

## Excavating Modernity

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Excavating Modernity:  
Physical, Temporal and Psychological Strata in Literature, 1900-1930

Eleanor Dobson and Gemma Banks

The opening decades of the twentieth century saw psychology, a scientific field which had been professionalized over the course of the nineteenth century, rapidly develop. At this time, and by practitioners as eminent as Sigmund Freud, the psyche was often conceived of as “stratified” and frequently likened to the physical strata uncovered by disciplines such as archaeology and geology. These subjects, which had recently undergone similar processes of expansion and professionalization, provided a fitting metaphor: they too probed dense systems of layers in the hopes that they would offer up their treasures to the excavator. That which could be unearthed by all of these fields—from physical relics to the immaterial, the internal and the emotional—could impact upon the ways in which both the external world and the inner self were perceived and remembered. There is a growing corpus of scholarly work exploring this cultural phenomenon, albeit one that favors the elite over the popular. Ground-breaking studies such as Sasha Colby’s *Stratified Modernism: The Poetics of Excavation from Gautier to Olson* (2009) have firmly established the modernist entwinement of archaeological and psychological dynamics; Colby uses canonical authors and thinkers including Walter Pater, Freud, Ezra Pound and H.D. to support this assertion. Cathy Gere, meanwhile, in *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* (2009), has demonstrated the particular cultural impact of Arthur Evans’s excavations at Knossos upon a similar high modernist coterie that also includes Freud and H.D.

Despite the appearance of these pioneering studies and the tantalizing connections they expose, there has not yet been a sustained academic study of literature that sees twentieth-century notions of physical, temporal and psychological strata interact across a range of authors of different nationalities and working in a variety of genres. The essays in this edited collection extend Colby's and Gere's claims by drawing together some of the disparate writers who engage with this material in surprisingly similar ways to the giants of modernism discussed in earlier studies, whether these individuals conceive mental and temporal strata as layers of earth, layers of text in palimpsestic documents, or layers of meaning. As this collection demonstrates, these entwined themes can be charted through a remarkable range of media: from theatre to ghost stories, children's literature to the modernist *magna opera*. Each chapter seeks to show how perceptions and impressions, the visual and the linguistic, were processed by the mind, from practices of envisioning that mimic looking at a painting, a photograph or a projection of light, through to the comprehension of the palimpsestic complexities of language, memory and time.

This collection builds upon an existing corpus of scholarship, which also includes our guest-edited special issue of the journal *Victoriographies*—"Strata: Geology, Archaeology and Psychology in Victorian and Edwardian Literature"—published in November 2017 (Dobson and Banks). This special issue explores employments of archaeological and geological imagery in Victorian literature in light of contemporary developments within these burgeoning disciplines, and demonstrates a growing cultural awareness of the new discipline of psychology towards the *fin de siècle*. The articles within the issue individually draw out nuanced connections between these fields and cumulatively comprise the argument that the contemporary preoccupation with all manner of "depths" permeated literature of the period, which expressed the slippage between literal and figurative forms of stratification using a

range of thematic, linguistic and formal techniques. The current collection seeks to complement this analysis of the ways in which these disciplines were entwined in the nineteenth century by considering how psychology, a comparatively new field by the advent of the twentieth century (although, as “Strata” attests, increasingly present in the cultural consciousness as the nineteenth century drew to a close), interacted with this established literary tradition, drawing upon revolutionary nineteenth-century sciences as this relatively new discipline began to flourish. Lynda Nead states that “modernity [...] can be imagined as pleated or crumpled time, drawing together past, present and future into constant and unexpected relations” (8): each of the essays in this collection deals with these temporal fault-lines, whether they emerge as ancient objects which come to light, as memories resurfacing, or, in some cases, as material and immaterial traces appearing hand-in-hand.

George M. Johnson—one of the contributors to this collection—rightly observes in *Dynamic Psychology in Modernist British Fiction* (2006) that academic engagement with psychology in early twentieth-century literature privileges Freud and neglects his predecessors and contemporaries, as well as pseudo-psychological methods of investigation including psychical research. While Freud remains (often implicitly) a significant presence in the current collection, a number of the essays introduce practices on the fringes of psychology into these conversations, including investigations of psycho-archaeological materializations in early twentieth-century séances recorded by the psychoanalyst Nandor Fodor, as well as works by other early psychologists whose studies predated and coincided with Freud’s *oeuvre*, such as Ewald Hering and Richard Semon. Others discuss conceptions of psychology personal to the author(s) in question that actively diverge from Freud’s models. Encounters with psychology, these essays demonstrate, were frequently filtered through archaeological and geological discourses, hence this collection’s emphasis on these disciplines. For many

individuals coming to terms with the rising visibility of psychology and its offshoots, it was via the imagery of these slightly older and more academically-established fields that the stratified psyche proposed by contemporary psychology might be comprehended.

