

THE PLAY OF NONSENSE IN MODERNIST CREATION

by

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The Play of Nonsense in Modernist Creation

Thesis directed by Professor Paul Gordon

This study examines the play of nonsense elements and devices in the works of four particular modernist authors. The term nonsense here refers not to unintelligible gibberish but to the genre of literary nonsense popularized in the nineteenth century by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, whose influence on the modernist movement and international avant-garde has heretofore received scant notice. In selected works of James Joyce, Vicente Huidobro, Macedonio Fernández, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, the study details how nonsense elements coincide with the use of play as a mode of creation. In this view, play, though lighthearted and childlike in aspect, also is revolutionary, subversive, and a fundamental means of innovation. Literary play generally involves departing from established conventions and systems of representation. By employing nonsense devices and incorporating nonsense elements in their art, modernist authors frequently defer, deny, withhold and/or ambiguate sense. In doing so, they play with and often overturn readers' expectations and sense-making strategies and break with tradition. Inasmuch as it produces rupture, play with nonsense thus enacts a quintessential modernist effect. No wonder, then, that Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, arguably the quintessential modernist text, has also been called "our greatest monument to literary Nonsense" (Rieke 23). From the *Wake*, the study moves to consider three writers whose work has rarely been mentioned in the context of literary nonsense. Huidobro's poetry bears a striking likeness to Joyce's text in that the creative play of both authors involves the radical combination of disparate elements. In the case of Macedonio's *Museum of Eterna's Novel*, what combines are multifold levels of fiction, resulting in a decentered structure—like the *Wake's*—that is conducive to play. The final chapter of the study

reveals how Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* may best be seen in the ludic light of literary nonsense. Like the *Wake*, *Gatsby* is an intricately patterned text, subtly edging readers to reconsider their methods of interpretation. Diverse and multifaceted, the modernist play of nonsense explores what is unfamiliar, fantastic, disorienting, and inexplicable in our world, innovating new ways of writing and inviting us to re-think ways of making meaning.

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## CHAPTER I

“Alis, alas, she broke the glass!”—

Through “ludubility,” Creating the New<sup>1</sup>

In 1998, the Modern Library endeavored to rank the 100 “best” English-language novels of the twentieth century. Capping the list was James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922); F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* (1925) placed second (“100 Best”). The shifting winds of literary fortune notwithstanding, such an opinion poll, however unobjective and unscientific, nonetheless betokens some scholarly interest in these authors and at least temporary regard for their artistic merit. Insofar as it does, if the Modern Library’s vote itself was little cause for surprise, of no small intrigue and worthy of further study is the degree to which the great work of Fitzgerald (1896-1940) and Joyce (1882-1941) is in fact invested with a host of devices common to the literature of Nonsense.<sup>2</sup> In *Gatsby*, the prevalence of such techniques has been almost entirely overlooked, while the variety of Nonsense procedures in *Ulysses* has received but scant attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Both of the quotations in my chapter title come from James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (270.20-21, 607.3). As per custom in Wakean scholarship, citations from this text are indicated with the corresponding page and line number in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> I will heretofore distinguish literary Nonsense (i.e. specifically, the genre of writing popularized in the nineteenth century by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll) from everyday nonsense (i.e. unintelligible gibberish) in this study by referring to it with a capital N.

To be sure, Joyce's Nonsense oeuvre par excellence is undoubtedly *Finnegans Wake* (1939): here his tricks and allusions to Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) and Edward Lear (1812-1888), our exemplars of literary Nonsense in the modern era, have been duly noted; the *Wake* itself, if not classifiable in the genre of literary Nonsense ("The surdity of it!" [538.18]),<sup>3</sup> nonetheless draws in its play from a compendium of Nonsense operations. Like Lear and Carroll, Joyce's sphere of influence transcends the English-speaking world, encompassing virtually all our universe, and extends to many who lacked direct knowledge of his art. And as with his progenitors in the Nonsense realm, his work reflects the ludic spirit both conducive to and characteristic of modernist creation.

In this study, we will move from the manifest to the hitherto undiscovered, to wit: after examining first the exhaustive panoply of Nonsense in *Finnegans Wake*, we will then proceed to assay assorted texts of three writers whose employment of Nonsense procedures has gone largely unremarked in English letters—avant-garde poet Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948), experimentalist and humorist Macedonio Fernandez (1874-1952), and Scott Fitzgerald, whose fondness for Nonsense animates much of his early writing and colors the lyricism and mystery of *Gatsby*. Each of these authors plays with Nonsense techniques in ways that disrupt conventional, common-sense interpretation. While such operations at times may startle or discommode readers by defying their expectations and understanding, some degree of audience disorientation is nevertheless inevitable in the production of innovative art. Though differing in function and effect, the Nonsense generated by each of the writers in question bears a curious resemblance to

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<sup>3</sup> "Nonsense!" (56.28) Though one could likely assemble a defensible argument that *Finnegans Wake* belongs to the genre of literary Nonsense, I believe the text's uniqueness places it in a category of its own. While the *Wake*'s overall ambiguity may be tantamount to that of Lear and Carroll's texts, its staggering allusiveness is without precedent in any genre.

that of the *Wake*. Macedonio's *Museo de la novela de la Eterna* [*The Museum of Eterna's Novel*; 1967<sup>4</sup>] similarly knows no end, drafting the reader by "comedy nominator" (283.7) into its flaunted fictional apparatus as it plays with infinity. Fitzgerald, whose reverence for Joyce bore legends,<sup>5</sup> matches him in the ludic exuberance and exacting precision with which he employs procedures of Nonsense. Cantos of Huidobro's poetry in *Altazor* (1931) show an astounding likeness to the wordplay of *Finnegans Wake*, brewing neologisms and defusing syntax in an exploration of origins. What the enigmas of Nonsense ask of the reader, how its play engenders the new, as well as why the *Wake* fared but seventy-seventh<sup>6</sup> on the list of the Modern Library I will in the coming pages reveal... or perhaps just suggest.

As for the last question, while some may wonder why *Finnegans Wake* did not finish first, others may well puzzle over why the text ought even to be included on such a list, or, for that matter, if it can properly be called a novel at all, what with its nonlinear narrative, reconfiguration of space and time, abundance of polylingual puns, shape-shifting cast of characters, myriad neologisms, and multifaceted transgressions of semantics. Unorthodox and biblical, modern and historical, studied and ecstatic, delightful and confounding, the *Wake*

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<sup>4</sup> Posthumously published, the text was written between 1925 and 1952.

<sup>5</sup> In July of 1928, Sylvia Beach, owner of the Parisian bookshop Shakespeare and Company, arranged a dinner party so that Fitzgerald could meet Joyce, whom he "worshiped" but "was afraid to approach" (Beach 116). In her memoir, Beach relates that Fitzgerald "drew a picture in my copy of *The Great Gatsby* of the guests—with Joyce seated at the table wearing a halo, Scott kneeling beside him [...]" (116). In another version of the encounter, the younger author "threatened to jump out of the window in honor of Joyce's genius" (Deming 420). (Beach offers a partial account of the situation: "Poor Scott was earning so much from his books that he and Zelda had to drink a great deal of champagne in Montmartre in an effort to get rid of it" [116].) In any case, Fitzgerald was an avid Joyce enthusiast; Kuehl notes that he "possessed copies of *Dubliners* (The Egoist Press, 1922 edition), *Chamber Music*, *Pomes Penyeach*, *Ulysses* (in which there is a card from Joyce dated 11.7.928), and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (in which Joyce has inscribed on the front flyleaf: 'To Scott Fitzgerald/James Joyce/ Paris/11.7.928'" ("a la joyce" 2). Nonetheless, I have found no compelling evidence of Joyce ever having read or alluded to *Gatsby*—nor, for that matter, any substantive proof that he did not... "The groom is in the greenhouse, gattling out his. Gun!" (377.5-6)

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, also ranked on the Modern Library's list, and far above *Finnegans Wake*, are Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (3<sup>rd</sup>) and Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* (28<sup>th</sup>) ("100 Best").



presents perhaps the greatest paradox of the lettered world. Joyce built “our greatest monument to literary Nonsense” (Rieke 23) with words that “are hypersensical”—“potentially the exact opposite of nonsense” (13). Confessed Edwin Muir in a 1939 review for the BBC weekly *Listener*, “I cannot tell whether it is winding into deeper and deeper worlds of meaning or lapsing into meaninglessness” (qtd in Deming 677). Over thirty years later, Margot Norris reflected, “Although *Finnegans Wake* is thoroughly original [...] it may also be the most self-consciously unoriginal work in the language” (“Consequence” 142). If its appropriation of other texts renders it, by Joyce’s own admission, an “epical forged cheque” (181.16) and “the last word in stolentelling” (424.35), Hélène Cixous nevertheless deems the *Wake* “the most modern work ever written” (17). And while Nonsense theoretician Wim Tigges describes the book as “surrealist” on account of its imaginative portrayal of the dreaming mind (122), Joyce’s procedure could not have been further from André Breton’s definition of Surrealism as “Pure psychic automatism” (*Manifestoes* 26); John Bishop regards it as, “perhaps, the single most intentionally crafted literary artifact that our culture has produced” (“Introduction” vii). In spite of such contradictions, what Grace Eckley observed about the *Wake* in 1985 still holds true: “the most commonest [sic] reaction to it still is likely to be identical to Alice’s reaction to ‘Jabberwocky’: ‘Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t exactly know what they are!’” (68).

Such readerly confusion is typical in Nonsense literature. Unlike gibberish, the genre of literary Nonsense inaugurated by Lear and Carroll does offer readers a measure of intelligibility, yet in doing so it playfully maintains a balance between presence and absence of meaning. While none of the works addressed in this study belongs strictly to the genre of Nonsense, each plays with Nonsense procedures—by turns deferring, denying, withholding, sundering and multiplying

sense, effectively rendering meaning ambiguous. In this way, as Peter Hutchinson observes, “Most so-called nonsense writing lies on the boundary between sense and non-sense, with the glimpse of a potential meaning acting as a challenge to the reader to *make* sense from words, phrases or sentences, which are at first incomprehensible” (84). Inasmuch as readers have varying degrees of tolerance for the obscurity of Nonsense, the boundary between sense and nonsense can be quite loose. What constitutes Nonsense for each individual reader is relative to his constitution of sense itself. In this regard, Elizabeth Sewall for her part describes Nonsense as “a collection of words or events which in their arrangement do not fit into some recognized system in a particular mind” (3). With respect to Nonsense in narrative fiction, Lisa Ede points out that “even in the simplest forms of nonsense, some degree of plot and structure are necessary if any sustained interest, much less meaning, is to be achieved” (qtd in Tigges 24). Likewise in Nonsense verse, readerly appetite and aptitude cannot be presumed; neologisms, for example, “if used too accumulatively or even exclusively [...] tend to turn into gibberish, with which the reader loses patience as there is too little semantic information to hold on to” (Tigges 64). For Tigges, whose treatise *An Anatomy of Nonsense* (1988) offers perhaps the most exacting, comprehensive survey of the subject to date, the “essence” of Nonsense “is that it maintains a perfect tension between meaning and absence of meaning” (4). While for the most part I agree with his findings, I believe his idea of a “perfect tension” is best described as a *playful balance*. In my view, not only is the notion of a “perfect tension” oxymoronic, but what constitutes a “perfect” tension for one reader may not be so perfect for the next. In this discourse I will seek to demonstrate that a playfully created balance between meaning and its absence can in fact be more diverting than disconcerting.

