Mathematical Possibilities in Modernism: Can Literature be a System?

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Abstract / Synopsis
From Aristotle’s Poetics, literature and logic have been companions in approaching the hypothetical realm of the ‘what if’. In this paper, I focus on the combinatorial possibilities of logic to see how mathematics becomes an important tool for the Modernist text’s aesthetic appeal to anti-representational and self-enclosed systemic autonomy. Is mathematical discourse autonomous vis-à-vis external reality? Can literary Modernism achieve textual autonomy that goes against realistic verisimilitude by following mathematical discourse? Though literary texts often negotiate formal systems with sophisticated governing logics, can literature itself become a logico-mathematical system? I trace the dialectic of form and system in the short stories of Italo Calvino, known for his interest in mathematical discourse as an Oulipian ‘proceduralist.’ Calvino weaves this dialectic around political concerns like the machinic logic of modernity and technocratic capitalism. ‘Numbers in the Dark’ mythicizes mathematical error that goes against systemicity and leads to an opposition between logic and calculative rationality. In ‘The Burning of the Abominable House,’ computer becomes a narrative device to play with permutations and combinations of the real that conspire against the construction of a single reality. Evoking Oulipo’s position against chance, I bring in Quentin Meillassoux’s readings of Cantorian ‘transfinite’ to distinguish chance from radical contingency. As we shall see, this distinction speaks to the mathematical tension between system and form in the Modernist literary text.

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Modernism in mathematics - this unusual notion turns out to provide a new perspective on central questions in and beyond literary modernism. Contrasting ‘mathematical fictions’ from and about the heyday of mathematical modernism, this book relates literary engagements with mathematical modernism to the wider context of modernist critiques of Enlightenment values and postmodern reassessments of modernist patterns. The analysis of canonical works by Thomas Pynchon, Hermann Broch, and Robert Musil demonstrates how mathematics is accorded a central role as a particularly telling indicator. Literary modernism, or modernist literature, has its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly in Europe and North America, and is characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional ways of writing, in both poetry and prose fiction. Modernists experimented with literary form and expression, as exemplified by Ezra Pound's maxim to "Make it new." This literary movement was driven by a conscious desire to overturn traditional modes of representation and express the new sensibilities. Modernism in literature An overview of early 20th century American literary trends Definition Modernism is a literary and cultural international movement which flourished in the first decades of the 20th century. Modernism is not a term to which a single meaning can be ascribed. It reflects a sense of cultural crisis which was both exciting and disquieting, in that it opened up a whole new vista of human possibilities at the same time as putting into question any previously accepted means of grounding and evaluating new ideas. Modernism is marked by experimentation, particularly manipulation. Modernist literature is heralded for having changed the form and content of literature and exploring new avenues in style and semantics. Characteristics. When Modernism was born, it was in reaction to the way of life that was becoming dominant in society at large, the dominance of the way of the city. And maybe that was the reason that unlike Romanticism which was a reaction to experience, this form has always been a conscious recognition to the surroundings and atmosphere. Many people confuse Modernism with Postmodernism. While the two movements have similar characteristics, there are differences.