While the essays in this collection explicitly deal with literary culture in particular, they are interwoven with broader and decidedly contemporary cultural-historical concerns—technological developments and their impact on visual culture, pioneering theatre, philosophy, religion and the increasing instability of the British Empire—demonstrating the permeability and receptiveness of these psychologically-sensitive writings to modern concerns. While extending the scope of the *Victoriographies* special issue historically to examine the interplay of archaeology, geology and psychology in the twentieth century, this study also builds upon the foundations established by Colby and Gere by providing a more comprehensive analysis across literary forms and genres, introducing into these dialogues authors who, despite their twentieth-century literary output, are commonly pigeonholed as “Victorian,” as well as popular and children’s authors, seeking to demonstrate that the imagery of these sciences was by no means exclusively adopted by the modernist elite. Specifically, through its range of analyses, the collection proposes that subsequent to the intertwinement of notions of stratification across these fields in the Victorian era, in these twentieth-century texts we see the nineteenth-century stratigraphic tropes adopted for modern audiences and used specifically to represent and explore buckles in time that, as Nead avows, characterized cultural modernity.

The first essay in this collection, George M. Johnson’s “Excavating the Psyche as Constructed by Pre-Freudian Pioneers,” observes that although Freud’s fascination with archaeology and his extensive use of its metaphors as a means of legitimating his new theory

have been explored in depth, the use of archaeological metaphors by rival psychological discourses have received little critical attention. His essay argues that J.F. Herbart, Pierre Janet, Frederic Myers and Henri Bergson made abstract ideas vivid using archaeological metaphors in developing their dynamic psychologies, beginning in the early nineteenth century with Herbart's threshold model of unconscious and conscious processes. Johnson moves on to discuss Pierre Janet's highly influential psychotherapy, which involved treating fixed ideas as artifacts buried among stratified layers, to be brought to the surface of a patient's mind; the "archaeological" methodologies of psychical researcher Frederic Myers when investigating the paranormal; as well as Henri Bergson's argument that the whole of one's past—conceived of as geological structures, such as crust and crystals—underlie one's present. Both canonical and obscure contemporary creative writers, Johnson notes, assimilated the discourses of all four dynamic psychologist pioneers, anticipating the subsequent essays in this collection with their closer focus on fictional forms: poetry, plays, novels and short stories.

The next essay, Holly Corfield Carr's "'As a Burnt Circle': Thomas Hardy's Visible Voices," addresses an author most often associated with nineteenth-century culture, positioning his twentieth-century work in relation to circular stratified forms. This essay examines the emergence of circular and centrifugal patterns in the visual imagination in a range of media at the turn of the twentieth century, including the illustrations of the formation of concentric rings in silver nitrate solution by the photographer and chemist Raphael Eduard Liesegang, the blue-eyed gaze of Friedlieb Ferdinand Runge's "self-made" blotting paper patterns and Margaret Watts Hughes's "voice figures" drawn in striations of sand, projecting such imagery ahead onto toroidal models of time in Thomas Hardy's poetry. Through close reading of Hardy's elegiac sequence "Poems of 1912-1913," alongside these sources that

bookend the turn of the century, Corfield Carr's essay proposes that the visible voices of Hardy's *genii loci* are to be considered less the inheritors of the topographical tradition but more material articulations of deep time, preparing the ground for the mid-twentieth-century emergence of site-specific land art and performance.

Maria Pia Pagani's essay "*The Dead City*: Eleonora Duse and the Archaeology of the Soul" takes as its focus Gabriele d'Annunzio's play *The Dead City*, a text which straddles the turn of the century, having been first produced in 1898 but first performed by Eleanora Duse, for whom the play was written, in 1901. Pagani furthers discussion of the collision of the modern and the ancient suggested in Hardy's understanding of time folded back on itself; *The Dead City*, as the first play to feature an archaeologist as a character, is at once concerned with ancient relics and the new discipline that sought to unearth, catalogue and understand them. She charts a correlation between the archaeologist's digging and the disruption of his psychological state, citing d'Annunzio's passionate response to the remarkable finds of Heinrich Schliemann (the site of which he had visited in 1895) as the inspiration for this mania. Focusing on Duse's performances in the second half of her essay, Pagani posits that the conflation of the play's archaeological and psychological strata reflects the fractures emerging across the relationship between playwright and muse; concurrently, the play's dream-like quality suggests that the events are born of the depths of the audience's psyche, hinging upon very modern neuroses accessed through a psychological form of excavation.