While the achievement of such a balance often entails ingenuity and care, it must be done in the spirit of play. In Hutchinson's estimation, "a delicate balance between sense and ridiculousness" reflects "the game of nonsense at it best" (85). Furthermore, his characterization of Nonsense as a game accords with the theories of various scholars such as Sewell, Susan Stewart, and Ina Rae Hark, all of whom regard Nonsense as "play with language" (Tigges 41). Indeed: yet the play of Nonsense frequently takes place not merely on the level of the word or sentence; it can also affect the very form and structure of a work, as we shall see. Walter Isle rightly grasps the radical nature of the mode when he expounds, "Play is experimenting, putting things together in new ways in the hope the new invention will work. But even more it is pushing this creative impulse further into excess and anarchy in the hope that the outrageous will not only surprise but reveal something new" (63). The "new": perhaps the creative nature of play in literature can best be understood in terms of its general subversivism. Play operates outside the rules of that which it transgresses, or plays upon. In not conforming to the existing order, it thus actively implies or suggests another system or set of rules. In this way, play may seem to propose a new order—yet it stops short of establishing that order: for that which is established must necessarily have some sort of stable presence, and play in itself requires some degree of looseness so that it can function without undue constraint.<sup>7</sup> Thus the character of play can be described as *revolutionary*: its initial, essential action involves change, as it breaks with an established order.

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<sup>7</sup> If plays suggests or gives rise to a new order, then, it is an order whose rules have yet to be formally established or enforced. Furthermore, as play is subject to its own laws only, it is autonomous, and hence supportive of the autonomy of the work of art—i.e. the free, experimental aspect of play as a mode of creation supports the premise that art need not be a mirror of external reality.

Whereas play has often been regarded as antithetic to seriousness, such an opposition, as Warren Motte points out, collapses in numerous instances where play reveals itself to be quite earnest indeed.<sup>8</sup> In my view, the true antithesis of play in poetry and literature is *imitation*. Though some forms of imitation, such as parody and pantomime, may be seen as playful, they can be truly playful only insofar as the representation departs from the original. For, as psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott asserts, “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative [...]” (54). And while many ludic acts may lead to further play and in effect be self-perpetuating, *to imitate the play of another is to do so in spirit*. Thus, any work which copies, or adheres rigidly to a model will accordingly be less playful. “The playful instinct,” Hutchinson explains, “does not lend itself to repeated experiments in limited format, and the trivia and meaninglessness with which we are sometimes confronted are more likely to be a product of rational exercises rather than creative zest” (20). In the opinion of psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget, “play is determined by a certain orientation of the behavior” (147); in poetry and literature, I suggest, this behavior is characterized by a willingness to experiment. In this sense, “playfulness” might best be regarded as what Isle calls “an attitude of creative possibility” (69).

If necessity is the mother of invention, play, then, is its mode of creating the new. Through their play with convention, modernist authors managed to break with stagnant forms of representation and create surprising new works. In his interpretation of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, Friedrich Nietzsche addresses that very moment when “the artist is seized by his need to create,” averring, “Not hybris but the ever self-renewing impulse to play calls new worlds into

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<sup>8</sup> In his essay “Playing in Earnest,” Motte suggests that with regard to literary ludics, “the distinction that we habitually draw between play and earnestness makes no sense at all” (40).

being” (62). For Joyce, whose avowed intention was to create something new, play became a fundamental mode of composition, and Nonsense operations his most felicitous (and efficacious) means of accomplishing a sharp, striking rupture with the literary status quo. Norris surmises that after the tour de force of *Ulysses*, “Joyce must have faced the special difficulties of trying to create something truly ‘new’ in his last work” (*Decentered* 122). In *Finnegans Wake*, as we shall see, by playfully and continually suspending meaning, Joyce keeps the structure of the work loose, and in so doing suggests a new paradigm for the novel. In the end, what he achieves, in Norris’s estimation, is a “‘new’ decentered literary structure” (123) and “linguistic freeplay which is the fertile ground for new semantic and syntactic forms, for a thoroughgoing linguistic originality” (“Consequence” 142). Yet in spite of Joyce’s revolutionary spirit, much of the *Wake*’s novelty reflects the influence of his forerunners in the art of Nonsense.

“Now listen, Mr Leer!” (65.4) In Joyce’s personal library, Thomas Connolly indicates, was Edward Lear’s *Book of Nonsense* (9), and the *Wake*’s various allusions to Lear’s poems and characters suggest Joyce was quite familiar with his work. In fact, as James Atherton has observed, most of “the quotations from Lear are from poems not in [*A Book of Nonsense*]” (261).<sup>9</sup> In passing, William Flesch notes that “Lear’s work is a major source for the imagery and language of James Joyce’s vast dreamscape of a novel, *Finnegans Wake*, some of whose characters are also based in Lear’s” (207). Twice Joyce alludes to “The Pobble Who Has No Toes” (“pobbel” [334.24]; “pobbel queue’s remainder” [454.35]); Atherton furthermore considers that the “crankley hat” (275.27) pressed in Book II might be a simultaneous reference to both Lear’s “Chankly Bore” and “Quangle Wangle Hat” (261). If the *Wake*’s figures didn’t

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<sup>9</sup> One exception is “The English Struwelpeter,” which Atherton believes “may be referred to in ‘Roaring Peter’” (261; *Wake* 212.2).

feast on mince or quince with a “runcible spoon,” Joyce nonetheless shares Lear’s fondness for neologisms. When Lear reports that he has “become like a sparry in the pilderpips and a pemmican on the housetops,” as Holbrook Jackson observes, “[it] reads like an excerpt from *Finnegans Wake!*” (xxvi). One particular Nonsense procedure that Joyce employed, which Stewart refers to as “misdirection,” finds an intriguing precedent in Lear’s writing (98). Jackson points out that “sometimes [Lear] translates whole sentences into nonsense-spelling, as ‘I gnoo how bizzy u were,’ or [...] ‘phits of coffin’” (xxvi). In this procedure, the “misdirection” is brought about by what Stewart calls “a surplus of signification”; in this case, the writer presents “a false contrast in languages. What looks like a foreign language on the page turns out to be English when the visual content is pronounced with the ‘proper foreign accent’” (98-99). If Lear’s application of “nonsense-spelling” does not require a foreign accent to be intelligible, Joyce for his part uses the ruse to confound the reader’s sense-making strategies, writing in what—Stewart notes—appears to be Gaelic: “mhuith peisth mhuisse as fearra bheura muirre hriosmas,” i.e., “with best wishes for a very merry Christmas” (99; *Wake* 91.4-5).<sup>10</sup> And while it may behoove us to be leery of such tricks, there are far more “loose carollaries” in the *Wake* (294.7).

Joyce’s use of and allusions to Carroll’s innovations, his characters, and even his personal life have been amply noted, perhaps most impressively by Atherton, who devotes a full chapter of *The Books at the Wake* to the pioneer in Nonsense literature. Quite possibly Atherton’s most astounding—though duly substantiated—assertion is that “Many of the wildest and most startling features of *Finnegans Wake* are merely the logical development, or the

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<sup>10</sup> Stewart’s penetrating, perspicacious study *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* is, in my opinion, unparalleled in this field. In it, naturally, she pays due attention to *Finnegans Wake*.

working out on a larger scale, of ideas that first occurred to Lewis Carroll” (124). Equally surprising, for that matter, is that Joyce did not become well acquainted with Carroll’s work or life until he was quite far along in the composition of his *Work in Progress*.<sup>11</sup> On May 31, 1927, four years into the process, with many fragments of his work already having been serialized, and his “dream language” of portmanteaux and polylingual neologistic puns now “at a fairly full stage of development” (Kenner 286), Joyce wrote to his patron, Harriet Shaw Weaver, of the public response to the latest installment:

Another (or rather many) says he is imitating Lewis Carroll. I never read him till Mrs. Nutting gave me a book—not *Alice*—a few weeks ago—though of course I heard *bits and scraps*. But then I never read Rabelais either though nobody will believe this. I will read them both when I get back [...] (qtd in Kenner 286; emphasis mine).

The time and extent of Joyce’s initial exposure to Carroll has been the subject of some debate. In the opinion of Hugh Kenner, “‘Bits and scraps has a perhaps deceptively unimportant sound. One of Joyce’s college nicknames was ‘The Mad Hatter’ and he presumably knew what it signified. And it is difficult to imagine a connoisseur of pun and parody not having run across *Jabberwocky*” (286). Eckley, however, notes that “Joyce’s nickname, the Mad Hatter, while he was at University College, Dublin [1898-1902], need not have come from Lewis Carroll” (76).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The initial installments of what would ultimately be titled *Finnegans Wake* were published under the title *Work in Progress*, the first appearing in April 1924.

<sup>12</sup> In her defense, Eckley cites the Norton 1971 critical edition of *Alice in Wonderland*, in which Donald J. Gray writes that

“Mad as a hatter” and “mad as a March hare” are both proverbial expressions. The latter is apparently founded on the behavior of hares in the mating season; the former is a more recent phrase, although current in the mid-nineteenth century, which may have originated in the fact that the use of mercury in preparing the felt which was made into hats did produce symptoms of insanity in hatters (Eckley 76; Gray 51n2).

