaks the boundary of the memory as the inner world and the exterior world of objects. It manifests how the books were considered and "retain their confidence in literature as a weapon against fascism" (120). It succinctly pictures the emergence of a new world out of the ashes of the destroyed books. Chapter four examines the power of papers as used for bureaucratic purposes. Describing the paramount role of the paper *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* not merely associates paper with nationality, but they are a crucial part of the individual identity. Recapitulating the idea of new technologies causing anxiety to the print media or the book history he emphasizes the imagination of literature as a decayed medium having been represented in the modernist fictions as the piled of tattered papers in different mediums in the last section.

The fictions that Rosenberg chooses here for heuristic reason exemplify the notion that reading or writing a book is to explore and unleash the history of a series of books. It is even clear from their characters that, just like their authors, they are voracious readers and obsessed with the materials of the printed page. Thereby, the readers realize how the material past has been accommodated in modernist fiction. Rosenberg's affirmation that despite breaking the traditional literary form, writers' relatively lower energy to celebrate the victory of newness is quite convincing. However, Rosenberg's impression that modernist writers are figuring the limits of literature as a medium seems contested.

Rosenberg might have been overstating about the exhaustion of the descriptive capabilities of modernist fiction. These references to the paper product are recurring not because their ideas and thoughts were limited in relation to text technology, but they were forecasting the future of the reading by representing the material decay of the paper. Similarly, the writer's engagement with text technology is a message of referentiality to reflect the vastness of information that they studied and how it is transforming into a new media with the technology that is trying to overtake the traditional mode of reading. Modernist authors not only conceived of their books as a space to talk about books, especially their intertextual references and allusions are the witnesses how they have minutely regarded the history of books and its

circularity. Only two of the examples are sufficient to serve for this purpose: Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Both modernist writers' structuring, and extensive notes are evidence to the disciplinary approaches to reading and history of text technology.

In a way these authors express their different viewpoint from the traditions about a book in the book. As an instrument being a technology, a book facilitates knowledge, but it is not any knowledge unless read. *Wastepaper Modernism* not only reflects the literary history but the history of the book itself. In this regard this book is quintessential to understand the concept of the meta-book and the history of text technology. Joseph Rosenberg acknowledges literature's own materials taking the space of communicating the uncommunicated. Thus, literature's sudden self-recognition as a medium has more to do with its metaphoric ability to absorb material qualities from the more substantial media around it.