In "Excavating Children: Archaeological Imagination and Time Slip in the Early 1900s," Virginia Zimmerman discusses conflations of archaeological and psychological layers at a similar moment to d'Annunzio's *The Dead City*, but via texts that reinterpret these themes in a more optimistic way and for a younger target audience. Rather than exposing psychological

fractures and emotional torment, she demonstrates how archaeological tropes and metaphors denoting confluences between the past and the modern world were used in children's fiction to represent coming-of-age: the transition from childhood into adulthood. As in Pagani's essay (and others to follow), Zimmerman entwines this analysis with biographical material: Kipling's children played in a quarry where the geological strata were (and still are) visible and also dug up artifacts that they found on the property. From the children's position in the twentieth century, archaeology allows them access to multiple times, complemented by Kipling's multi-layered use of form in the literature based upon these events. Zimmerman then turns to works by E. Nesbit, revealing a similar fusion of the archaeological and the domestic that emerges in her children's fiction, and indeed one that can also be read fruitfully alongside Nesbit's biography: Nesbit's close friendship with E. A. Wallis Budge, the Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum, results in a work informed by modern Egyptology. Finally, Zimmerman demonstrates a homoerotic psychological stratification as archaeologist and ancient Egyptian become one, in an adult coming-of-age that anticipates the archaeological metaphor for the unconscious that recurs not only across the works of Freud, but as Johnson demonstrates earlier in this volume, several of his predecessors.

Eleanor Dobson's essay "The Sphinx at the Séance: Literature, Spiritualism and Psycho-Archaeology" follows Zimmerman's analysis of personal psycho-archaeological development, by unearthing a trend in early twentieth-century spiritualist practices that saw Egyptian artifacts infiltrate the séance room. Connecting psychical research to contemporary psychology, as Johnson does in *Dynamic Psychology in Modernist British Fiction* and in the first chapter of this volume, Dobson comments upon the twin interests in spiritualism and archaeology nurtured by a number of twentieth-century psychoanalysts (not only Freud but



his colleagues including Carl Jung and Nandor Fodor). Investigating the relationships between accounts of spiritualist phenomena and fictional literature, this essay demonstrates the ties between these media in the works of individuals drawn to esotericism, including members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, such as W. B. Yeats and Algernon Blackwood. Furthermore, Dobson reveals the reciprocal participation of Egyptologists in these practices: artifacts that materialized in the séance room were taken to British Museum experts to assess their authenticity, while other specialists including Howard Carter participated in séances of their own. Egypt, Dobson claims, so often conceived as the bedrock of the psyche and the origins of Western civilization, was emblematic of modern imperialist concerns. Ultimately, these narratives suggest a sense of Britain's entitlement to Egypt's riches as the modern political power that had occupied Egypt since 1882: British mediums and séance-goers—their archaeological relics in hand—were represented as sharing a particular psychical and psychological intimacy with the spirits of ancient Egypt.

Craig Wallace continues the supernatural discussion begun in Dobson's essay in "The 'Carefully-Constructed Screen': Phantasmagorical Strata in the Ghost Stories of M.R. James." Herein, archaeological excavation is shown to produce both geological and temporal disruption, as James's protagonists fragment the settled layers of stratified landscapes and complicate the boundaries between past and present. Wallace draws parallels between these sacrilegious intrusions and the developing psychoanalytic understanding of processes such as trauma, the return of the repressed and therapeutic techniques. The landscape, the historical artifacts it affords and the mind are thus all mystified through the eerie consequences of exploration. As in Corfield Carr's essay previously and Xavier Le Brun's later in the collection, ways of seeing are integral: Wallace illuminates how photographic and cinematic techniques, exemplified in modern viewing mechanisms such as the apparatus of

phantasmagoria, are appropriated in James's narratives to convey his skepticism of desacralized modernity; the supernatural and mechanical are brought into an uneasy coexistence, the ghost story proving an apt generic vehicle for questioning the limitations of rational enlightenment and complicating modernity's perceived progressiveness. Moreover, Wallace demonstrates the protracted influence of James's skeptical representation of modernity through the later television plays of Nigel Neale, wherein the magic lantern is replaced by its successor, the television, but the injurious consequences of "looking beyond" endure, reaching a new audience that is more modern still.