Nevertheless, John A. Rea, for his part, finds an allusion to Carroll's poem "Theme with Variations" (1869) in the "Circe" section of *Ulysses*.<sup>13</sup> In any case, after receiving Carroll's book from Mrs. Nutting, Joyce showed immediate interest, and read voluminously about him.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, as Atherton has documented, in the *Wake* Joyce does not hide his knowledge of Carroll, "Alice," or their real-life counterparts Charles Dodgson and Alice Liddell:<sup>15</sup> "All old Dadgerson's dodges one conning one's copying and that's what wonderland's wanderlad'll flaunt to the fair" (374.1-3). Apart from flaunting references in the "funferal" (13.15) to a great many of Carroll's characters,<sup>16</sup> the "wanderlad" Joyce also incorporates Dodgson himself into the *Wake*, as well as Alice Liddell, and her sisters Edith and Lorinda Charlotte.<sup>17</sup> As William

<sup>13</sup> Rea notes that though the "ultimate source" of Bloom's quotation "I never loved a dear gazelle but it was sure to..." is Thomas Moore's long poem *Lalla Rookh*, Bloom actually "uses the wording of a parody by Lewis Carroll" (87-88; *Ulysses* 389). In his view, "Joyce alludes simultaneously to Moore's *Lalla Rookh* and to the word play in the parody by Lewis Carroll" (88). In conclusion, Rea adds, "And we may then wonder why Mrs. Breen responds to Bloom's mention of the 'dear Gazelle,' with 'Glory Alice'" (88; *Ulysses* 363).

<sup>14</sup> Atherton imagines that "Joyce's situation at this stage, when confronted with the work of Lewis Carroll, was something like Captain Scott's when he reached the South Pole to discover that Amundsen's flag was already there" (127-28). Kenner likewise envisages the Irishman's astonishment but offers a slightly different analogy: "Joyce found [Carroll] indispensable. It was as though, in the midst of writing *The Forsaken Merman*, Arnold had been able to interrogate a fish" (287).

<sup>15</sup> Lewis Carroll was the *nom de plume* of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, and his books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871) are widely assumed to be named after his friend Alice Pleasance Liddell (later Alice Hargreaves), who was the daughter of the dean of the college at Oxford where he taught. At the end of *Through the Looking-Glass*, an acrostic poem in fact spells out her full name, if the first letter of each line is read downward.

<sup>16</sup> In Joyce's "linkingclass" (459.4), we find everything "from tweedledeedumms down to twiddledeedees" (258.23-24). Atherton encounters "Hatter's hares" (134; *Wake* 83.1) and "Muckstails turtles" (134; *Wake* 393.11); Bishop spies "through alluring glass or alas in jumboland" (*Book* 327; *Wake* 528.17-18); Kenner comes across Shaun's "beamish brow" (*Wake* 405.16-17) and connects him with the "beamish boy" who slew the Jabberwock (290)—"Tis jest jibberweek's joke" (565.14). Tindall wonders if the "Mookse is also Alice's Mock Turtle" (119; *Wake* 152.14-158.30). Eckley, for her part, includes an appendix listing thirty-six allusions to Lewis Carroll (a.k.a. "Mr Lhugewhite Cadderpollard" [*Wake* 350.11]) (220-22); she enters forty-five references to Humpty Dumpty in a separate appendix (223-24).

<sup>17</sup> With respect to Alice Liddell's sisters, Atherton points out that "Further elaborations of the Alice figure were available to Joyce from information contained in Collingwood's *Life*, in which a bewildering number of Carroll's 'child-friends' are mentioned" (129). (Kenner reports that in 1927 Joyce "acquired the Rev. Stuart Dodgson



York Tindall notes, “‘addle liddle phifie Annie’ [4.28] is A.L.P., as the initials show, and Lewis Carroll’s Alice Liddell” (33).<sup>18</sup> And “Though Wonderlawn’s lost us forever” (270.19-20), Atherton suggests that “Alice Liddell, Carroll’s Alice, is portrayed as being an Eve before the Fall” (32). Even Isa Bowman, who played Alice on the stage, figures prominently in the *Wake*. Kenner, who recounts Dodgson’s affection for the actress, writes that “Joyce transferred Dodgson’s ambivalent relations with Isa to the *Wake* almost unaltered, as HCE’s incestuous infatuation with his daughter Iseult. It was, in fact, a relationship of symbolic incest: Dodgson saw in Isa an incarnation of Alice, and Alice was his creation” (288)—“maker mates with made (O my!)” (261.8) Atherton too notes how Joyce both subsumes and alludes to Carroll’s personal relationships in the text: “Onzel grootvatter Lodewijk is onangonamed before the bridge of primerose and his twy Isas Boldmans is met the blueybells near Dandeliond. We think its a gorsedd shame, these godoms” (361.21-24). Atherton explains that “Lodewijk” is Dutch for “Lewis,” and that in the same language “onangonamed” and “gorsedd” mean “disagreeable, offensive” and “cursed,” respectively; “godoms” he suspects to be a composite of “God-dam” and “Sodom” (131). “The charge is made clearly enough,” Atherton avers, “but in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce holds no bitterness against anyone” (132).<sup>19</sup>

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Collingwood’s *Life and Letters* of his uncle [1898], and on March 28 of the following year wrote, ‘I have been reading about the author of *Alice*’ ....” [287; qtd in Kenner 287].) Atherton writes that Alice’s sisters were with her when the Wonderland story was first told, and appear in the story under various disguises; Lorinda was the Lory, and the name Elsie in the “Elsie, Lacie, and Tillie” of the dormouse’s tale comes from her initials, L.C. The third sister, Edith, was the Eaglet, and “Tillie” was her family nickname. “Lacie” is an anagram of Alice. All three, “Elsie” (587.26), “Lacey” (238.23), and “Tilly” (385.33), are named in the *Wake* (129-30).

<sup>18</sup> A.L.P. is of course also an anagram of the initials of Alice Pleasance Liddell.

<sup>19</sup> Atherton muses that “It may even be true to say that from the Viconian standpoint Joyce regarded Carroll as another incarnation of himself. Certainly his remarks about Carroll are tinged with humorous sympathy” (135).

Indeed not: in many ways Joyce pays and plays in homage to Lewis Carroll in the *Wake*. Whereas in *Ulysses* he shows his command of a veritable cavalcade of Nonsense operations,<sup>20</sup> in the *Wake* Joyce's increased knowledge of Carroll and his trade enables him to enhance his use of Nonsense strategies, which prove integral to his art. Atherton observes for example that Joyce avails himself periodically of one particular invention of Carroll's, the "Word Ladder,"<sup>21</sup> and that through it he also equates Carroll "as a creator—and therefore, from Joyce's axiom, a type of god—with the Ancient Egyptian primeval God Atem" (132).<sup>22</sup>

A more multifaceted Nonsense device widely employed by both Joyce and Carroll in different ways is that of reversals and inversions. On a purely lexical level, Atherton explains that "Another of Carroll's verbal tricks is the reversal of the letters of a word," furthermore remarking that "the very idea" of such an inversion "suggests looking-glasses" (125). In the *Wake*, Joyce repeatedly evokes the image of the looking glass, often linking it to Carroll:

"Nircississies are as the doaters of inversion. Secilas through their laughing classes" (526.34-36).

In this passage, Joyce names his Nonsense trick ("inversion") before alluding to Carroll's book

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<sup>20</sup> Though outside the scope of the present study, Joyce's use of Nonsense procedures in *Ulysses* merits further attention. Stewart in her book notes the text's "anachronism of intertextuality" in the "Aeolus" episode (155), its puns and portmanteaux (162-64), its "paradigmatic allusion" (to Homer's *Odyssey*) (181), as well as a few specific instances of its "rearrangement and elimination of hierarchy between universes of discourse," which she finds "typical of collage" (174).

<sup>21</sup> "Carroll invented what is usually called the 'Word Ladder,' although the name he gave to it was 'Doublets.' This is a game in which the players turn one word into another by altering one letter at a time but always making a word [...] Joyce plays at his own variant of the game in *Finnegans Wake*, but only in passages where Carroll is being mentioned" (Atherton 125). In his chapter on Carroll, Atherton furthermore provides assorted examples of such 'Word Ladders' in the *Wake*: "Tal the tem of the tumulum" (56.34); "Poor Isa sits a glooming so gleaming in the gloaming... Woe fear gleam she so glooming, this pooripathete I solde" (226.4-7); "I'll tall tale tell" (366.27-28); "To tell how your mead of, mard, is made of" (374.1). Atherton adds: "It seems probable that Carroll's 'Doublets' or 'Word Ladder' was the only trick with words that Joyce had not rediscovered for himself before he found it in Carroll's books" (133). In his estimation, "If Joyce heard of anything that could be done with words he was likely to try doing it himself. Carroll's Doublets are a good example of this" (208).

<sup>22</sup> Noting how "references to Ancient Egypt are interwoven with references to Carroll," Atherton deduces, "This seems to be what is behind the word-ladder 'Item... Utem... Otem... Atem... Ahem!' [...] Joyce is using another of Carroll's inventions to hit at Carroll" (132-33; *Wake* 223.35-224.7).

and reversing the letters of Alice (“*Selicas*”), as they would appear through a looking glass. Reflecting on the two writers’ treatment of time, Ann McGarrity Buki writes that “Similar to [Joyce’s] way of presenting time is that of the looking-glass country, where everything lives backwards” (164). While the notion of regressive time is not uncommon among practitioners of Nonsense, as Fitzgerald demonstrates both in “Benjamin Button” and through *Gatsby*’s “thrilling, returning trains of [...] youth” (184), “the reversals of time and space [...] and other Carrollian motifs recur and recur throughout Joyce’s text” (Kenner 291). Even the *Wake*’s very first movement (if we may speak of a “first”) is retrograde. As David Hayman explains,

We are entering an inverted world and consequently we follow the ‘riverrun’ backwards from the sea as in the playback of a filmstrip “past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay” until it brings us “by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs” (340; *Wake* 3.1-3).

In defiance of space and time, the *Wake* bears us back, against the current, upstream, struggling for knowledge of origins, till “We are once amore as babes awondering in a wold made fresh where with the hen in the storyabout we start from scratch” (336.16-18). If, as Bishop has suggested, ALP “reanimat[es] in our hero [...] “the unpotentiated mind of the child” (*Joyce’s Book of the Dark* 383), HCE’s rediscovery of youth echoes a familiar theme in Nonsense, that of childhood returning.... In the opinion of Robert M. Polhemus,

Carroll’s way is the way of regression. By [...] projecting himself back into childhood, and writing tales explicitly for children, he managed to create two texts that have been, and are, as widely read and quoted, and as influential, as any imaginative literature of the past century [...] this man who retreats into juvenility and dream states, reverts to play and nonsense, toys with language, avoids any

overtly didactic or practical purpose, and escapes from society, history, and “reality” into the fantasy of his own mind appears before us as a comic prophet and a father of modernism in art and literature (245).

If the reversals and inversions common to Carroll’s fiction proved an important modernist means of effecting rupture, the *Wake*’s most significant Nonsense device—which also gives it its most striking likeness to the literature of Nonsense—is its stream of neologisms and portmanteaux. By inventing his own words, Joyce not only dramatically transcends the most fundamental convention of language, he perpetuates the *Wake*’s instability of sense. Of course it is none other than Carroll’s own Humpty Dumpty—“the official guide to Joyce’s vocabulary,” as Harry Levin dubbed him (132)—who is the first to explain the phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> It is Humpty himself who originally coins the term *portmanteau*, and in doing so he proffers an example to Alice: “‘*slithy*’ means ‘lithe and slimy.’ [...] You see it’s like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word” (Carroll *Alice’s* 187).<sup>24</sup> This device, which has been called the quintessence of nonsense (Reichert 184), is considered by both Stewart and Tigges to be an instrument of Nonsensical simultaneity, in which “The disparity of meaning rules out the connotations and associations of each single denotation, and so contributes to a lack of emotional

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<sup>23</sup> Atherton reminds us that “Humpty Dumpty is, of course, a nursery-rhyme character in his own right as well as being a character in Carroll’s books” (127). In projecting himself, like Carroll, back into childhood, Joyce finds a fascination in nursery rhymes. Mabel P. Worthington lists sixty-eight in the *Wake*, and notes that “Humpty Dumpty” in fact “is thought to be thousands of years old” (38). For Joyce, however, the most significant incarnation of the legend is likely Carroll’s Humpty, the linguistic acrobat and “accredited expositor of *Jabberwocky*” (Kenner 290).

<sup>24</sup> Tigges considers that for a portmanteau to be truly nonsensical there must be “an unresolved tension between divergence and synthesis of meaning” (65). Thus, he rationalizes,

In as far as the portmanteau actually defines an existent phenomenon, as “slithy” is explained by Humpty Dumpty to apply to a creature which is both “lithe” and “slimy,” it is not nonsensical. I suspect this word is in fact a neologism, and that the explanation that Carroll puts into Humpty Dumpty’s mouth is itself nonsensical; after all, the creatures which the word is modifying, “toves,” are themselves nonexistent, and their characteristics, if Humpty Dumpty is to be trusted, are nonsensically incompatible (66).

involvement as well” (Tigges 67). Norris observes that in the *Wake* the “portmanteau words [...] are generally a composite of two phonetically similar but semantically dissimilar words, thereby expressing an unlikelihood or contradiction” (*Decentered* 108). For instance, the *Wake*’s “phoenish” (4.17) provides a playful case in point; as a portmanteau, “phoenish” appears to be a composite of “phonetically similar but semantically dissimilar words”: “finish,” which may suggest a decisive ending, and “phoenix,” the mythical bird that is cyclically reborn or reawakened.<sup>25</sup> Thus, “phoenix” appears to express a contradiction, or at least an ambiguity; as a Nonsense device, this “portemanteau” (240.36) supports a balance between meaning and its absence. “If Joyce learned this device from Lewis Carroll,” ponders Norris, “he learned it well—a thousand such forms could easily be cited in the *Wake*” (*Decentered* 108).<sup>26</sup> In *Comic Faith*, Polhemus addresses the significance of this artifice and the *Wake*’s “secular phoenish” within the context of modernism:

Humpty’s phenomenon, the semantic portmanteau, has profound implications. Not only is it the brick from which Joyce would try to build his Tower of Babel, *Finnegans Wake*; it also indicates the whole modern tendency to apotheosize language as the structure in which all human significance and value exist [...] The

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<sup>25</sup> Joyce’s portmanteaux are rarely simple. In *Finnegans Wake*, Phoenix is also the name of a park in Dublin, where the protagonist HCE is rumored to have committed some form of sexual transgression, the nature of which is never made explicit.

<sup>26</sup> Atherton asserts that Joyce is in fact indebted to Carroll for his use of portmanteaux in *Finnegans Wake*: “the most obvious, and the most important, of Joyce’s verbal borrowing from Carroll is the portmanteau-word” (126). While *Ulysses* does also feature neologistic “abstrusiosities” (38), they are less frequent and tend not to produce a true balance between meaning and its absence. By contrast, in the *Wake*, as Kenner explains,

It is worse than useless to push this [linguistic freeplay] toward one or the other of the meanings between which it hangs; [...] It is equally misleading to scan early drafts for the author’s intentions, on the assumption that a “meaning” got buried by elaboration. Joyce worked seventeen years to push the work away from “meaning,” adrift into language; nothing is to be gained by trying to push it back (304).

power of God, for Humpty and his spiritual progeny, becomes the potential of the word (284).

If, as Samuel Beckett has asserted, “[Joyce’s] writing [in *Finnegans Wake*] is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*” (14), his linguistic innovations suggest a new form of writing, one which playfully ignores traditional standards of composition, and which deliberately frustrates conventional sense-making strategies. In his groundbreaking essay on structure, sign and play, Jacques Derrida expounds “the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself” (86). This is the selfsame problem Shem faces in the *Wake*: how to make “synthetic ink and sensitive paper for his own end out of his own wit’s waste” (185.7-8). In Norris’s opinion, “The image of Shem writing with his own shit on his own body about himself indicates not only the scatological and solipsistic nature of the creative act, but also the entrapment in what is apparently a closed system” (*Decentered* 122). (“(highly prosy, crap in his hand, sorry!)” [*Wake* 185.17-18]) “No wonder then that the letter smells like dung,” Jennifer Schiffer Levine remarks—“it is recycled language, repeated discourse, sometimes even going to mold at the edges” (111). In employing neologisms and portmanteaux to tell his tale, Joyce can be seen as attempting to liberate language from the entrapment of a closed system. His endeavor might also be seen as the logical development of the emancipatory proclamation voiced by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (220). In Donald Davidson’s view, “Joyce’s conception of aesthetic freedom required that he not be the slave of settled meanings, hypostatized connotations, rules of grammar, established styles and tastes, ‘correct spellings’” (147). Thus, if “freedom only exists outside the

culture in which one is irremediably imprisoned,” as Cixous argues (736), Joyce’s disimprisoning quest required him to transcend the bounds imposed by culture and migrate to new artistic terrain. In a recent study, Gaurav Majumdar holds that “the pun and the portmanteau are necessarily migrant forms, having deviated from words that were their ‘prior’ or ‘standard’ locations” (53). Majumdar regards the portmanteau specifically as “a form of wildly careening (and therefore threatening) nonsense that can have infinite associations” (54). In the *Wake*, these seemingly “infinite associations” may cause readers to wonder whether through his portmanteaux Joyce has in fact succeeded in multiplying meaning. As Alice herself wonders aloud to Humpty Dumpty, “The question is [...] whether you *can* make words mean so many different things” (Carroll *Alice’s* 186). With respect to *Finnegans Wake*, the answer depends upon how one defines meaning. In terms of the way meaning is traditionally constructed, Joyce fabricates a kind of polysemous ambiguity; with regard to the text’s portmanteaux, as Norris points out, Joyce tends to create new words by combining semantically dissimilar words, “of which none can be assigned priority as a predominant or ‘true’ referent” (“Consequence” 141). In consequence, Joyce’s portmanteau word can have a disorienting effect on the reader, for it “refuses any interpretive control through its form itself” (Majumdar 53). In Stephen Heath’s assessment, the reader is faced with “the multiplication of possible levels of meaning that blocks the reception of a meaning” (45). Alison Rieke similarly notes the paradox inherent in Joyce’s procedure: “[The *Wake*] overturns sense through its excess of significations, where such plenitude would seem to be the epitome of meaning and significance” (23). Equally paradoxical, of course, is the application of formal sense-making strategies to a text which takes great pleasure in confounding them. As Majumdar avers, “The non-sensibility of *Finnegans Wake* appropriates for it a freedom from the authority of formal fetters” (64). By employing Nonsense

devices such as the portmanteau, the book breaks free of the closed system of conventional language; in doing so, though, it also asks the reader to let go of conventional interpretive procedures.<sup>27</sup>

Before exploring further the particular nature of the burden that the *Wake* imposes upon its reader, we would do well to note how Joyce's play with neologisms and portmanteaux replicates, on a lexical level, his overarching compositional technique of juxtaposing disparate elements. In availing himself of such a method, Joyce may again be beholden to Carroll. In *Sylvie and Bruno* (1893), "the book which probably formed Joyce's introduction to Carroll" (Atherton 135),<sup>28</sup> the Englishman begins by explaining the genesis of his book, which he says evolved out of a strange conglomeration of notes:

As the years went on, I jotted down, at odd moments, all sorts of odd ideas, and fragments of dialogue, that occurred to me—[...] Sometimes one could trace to their source these random flashes of thought [...] but they had also a way of their

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<sup>27</sup> While thus far we have examined Joyce's use of "Word ladders," invented words, misdirection, reversals and inversions, his arsenal of Nonsense procedures is in fact far more extensive. Of brief note here is Joyce's play with the boundaries of the text through his use of marginalia and footnotes in the second part of Book II (260-308). Stewart writes that footnotes in fictive texts "present an implicit denial of the status of the text" (108), and in so doing "tear the reader away from any center of attention" (110). As he multifariously splinters and scatters the sense of his text, Joyce thus tests the skills and acuity of his readers.

<sup>28</sup> Atherton, who surmises that this book—Carroll's last—was the one given him by the aforementioned Mrs. Nutting, suspects that Joyce "probably found the Introduction to *Sylvie and Bruno* the most interesting part of the book, for it is in this that [...] Carroll describes how he made use of material which came to him in dreams" (136). Atherton furthermore notices that "Joyce takes care to weave some of the details from the body of the book into his own text," and that several of its characters are named or alluded to in the *Wake* (135-36). While the boy character's name, Bruno, "is already being used to signify Giordano Bruno" (136), the girl, Sylvie, is named several times: 'Golded silvy' (148.7), 'Sylvia' (337.17), and 'Silve me solve' (619.30), which forms a tiny 'Doublet' [Word Ladder] to show the connection with Carroll" (136). The other major boy character in *Sylvie and Bruno*, Ugg Ugg, appears to be referenced through another tiny 'Doublet':

All sing.  
—I rose up one maypole morning and saw in my glass how nobody loves me but you. Ugh. Ugh.  
—All point in the shem direction as if to shun [...] the boy that was loft in the larch. Ogh! Ogh!  
(249.25-31)

Atherton maintains that Joyce is specifically alluding to Carroll's Ugg Ugg in this passage, for it comes at a moment "when the children are playing games" and the boy Ugg Ugg "is everything that is horrid" (136).



own, of occurring, à propos of nothing—specimens of that hopelessly illogical phenomenon, “an effect without a cause” [...]