Where Wallace traces James's prolonged cultural influence, Sally Blackburn, in "Vernon Lee: Excavating *The Spirit of Rome*," seeks out the influences upon Lee—psychologists Ewald Hering and Richard Semon, the archaeologist Giacomo Boni and, before them, the Victorian geologist Charles Lyell, in particular—in order to understand the significance of their disciplines within her writing. Lee proved adept at viewing nineteenth-century works such as Lyell's from a thoroughly twentieth-century perspective, filtering Victorian science through recent developments in psychology. As in Annalisa Federici's essay later in this collection, Blackburn appreciates the palimpsestic nature of the text, adopting Lee's own interpretive techniques of seeking out biographical and intertextual connections during study of both the physical objects of Lee's reading, overwritten with her marginalia (housed in the Harold Acton Archive at the British Institute, Florence), and the layered impressions and memories of the author's consciousness stratified within and stimulated by Lee's own textual outputs. As Blackburn demonstrates, the archaeological fragment rediscovered in the present becomes, for Lee, a historical key to the past, but the interpretive experience is deeply subjective, molded by each reader's own memories and experiences, so that the modern readership of a text ultimately becomes its mneme.

Annalisa Federici gestures back to nineteenth-century psychological theories in “Mind Strata: Layers of Consciousness in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*,” in an essay which examines the representation of the characters’ subjectivity in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in relation to the basic tenets of nineteenth-century “scientific” or “experimental” psychology. Federici posits that the influence of empirical or experimental psychology on the composition of *Ulysses* has been underestimated, claiming that Joyce incorporated a variety of psychological notions in his masterpiece, first and foremost the idea of a correlation between psychical (inner, hidden) and physical (outer, manifest) phenomena. By analyzing the stratified representation of the characters’ minds in the novel, as well as a series of dichotomies arising from the depiction of their inner life—changing surface vs. sedimented depth, submerged/repressed past vs. conscious present—Federici shows that some of the concepts propounded by early psychologists may have provided the substance for Joyce’s understanding of the workings of mind, consciousness, the unconscious and memory as portrayed in *Ulysses*.

The final essay within this collection, Xavier Le Brun’s “Husserl’s Theory of Image Consciousness and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” privileges the psychological over archaeological and geological strands, but draws together many of the themes raised in earlier chapters, demonstrating the shared concerns and connections between disciplines only superficially discrete, and between texts from a range of genres, from the turn of the twentieth century through its early decades, with implications that extend to post-modern art and theory. Le Brun begins by drawing out the stratification implicit in Woolf’s conception of degrees of self-consciousness by comparison with the more explicit stratification of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. He then goes on to apply Husserl’s theory of image consciousness to an interpretation of Lily Briscoe’s iconic painting in *To the Lighthouse*, with

its own inherent physical and psychological stratification. Le Brun also delves beyond the surface of the painting, positing Woolf's and Husserl's alternative perspectives to the modes of viewing identified in James's literature by Wallace and in Hardy's by Corfield Carr. The active participation of the in-text spectator of the painting identified by Le Brun may thus be considered alongside the reader of the text in this and other chapters, the audience watching Duse's performance in Pagani's essay, the participants in the séances described by Dobson and, recalling Blackburn's biographical and bibliographical connections, the observers of excavations, such as Lee. In concordance with previous chapters, Le Brun does not figure such viewing passively and proceeds to probe the related psychological processes manifested in Woolf's novel, adding to the discourse around memory so prevalent in the essays of Johnson, Blackburn and Federici, and the modern imagination in the essays of Zimmerman and Wallace.

Nicholas Daly, in *Modernism, Romance, and the Fin de Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture* (1999), has called for the reconsideration of aspects of continuity between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in terms of literary genre and, more recently, Michael Saler has proposed a similar pattern bridging these centuries with regards to the notion of modern "enchantment," which is, according to Saler, the combination of the fantastical with "the rational, scientific trends of modernity" (66). This edited collection seeks to contribute to this revision of the dominant historiography that severs the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by demonstrating the continued influence of "Victorian" sciences upon modern literary forms. As the literary and cultural studies of modernism (or "modernisms" to use Peter Nicholls's more accurate terminology) continue to expand, celebrating the diversity of experience and style, this edited collection postulates such variegation in stratigraphic terms and offers an important contribution to the increasingly inclusive scholarship in this

area by showcasing the nexus of connections across disciplines, texts, genres, authors, audiences, geographical areas and temporal moments. The heterogeneity of the collection's subject matter is mirrored in the diversity of its contributors, uniting established and emerging scholars working in a range of disciplines across national and international institutions, demonstrating the breadth of twenty-first-century interest in this fascinating aspect of twentieth-century modernity.

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