And thus it came to pass that I found myself at last in possession of a huge unwieldy mass of literature—if the reader will kindly excuse the spelling—which only needed stringing together, upon the thread of a consecutive story, to constitute the book I hoped to write (278).

In this way Carroll’s method of composition in *Sylvie* approximates that of the *bricoleur*. Derrida comments specifically on this technique, which works like a Nonsense operation in that it involves pulling elements out of their original context:

“The *bricoleur*,” says Lévi-Strauss, is someone who uses “the means at hand,” that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are being used [...] There is therefore a critique of language in the form of *bricolage*, and it has even been said that *bricolage* is critical language itself (“Structure, Sign and Play” 88).

Norris, who cites a letter Joyce penned to his aunt in Dublin, requesting that she send him whatever kind of miscellany that she could find,<sup>29</sup> suggests that the Irishman in fact “is like Lévi-Strauss’ ‘bricoleur,’ collecting and saving things ‘on the principle that they may always come in handy’” (“Consequence” 144-45; Lévi-Strauss 18).<sup>30</sup> Heath shares the same view, referencing Carroll’s preface to *Sylvie*, and noting that “Joyce declared himself ‘quite content to go down to

<sup>29</sup> In a letter dated November 10, 1922, Joyce “asked his Aunt Josephine to send ‘any news you like, programmes, pawntickets, press cuttings, handbills. I like reading them’” (Norris “Consequence” 144).

<sup>30</sup> Norris adds: “That Joyce’s method certainly approximated that of the bricoleur is most evident in his voluminous working notebooks for the *Wake*, crammed as these are with list upon list of apparently unrelated words, phrases, snatches of thought, bits of data” (“Consequence” 45).

posterity as a scissors and paste man for that seems to me a harsh but not unjust description” (40; qtd in Heath 40). *Bricolage* in this sense operates as a sort of “critical language,” enabling Joyce to escape the entrapment of a closed system of language and culture that confines words and objects to their traditional functions and contexts. Norris opines that “this method of bricolage allows Joyce to liberate materials from their old contexts, to juxtapose them freely and allow them to enter into new and unexpected combinations with each other” (“Consequence” 145). *Bricolage* thus corresponds to Isle’s theory of play as “putting things together in new ways” and functions as a Nonsense procedure, creating incongruity through the playful juxtaposition of disparate elements. In employing this technique, Carroll’s objective, like Joyce’s, was to forge a new kind of writing. “Perhaps the hardest thing in all literature,” he remarked in the same preface, “is to write anything original [...] in ‘Sylvie and Bruno,’ I have striven [...] to strike out yet another new path” (279-80). Joyce, after accumulating his own “huge unwieldy mass of litterature,” “with lines of litters slittering up and louds of latters slettering down,” engages in innovative play around “the old semetomyplace” (114.17-18).<sup>31</sup>

In the *Wake*, some of Joyce’s most unusual and ingenious combinations involve his manipulation of different idioms. In these juxtapositions, the polylingual aspect of Joyce’s *bricolage* constitutes another variety of Nonsensical simultaneity, that of the macaronic. As a “literary construction that is written in more than one language,” Stewart explains, “The *Wake* can be seen as part of the tradition of the macaronic text, which in her view is marked by “a pleasure in a combination of elements taken from systems conventionally regarded as

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<sup>31</sup> It is the opinion of this writer that the changing vowels in the alliterative sequence “litters slittering [...] latters slettering” may themselves be seen as a kind of “Word Ladder” and hence another nod to the “litterature” of Lewis Carroll.

disjunctive” (165). In availing himself of myriad languages in his writing,<sup>32</sup> Joyce finds a new way to fly by the “net” of his native tongue and engage simultaneously in a “critique of language.” In this light, Eric Charles White proposes that the *Wake*’s “juxtaposition of heterogeneous traditions—‘a world of different’ (417.10),” can be regarded “as method for renewing the possibilities of invention” (95). In Stewart’s view, “If Joyce has succeeded in fragmenting English into a set of borrowings that range from Norse to West Indian creoles, he has also succeeded in fragmenting any univocal notion of culture” (165).

Inasmuch as Joyce’s use of heterogeneous elements aided him in creating an original text, it also ingrained him in the tradition of the avant-garde. If, as Susan T. Viguers reasons, “At the heart of every metaphor is a merging of two apparently mutually exclusive worlds” (142), then Huidobro’s *Creacionismo*, André Breton’s *Surréalisme*, and Joyce’s method of *bricolage* share a fundamental characteristic of Nonsense, in that all three involve straining the ties of metaphor by juxtaposing elements so disparate that any semantic link between them seems almost nonexistent. In the first *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924), Breton highlights Pierre Reverdy’s idea that the image is born from a “*rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées*” [“juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities”] (qtd in Breton *Manifestes* 34; qtd in Breton *Manifestoes* 20). Similarly, in his aesthetic of *Creacionismo*, Huidobro seeks “la relation occulte entre les choses les plus lointaines” [“the hidden relationships between the most distant things”] (*Obra* 1321; *Manifestos* 22). And, apropos of descrying the invisible, “Joyce’s genius,” in Atherton’s estimation, lies in “finding connecting links between unconnected things, or creating them where none exist” (134). Like the *creacionista*, the Surrealist, and the *bricoleur*, the

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<sup>32</sup> While the idiom of the *Wake* is “basically English” (116.26), or rather “jinglish janglage” (275.n6), Roland McHugh has noted the presence of sixty-one other languages (xix-xx).

practitioner of Nonsense aims to surprise and stagger audiences by maximizing the distance or tension between the elements presented.<sup>33</sup> In Nonsense, which Stewart describes as “an overlapping of two or more disparate domains” (34), Tigges posits that “The greater the distance or tension between what is presented, the expectations that are evoked, and the frustration of these expectations, the more nonsensical the effect will be” (47).

For both Joyce and Huidobro, the need to play with language arose out of a discontent with clichés and hackneyed words that had exhausted their expressive potential. Both likely would have concurred with Philippe Sollers’s claim that “We live in the false daylight of a dead language of limited meanings” (qtd in Heath 51). What Norris writes of Joyce’s aesthetic sentiment at this time applies equally well to Huidobro’s: “all of Western civilization is finally reducible to a great rubbish heap of words, with bits of wornout concepts still adhering to them, bound together in clichéd and stratified relationships” (“Consequence” 145). Huidobro, who proclaims in *Altazor* that “Todas las lenguas están muertas” [“All the languages are dead”] (III, 121), calls for reviving them “Con vagones de carcajadas/ Con cortacircuitos en las frases/ Y cataclismo en la gramática” [“With wagons of cackles/ With circuit breakers in the sentences/ And cataclysm in the grammar”] (III, 125-27).<sup>34</sup> Around the time Huidobro was composing his epic poem, James Joyce began experimenting with his own syntactic circuit breakers, explaining to Weaver in a 1926 letter that “One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and

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<sup>33</sup> I am using the term “Surrealist” here to designate one who follows Breton’s prescription of *l’écriture automatique*. To be sure, this prescription did prove a significant point of contention among participants in the Surrealist movement. Moreover, Nonsense, *bricolage*, and *creacionismo* all differ sharply from Breton’s alleged method of automatic writing in the role they assign to the artist as conscious creator of his work.

<sup>34</sup> All translations of Huidobro’s *Altazor* are from Eliot Weinberger’s masterful version (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

goahead plot” (*Letters* 146). Davidson points out that in the *Wake* “there is plenty of destruction that goes beyond merely grinding up familiar words and assembling new words from the pieces; there is the destruction of grammar” (152).<sup>35</sup> Whereas Joyce, in his attempt to represent the world of the night,<sup>36</sup> often will fragment and multiply the potential meanings of a word, Huidobro, who felt that “Las palabras tienen demasiada carga” [“Words carry too much weight”] (*Altazor* III, 147), sought in *Altazor* to unburden them of their semantic charge. Nonetheless, in their playful concoction of new forms, the two avant-gardists both effectually shatter sense—and effectually leave the reader in quite a quandary.

On this point Joyce’s critics are in accord: *Finnegans Wake* places unprecedented demands upon the reader. As Davidson puts it, “It is Joyce’s extraordinary idea to raise the price of admission to the point where we are inclined to feel that almost as much is demanded of the reader as of the author” (156). At the same time, the *Wake* is not all “Reeling and Writhing,” as the Mock Turtle might say (Carroll *Alice* 85). Inasmuch as the author enjoys nearly infinite freedom to play with the text, the reader too can partake of the book’s ludic sport. Isle posits that “The playful writer pushes the reader, manipulates him, jokes with and against him but a connection is made, a look exchanged” (65). Joyce’s suggestion to “Wipe your glosses with what you know” (304.n3) can thus be seen as a ludic appeal for the reader to draw on all his resources—linguistic, literary, historical, geographical, imaginative—in creating his own

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<sup>35</sup> With regard to the cataclysms in the grammar of the *Wake*, Norris has expounded on how Joyce “plays with the ways in which words combine to form sentences,” noting various “syntactic irregularities”—e.g. instances of “noun in verbal position,” “adjective in nominal position,” “adjective or noun in verbal position,” etc. (“Consequence” 142).

<sup>36</sup> In reference to *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce said “I wanted to write this book about the night” (qtd in Ellmann 695); in it “I reconstruct the nocturnal life” (qtd in Bishop *Book* 4). To his friend William Bird he confessed, “the action of my new work takes place at night. It’s natural things should not be so clear at night, isn’t it now?” (qtd in Ellmann 590). In Bishop’s opinion, the “obscurity” of the *Wake* is “darkness rendered verbal” (*Book* 4).

interpretation of the work. In this vein, Hayman offers that “*Finnegans Wake* is more nearly an invitation to play than to read” (338). Yet Joyce’s invitation, like the one Macedonio extends to the reader in *Museo de la novela de la Eterna* [*The Museum of Eterna’s Novel*], also entails a challenge.

Notwithstanding the *Wake*’s plethora of riddles and enigmas,<sup>37</sup> perhaps the most baffling aspect of the story itself is its structure. As Hayman maintains, “the structure is designed to unsettle the reader” (340). For Derrida, who himself confessed to being haunted by Joyce,<sup>38</sup> *Finnegans Wake* provides probably the quintessential example of a text with a decentered structure. Prior to the “rupture” wrought by the literature of modernity, works traditionally had a “center” or “point of presence,” Derrida posits, and “The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure [...] but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure” (“Structure” 83-84). In Joyce’s innovative text, with its “nightly redistribution of parts and players” (219.7), the structure is not tied to a center in any traditional manner that might promote the establishment of meaning. In Norris’s estimation, “the formal elements of the work, plot, character, point of view, and language, are not anchored to a single point of reference, do not refer back to a center” (*Decentered* 120). In consequence of this decentering, the looseness of the work’s structure gives Joyce freedom to play with myriad potential meanings and identities. For

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<sup>37</sup> Alas, we are all living in the *Afterjoyce*.... As Joyce himself once remarked, “I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant” (qtd in Hutchinson viii). In this respect, Joyce’s collegiate nickname seems rather apt, for just as the Mad Hatter addles Alice with a riddle (“Why is a raven like a writing desk?” [Carroll *Alice’s* 60]), Joyce befuddles his readers with a few others (“why do I am alook alike a poss of porterpease?” [21.18-19]; “where was a hovel not a havel” [231.1]). In a sense, Joyce wraps the whole story in an enigma: “—Which was said by whom? / —It wham. But whim I can’t whumember” (493.16-17).

<sup>38</sup> In “Two Words for Joyce,” Derrida states plainly, “every time I write, and even in the most academic pieces of work, Joyce’s ghost is always coming on board” (149).

instance, with respect to his method of characterization, Joyce himself explained, “there are, so to say, no individual people in the book—it is as in a dream, the style of gliding and unreal as is the way in dreams” (qtd in Bishop “Introduction” xvi). For James Rother, such a method reflects a fundamental affinity between “Modernism and the Nonsense style,” in that “The modern age [...] is far less obsessed with stable essences than with unstable appearances” (195). As in the dream world of Lewis Carroll, not even characters are anchored to stable forms; a baby can metamorphose into a pig, and a cat with a grin can turn into “a grin without a cat” (*Alice* 59). As Norris observes, “Wakean figures [...] like the ‘shape-shifters’ of fairy tales, slip as easily into animals, geographical features, household objects, edibles, and abstract concepts as into human guises” (“Consequence” 131).

While Joyce’s play with identity—much to the reader’s bewilderment—extends to every one of the *Wake*’s oneiric entities, one specific case in point may reveal how his ludic method of characterization reflects Nonsense strategies and, in particular, the influence of Carroll. McGarrity Buki notes that in both the *Wake* and Carroll’s books, “The diffusion of reality through dreams often results in a loss or a confusion of one’s identity” (162). As Alice tells the Caterpillar, “I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then” (41). McGarrity Buki says that “Her problem, in the language of *Finnegans Wake*, is how to ‘isolate i from my multiple Mes’” (162; *Wake* 410.12). So it is with the nightlife of Joyce’s HCE, “the ultimate male protagonist of the *Wake*” (McHugh xv), who may or may not be identified by, or associated with—among other combinations—“Howth Castle and Environs” (3.3); “hod, cement, and edifice” (4.26); “Haroun Childeric Eggeberth” (4.32); “Here Comes Everybody” (32.18); “Habituels conspicuously emergent” (33.12-13); “H. C. Earwicker” (33.30); “Hear! Calls! Everywhair!” (108.23); “Huges Caput Earlyfouler” (197.8);

“Her Chuff Exsquire” (205.22); “Hung Chung Egglyfella” (374.34); “Hayes, Conyngham and Erobinson” (434.12-13); “Hunkalus Childared Easterheld” (480.20); “*Human Conger Eel!*” (525.26); “Haveth Childers Everywhere” (535.34-35); “Heliotropolis, the castellated, the enchanting” (594.8-9); “Have we cherished expectations?” (614.23).<sup>39</sup> “Less a ‘character,’ properly speaking, than a psychic state” (Bishop “Introduction” xvii), HCE, in Hayman’s opinion, “seems too protean for a characterization” (325). According to Hayman’s calculations, “HCE is by turns a medieval innkeeper, Noah, a lord mayor, a local lord, the last High King of Ireland, King Mark of Cornwall, Hosty the composer of the scurrilous ballad, a Russian general in the Crimean War, a Norwegian Captain, a tailor, King Leary”—to name but a dozen of his shape-shifting personae (325). If anything is certain about Joyce’s HCE figure, his portrayal demonstrates what Tigges deems a common motif in Nonsense literature, that of protean identity (79). In this regard, Atherton believes that Joyce likely was influenced by the dream theory Carroll elaborates in *Sylvie and Bruno*, whereby “one character in a dream can merge into another, or manage to become two distinct and contradictory persons at the same time” (128). In McGarrity Buki’s estimation, “The identities of the characters in *Finnegans Wake* are continually in flux. The three women are actually the same woman at different stages of her life, and Shem and Shaun are incomplete halves whose union forms H.C.E.” (162). Through the perpetual flux, Joyce playfully withholds identity and meaning from the reader’s grasp, employing a strategy akin to the self-annulling discourse that Stewart considers an essential procedure of Nonsense (72-77). Bishop explains that

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<sup>39</sup> If such a panoply of combinations serves to confuse the protagonist’s identity, even more perplexing are other instances in which Joyce appears to reverse his initials (as in “eternal chimerahunter” [107.14], or “Eusebian Concordant Homilies” [409.36]), scramble them (“combarative embottled history” [140.33]; “Eh? Ha! Check action” [559.22]), or mix them into his prose, perhaps just to tease the reader: “here, creakish from age and all now quite epsilene” [19.10-11]; “The elephant’s house is his castle” [537.1-2].



The text accordingly becomes a “left hinted palinode” [*Wake* 374.7] (a “palinode” is a poem in which the writer retracts something he has said) because as soon as it provides a reader with “meaning” through the letters and words apparent on the line, it takes the meaning away and leaves him with “sinister” hints (L. *sinister*, “left-handed”) and with puzzles to solve (hence “left hinted palinode”) (*Book* 313).

In this way, the permutations of HCE reflect the play, or “hecitency” (119.18) of the signifier,<sup>40</sup> and the playful balance that it creates between presence and absence of meaning in the *Wake*’s “constant of fluxion” (297.29). The HCE figure can undergo perpetual changes precisely because his character remains undefined, in a text whose center is “not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions c[o]me into play” (Derrida “Structure” 84). If, as Heath suggests, “The writing illimits language, breaking the accepted categories of communication” (57), perhaps most significant of all the “categories of communication” exploded through Joyce’s ludic mode is that of figurative language. Derrida elaborates that “the signification ‘sign’ has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified” (85). As Heath points out, “the writing deconstructs the fundamental (contextual) distinction between the literal and the figurative: according to what criteria are any particular elements to be identified as metaphors in a text in which every element refers to another, perpetually deferring meaning?” (41). In the *Wake*, as in the literature of Nonsense, there is no such figuration, at least

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<sup>40</sup> “HeCitEncy!” (421.23) Even HCE’s stammer suggests the stamp of Carroll. McGarrity Buki writes that HCE “shares Carroll’s odd walk (‘his rather strange walk’ [131.29]) and stutter (‘stutters fore he falls’ [139.9])” (155)... “his hes heciteny Hec” (119.18). Atherton, who considers “‘hesitency’ and guilt” to be a “*leit-motiv*” in the *Wake* (“Lewd’s carol!” [501.34]), remarks that “[Carroll’s] stammer, which is described as a ‘hesitancy’ of speech, was just what Joyce needed to link him with his H.C.E. and Vico’s God of the thundering sky” (136).

not in the conventional sense. The play of the signifier effectually precludes any possible context that would lend stable sense to the text. Whereas “metaphor is ‘rescued’ from nonsense by contextualization,” Stewart explains that,

in nonsense, metaphor “runs rampant” until there is wall-to-wall metaphor and thus wall-to-wall literalness [...] Once metaphors are removed from any possible context, they become part of a pure, metaphorical surface whose interpretive procedures are to some degree hermetic to that surface (35).

Thus, in the line “Alis, alas, she broke the glass!” (270.20-21), while we may surmise that Joyce is alluding to Carroll’s Alice and her looking glass, we cannot with any degree of certainty establish a meaning. Might Joyce be implying that Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871) broke the mirror of traditional mimetic representation and opened an avenue for avant-garde experimentation? He might, of course, but that is only one possible reading; moreover, and more importantly, we cannot ascertain any such implication, for this line—like those which precede and follow it—refers not to a context but to an intertext. Roland McHugh, for example, perceives that the line may also be referring to the eighteenth-century song, “Amo, Amas, I Love a Lass” (270). In this way, Heath suggests, the text’s “continual citing of elements” enables it to “transgress the laws of the context,” and thus to forever withhold meaning. Ultimately, these deferrals come to function as a Nonsense operation Stewart terms “play with infinity,” whereby “the last sentence is completed by the first sentence, the reader is caught up in the game, and the author stands outside the circle, controlling the machinery of circularity” (133). Such a procedure, she explains, effectively overturns readers’ expectations—“their sense of events as characterized by distinguishable beginnings and endings”

(116).<sup>41</sup> In *Finnegans Wake*, where sense has been perpetually withheld by the signifier's continual splintering of context, Cixous holds that "it is not surprising that the word chosen to be the last and designated to be the first should be 'the'—the definite article, the word which points out but which by itself means nothing, a *dead word*, a sign which depends upon what follows it" (735-36).

Thus Joyce keeps his readers in "Tobecontinued's tale" (626.18), inviting them to take part again in the "game of creation with its unusual combinations and surprising moves" (Isle 65). Through the decentered structure of his "meanderthalltale" (19.25), with its intertextual *bricolage*, Joyce propounds a new way of writing. In employing Nonsense procedures, and denying the traditional function of language, he innovates another, unprecedented form of communication. Subversive, exuberant play is his mode of creation. "It is freeplay," Norris avers, "that makes characters, times, places, and actions interchangeable in *Finnegans Wake*, that breaks down the all-important distinction between the self and the other, and that makes uncertainty a governing principle of the work" (*Decentered* 123). His technique served to inaugurate a new age of experimentation in Western literature. "For innovators of the Latin American novel," Gerald Martin proclaimed, "Joyce had shown the way into the great labyrinth

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<sup>41</sup> The *Wake*'s circular design is nonetheless not its only "play with infinity"—it features at least two other varieties of such play that are worthy of note here. Joyce evinces a particular partiality in the *Wake* for a Nonsense device Stewart refers to as "serializing," in which "the text becomes a game of lists" (133, 137). Numerous lists varying in length abound in the book, the most celebrated being ALP's "untitled mamafesta" (104.4), which runs to about ninety-nine lines (104.5-107.7). Such a list, Stewart explains, "threatens an exhaustiveness that is lyric, that offers an interchangeability of elements across a horizontal temporal axis" (136); indeed, the "mamafesta" seems as if it could go on indefinitely.

Joyce's other means of "playing with infinity" deserving mention here involves "one of the most common forms of nonsense causality," which Stewart describes as "concatenation or chain verse," whereby "the last word or phrase of a line is used for the beginning of the next line" (139). She points out that the "quiz show in *Finnegans Wake* uses this technique in answer to question '8: And how war yore maggies? Answer: They war loving, they love laughing, they laugh weeping, they weep smelling, they smell smiling, they smile hating, they hate thinking, they think feeling, they feel tempting, they tempt daring, they dare waiting, they wait taking, they take thanking, they thank seeking...'" (139; *Wake* 142.30-35).

of modernity and had effectively ordained the literary systematization of Modernism” (128). While Joyce’s influence became pervasive only gradually, “what he did give young writers immediately,” in Martin’s estimation, “was the most remarkable among many examples of linguistic exploration and the confidence to experiment with words in the era of what Latin Americans call *jitanjáfora*, or word play” (135). In “Sanscreed latinized: the *Wake* in Brazil and Latin America,” Haroldo de Campos asserts that “Joyce’s work—*Finnegans Wake* in particular—was a fundamental point of departure and an obligatory term of reference [...] for the developing project of a new poetry, corresponding to new trends in music (serial and postserial) and in painting (post-Mondrian)” (54-55). In regard to poetry, worthy of note are the *Wake*’s circular design and technique of *bricolage*, aspects of which are reflected in the ideograms of Concrete Poetry with their “lexical montages” (55).<sup>42</sup>

Apropos of works with “unusual combinations,” Atherton suggests that Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de Dés* (1897), itself a significant influence on the Concrete Poetry movement, “is the *Wake*’s only rival in contemporary obscurity” (211). If the prevailing darkness in the “clearobscure” (247.34), “*heliotropical noughttime*” (349.7) of *Finnegans Wake* failed to earn it a place atop the Modern Library’s ranking of best novels, greater subscription to convention likely would have limited Joyce in his pursuit of invention. “I might easily have written this story in the traditional manner,” he once explained to Eugene Jolas. “Every novelist knows the recipe [...] It is not very difficult to follow a simple, chronological scheme which the critics will understand [...] But I, after all, am trying to tell the story of this Chapelizod family in

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<sup>42</sup> De Campos relates in particular that “the Brazilian founders of the Concrete Poetry movement (the members of the 1952 Noigandres group) were using the *Wake* to stimulate and focus their poetical experiments” (55-56). He adds that “they made use of some Joycean devices in their poetry,” such as the “montage word” (56). (“monthage” [223.8])

a new way” (qtd in Norris *Decentered* 2). By telling his story in a new way, Joyce did create one of the most abstruse texts in literary history. Yet Atherton’s remark overlooks what could be the *Wake*’s greatest rival in contemporary obscurity, Huidobro’s *Altazor*. De Campos notes that Jolas, who decided to publish the daring dream language of Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, also around the same time included a fragment of Huidobro’s *Altazor* in *transition* (60).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Vicente Huidobro’s “long poem *Altazor* (begun in 1919, finished in 1931) includes in Canto IV a fragment of great imaginative verbal power, which anticipates Joycean influence,” writes de Campos. “This fragment, in the author’s own French version, was first published in 1930 in *transition*, in which Joyce’s ‘Work in Progress’ had been appearing since 1927” (60).

## CHAPTER II

## Losing Gravity in Ludic Space: The Magic of Huidobro's Anti-Poetry

“La poesía es el tricamagnuceptófalo del maravilloso secreto”

—Vicente Huidobro

*Papá o el diario de Alicia Mir (1934)*

With a preference for innovation and a conception of the poet as both demiurge and mage, Vicente Huidobro's (1893-1948) artistic ethos guided him to play with every facet of his literary creation: from modes, conventions, and forms of representation, to typography, syntax, words and morphemes. While such experimentation was common among—and even characteristic of—many avant-gardists, Huidobro's iconoclastic nature constantly propelled him to break with tradition and explore further dimensions for his art. A participant in many avant-garde movements, he sought to transcend each one, all the while cultivating his own aesthetic of *Creacionismo* with a host of sundry enterprises. After creating Cubist poems and *calligrammes* akin to those of Apollinaire, he went on to produce poems to be sported on blouses and dresses,

and to compose an award-winning script for a Cubist film, *Cagliostro* (1927),<sup>1</sup> the first of its kind. And while appreciative of Surrealism's discoveries, Huidobro in *Manifeste manifestes* [*Manifestos Manifest*; 1925] criticizes André Breton's (1896-1966) idea of *l'écriture automatique*. In his poetry, he plays with—and questions—this Surrealist procedure and its effect.<sup>2</sup> As creator and artificer of his poetic universe, Huidobro objected to the involuntary nature of psychic automatism. More suitable to his aesthetic was the autonomy of play action and its subversive nature that tends to engender the new. While he developed his particular artistic theory, Huidobro engaged in radical ludic endeavors, which situated him close to, if not at the very center of, the vanguard. For Edmundo Paz-Soldán, Huidobro was a “key figure of the European avant-garde, capable of adapting to his own creacionismo a bit of all the movements in fashion—futurism, cubism, surrealism, dadaism” (59). As he toyed with other styles, Huidobro refined and renovated his own. By the mid-1920s, an unusual new influence on Huidobro's art

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<sup>1</sup> The genesis of Huidobro's “novela-film” is nearly as peculiar as the work itself. According to de Costa, the work was begun “en el período parisino del autor” [“in the Parisian period of the author”] and “su redacción fue iniciada en francés hacia 1921” [“its composition was begun in French around 1921”] (de Costa *En pos de Huidobro* 76). No copies survive of the original film script, yet as de Costa points out, “the film must have [. . .] been shot, for among Huidobro's papers there is a memo (dated June 1923), in which the writer and director [Mime Mizú] jointly declare their dissatisfaction with the ‘découpage’” (de Costa “From *Film* to the Filmic Novel”: 17). On July 23, 1927, *The New York Times* published an article entitled “Chilean Gets Film Prize,” which reported that “Vicente Huidobro, young Chilean poet and novelist, was announced yesterday as the winner of a \$10,000 prize offered by the League for Better Pictures for the book of the year having the best possibilities for moving picture adaptation. The book, still in script form in the hands of Parisian publishers, is called *Cagliostro* [. . .]” (qtd in de Costa “From *Film* to the Filmic Novel” 17). (Ironically, after the October 1927 premiere of *The Jazz Singer*, the world's first talking picture, Huidobro's award-winning script [for silent film] was all but discarded.) The novel was first published in 1931 in English under the title *Mirror of a Mage* (trans. Warre B. Wells) by Houghton Mifflin in New York and Spottiswood in London. The first Spanish version, printed in Chile and entitled *Cagliostro*, did not appear until 1934.

<sup>2</sup> Although Breton's proposition of *l'écriture automatique* never came to define Surrealism in literature or even really took hold as a method of composition, Huidobro nevertheless uses it as a point of departure in *Manifeste manifestes* before going on to delineate the principles of *Creacionismo*.

could be detected. In his quest for “unexplored territory” in his epic *Altazor* (1931)<sup>3</sup> and other contemporaneous texts, Huidobro’s ludic approach to artistic creation led him to experiment with elements of Nonsense, which distinguish many of his best works.

Huidobro’s first direct reference to Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) and his “libro encantador” (“delightful book”)—*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)—appears in his novel *Papá o el diario de Alicia Mir* [*Papa, or the Diary of Alicia Mir*; 1934], but we have various indications that the poet was familiar with literary Nonsense by 1925, during his composition of *Altazor* and *Ver y palpar* [*To See and Feel*; 1941].<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Hey adverts to the presence of Nonsense in *Altazor* in a 1979 article that analyzes the poet’s experiments in sound and use of portmanteau words.<sup>5</sup> In “Vicente Huidobro: El sentido del sinsentido” [“The Sense of Nonsense”],<sup>6</sup> Oscar Hahn (1998) acknowledges elements of the Nonsense repertoire in *Altazor*, while focusing his attention on a group of poems in *Ver y palpar*, which in his view “concentran todos los rasgos típicos del ‘Nonsense’: el carácter lúdico, el infantilismo, el sinsentido, el humor, la obliteración de lo real y—subrayo este último rasgo—la total arbitrariedad” [“bring together all the typical features of ‘nonsense’: its ludic character, childlike qualities, absurdity or illogicality, humor, obliteration of the real and—I underline this last characteristic—its utter arbitrariness”] (5).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Although *Altazor* did not appear in its entirety until 1931, Huidobro had already completed the preface and first canto in 1918, and published various fragments of the poem—some in French, some in Spanish—between 1925 and 1930 (Huidobro *Obra poética* 726).

<sup>4</sup> First published by Ediciones Ercilla in Santiago, Chile, in 1941, *Ver y palpar* comprises forty-nine poems, with the date “(1923-1933)” appearing below the title on the cover page. The individual poems are undated, though Cedomil Goic notes that sixteen of them had previously been published, the first two (“Naturaleza Viva” [“Lively Life”] and “Poema” [“Poem”]) in August of 1925 (Huidobro *Obra* 905; 950; 966).

<sup>5</sup> “‘Nonsense’ en *Altazor*.” *Revista Iberoamericana*. 45 (1979): 49-56.

<sup>6</sup> *Inti* 46-47 (1997-98): 3-11.

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.



Surprisingly, in the extant scholarship on Huidobro, only one other study addresses his art in the context of literary Nonsense.<sup>8</sup> In a chapter of his unpublished dissertation (2000) entitled *Al sur del espejo: Carroll y la inversión de la maravilla y el sinsentido en la poesía chilena del siglo XX* [*South of the Looking-Glass: Carroll and the Inversion of the Marvelous and Nonsense in Twentieth-Century Chilean Poetry*], Luis Andrés Figueroa argues that Carroll stands as one of the most significant precursors of the European and Latin American avant-garde of the 1920s, and highlights the importance of his influence on Huidobro's novel *Papá o el diario de Alicia Mir* (147).<sup>9</sup> Figueroa suggests that the presence of Carroll in Huidobro's work can be recognized primarily in his "nueva concepción de la maravilla y del texto poético como universos autónomos; y en la concepción de un lenguaje-objeto que caracteriza parte de la producción huidobriana" ["new conception of the marvelous and of the poetic text as autonomous universes; and in the conception of the language-object that distinguishes part of Huidobro's work"] (147); furthermore, Figueroa sees a correspondence in the unconventional love between the characters Alicia and Alejandro Mir in the novel (the latter functioning as Huidobro's double) and that between Alice Liddell and Charles Dodgson.<sup>10</sup> In the present study I seek to demonstrate how Nonsense devices are germane to Huidobro's *Creacionismo*, how his play with Nonsense enabled him to accomplish a significant breakthrough in his poetry, and precisely how the elements of Nonsense operate in his books *Altazor* and *Ver y palpar*.

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<sup>8</sup> In "Decir sin decir," (*Vuelta* 107 [October 1985]: 12-13), Octavio Paz mentions in passing how Huidobro's procedure in the final cantos of *Altazor* resembles that of Lewis Carroll. In his view, the protagonist's journey represents "la historia de la ascensión del sentido al ser" ["the history of the ascension from sense into being"] (13).

<sup>9</sup> Washington University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2000.

At this point I wish to make clear that ludic activity and Nonsense devices, while essential to Huidobro's aesthetic in the aforementioned texts, are nevertheless not constant features in them. Saul Yurkievich discerns two basic tendencies in Huidobro's poetry of this period:

Por un lado, se da una poesía de confesión personal, apasionada, visceral, angustiada, que tiende a la fusión entre la subjetividad y la palabra; y por el otro, una actitud lúdica y experimental, de distanciamiento frente al lenguaje, que lo impersonaliza, que reconoce la arbitrariedad del signo lingüístico y que busca lo verbal intrínseco, activar las energías de la lengua librada a su propio movimiento [On the one hand, he creates poetry of personal, passionate, visceral, anguished confession, which tends to fuse subjectivity and language; on the other, his approach is ludic and experimental, placing himself at a distance from language, impersonalizing himself, in a way that acknowledges the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and seeks the intrinsic word in order to stimulate the energies of language that is freed from its own movement] (97-98).

As previously stated, my focus will be on Huidobro's playful, experimental work, and the Nonsense devices he employs in a handful of the "Poemas Giratorios" ["Revolving Poems"] in *Ver y palpar* and in the middle cantos and preface of *Altazor*. I concur with Hahn, who accurately points out the elevated, grave tone of Cantos I and II (3), and also with Hey, who divides the language of *Altazor* into three categories: "(i) sentido, (ii) *Nonsense*, (iii) sonidos" ["(i) sense, (ii) Nonsense, (iii) sounds"] (149), and furthermore posits that the Nonsense of the epic can be viewed as a counterpoint to, and an attempt to revivify, the conventional language of the first two cantos (155). In *Altazor*, the Nonsense elements enact the playful devolution of

language, the rules of which are suggestively and deliberately violated: these elements, I will argue, are the poem's most successful innovations. With regard to *Ver y palpar*, those who subscribe to the play-seriousness opposition may find it ironic that the poems from this abstruse collection which have received the most serious critical attention are also the most playful.

In particular, what merits renewed attention to these works is the seeming arbitrariness of their tropes, and their creator's seemingly ambivalent attitude toward the arbitrary, which itself is a fundamental characteristic of Nonsense. The hermetic, autonomous quality of his texts derives from startling metaphors—the linking of realities so distant that their coupling seems illogical, irrational and utterly random. The point on which so many of Huidobro's critics concur is that the convergence of disparity he accomplishes is arbitrary; nonetheless, given Huidobro's position as a *creacionista*, his objection to psychic automatism, his theory of the poet's "superconscience" ["superconsciousness"] (*Obra poética* 1319; *Manifestos Manifest* 17), and his view that "le poète est celui que surprend la relation occulte entre les choses les plus lointaines, les fils cachés qui les unissent" ["the poet is he who hits upon the hidden relationships between the most distant things, the secret threads which unite them"] (*Obra* 1321; *Manifestoes* 22), we might wonder if the arbitrariness is only appearance. Then again, dare we take Huidobro at his word? After all, the selfsame man once proclaimed "pour moi il n'y a jamais en un seul poète dans toute l'histoire de notre planète" ["for me there has never been a single poet in the history of our planet"] (*Obra* 1335; *Manifestos* 60). Before we consider the nature of Huidobro's playful and innovative Nonsense, we must first examine his relation to the Parisian avant-garde, his response to Breton's Surrealist doctrine, and the principles of his aesthetic.

### *Creacionismo*

Although his first volumes of poetry clearly reflect the influence of Ruben Darío and Latin American *modernismo*, Huidobro began fashioning his own aesthetic of *Creacionismo* very early in his career. In the preface to *Adán* [*Adam*; 1916],<sup>11</sup> he includes more than three hundred words from Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-1882) essay "The Poet," which, as Goic notes, "provee la clave más original y personal del creacionismo de desarrollo ulterior" ["provides the most original and personal key to his subsequent development of *Creacionismo*"] (*Obra* 319). In "Le créationnisme" (1925),<sup>12</sup> he again cites an idea of Emerson's that he had quoted nine years earlier: "Une pensée si vivante que comme l'esprit d'une plante ou d'un animal a une architecture propre, embellit la nature avec une chose nouvelle" ["A living thought, like the spirit of an animal or a plant, has its own architecture, and embellishes nature with something new"] (*Obra* 1328; *Manifestos* 41).<sup>13</sup> In her essay "Emerson y el creacionismo" ["Emerson and *Creacionismo*"; 1980], Mireya Camurati asserts that the most valuable or influential idea Huidobro may have extracted from his reading of Emerson is that of creation, specifically

La exhortación a construir nuestro propio mundo, el convencimiento de que el poeta dice algo que nunca se había expresado, que dentro de sus poderes está el de

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<sup>11</sup> In "Le créationnisme," Huidobro asserts that he wrote *Adán* while on vacation in 1914, although he did not publish it until 1916. His 1914 manifesto in any case suggests he was already familiar with Emerson.

<sup>12</sup> Huidobro originally included this essay in *Manifeste manifestes* (1925), afterward translating it into Spanish as "El creacionismo."

<sup>13</sup> The literal rendering above by Gilbert Alter-Gilbert of Huidobro's own translation differs slightly from Emerson's original, which reads: "For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing" (Emerson 200).

adornar a la naturaleza con algo nuevo, y de que las obras de arte nos muestran la existencia en el hombre del poder creador [...]

[The exhortation to construct our own world, the conviction that the poet says something that never before has been expressed, that included among his powers is the ability to adorn nature with something new, and that works of art show us the creative power that resides in man...] (145)

As evidenced by Huidobro's own poetry and manifestos of the time, Emerson's writings, though by no means the sole influence on the *creacionista*, nonetheless encouraged him to conceive of the poetic text as its own independent universe and to take full advantage of his creative powers. In 1914, at the age of twenty-one, he delivered his first manifesto, "Non Serviam," in the Athenaeum of Santiago, Chile, proclaiming that, "Hasta ahora no hemos hecho otra cosa que imitar el mundo en sus aspectos, no hemos creado nada [. . .] *Non serviam*. No he de ser tu esclavo, madre Natura; seré tu amo" ["Up to now we have done nothing but imitate the world as it appears; we have not created anything... *Non serviam*. I do not have to be your slave, Mother Nature; I shall be your master"] (*Obra* 1294-295).<sup>14</sup> Though he did not yet use the term *Creacionismo* to denote his aesthetic, Huidobro's first manifesto unequivocally shows his preference for creation over imitation, if not an outright dismissal of the Aristotelian mimetic mode of representation. Whereas mimesis generally entails subscription to the conventions of realism, the creation of an autonomous world affords the poet a license to play with convention and produce startling images that appear to make little sense. In declaring himself master over nature, Huidobro thus asserted that art need not be a mirror of external reality, as Aristotle had

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<sup>14</sup> Cedomil Goic notes the "resonancias hegelianas" ["Hegelian echoes"] in Huidobro's poetry (908). Huidobro's aesthetic philosophy indeed displays the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), the German philosopher who proposed that "the end or object of art must [...] consist in something other than the purely formal imitation of what is given to objective sense" (416).

propounded in his *Poetics*. On the contrary, Huidobro, like his modernist counterparts, regarded himself as a demiurge, the creator of an autonomous world which in his view had no obligation to mirror external reality. A year earlier, in his 1913 treatise *Les peintres cubistes* [*The Cubist Painters*], Apollinaire had posited strikingly similar ideas: “trop d’artistes-peintres adorent encore les plantes, les pierres, l’onde ou les hommes [...] la servitude finit par créer de doux loisirs. On laisse les ouvriers maîtriser l’univers et les jardiniers ont moins de respect pour la nature que n’en ont les artistes. Il est temps d’être les maîtres” [“too many painters still adore plants, stones, the sea, or men... servitude ends by creating real delights. Workers are allowed to control the universe, yet gardeners have even less respect for nature than have artists. The time has come for us to be masters”] (*Œuvres en prose complètes* 5; *Cubist Painters* 9).

In his essay “Teoría del creacionismo” [“Theory of *Creacionismo*”] Antonio de Undurruga avers that Huidobro was by all indications still unaware of Apollinaire’s ideas in 1914;<sup>15</sup> nonetheless, the poets were neither the first nor the only ones to question traditional modes of representation. In 1902, the French essayist Rémy de Gourmont (1858-1915), in *Le problème du style* [*The Problem of Style*], had written: “Il semble que nous soyons, à cette heure, revenus [...] à l’aurore d’une période nouvelle d’énergie. On s’est lassé de copier. On a tenté de créer” [“It seems that we are, at this time, approaching... the dawn of a new period of energy. We have grown weary of copying. We must attempt to create”] (205). A year later, the French painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) advanced a similar idea: “Si el artista [...] quiere sacar a la luz una obra creadora, no puede imitar a la naturaleza, sino que debe tomar los elementos de la naturaleza y crear un elemento nuevo” [“if an artist wishes to bring to light a creative work, he

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<sup>15</sup> “Todos los antecedentes históricos y bibliográficos que obran en nuestro poder, nos llevan a pensar que Huidobro no conoció el texto de Apollinaire” [“All the historical and bibliographical data at our disposal lead us to believe that Huidobro did not know of Apollinaire’s text”] (50).

cannot imitate nature; rather, he must take elements from nature and create something new”] (qtd in Cano Ballesta 7). In *La jeune peinture française* [*Young French Painting*], the art critic and writer André Salmon (1881-1969) echoed this theory of artistic creation, as Christopher Gray elucidates: “el papel del artista era crear una nueva realidad” [“the artist’s role was to create a new reality”] (qtd in Cano Ballesta 8). In 1916, on his way to France, and now indubitably more aware of French aesthetic trends, Huidobro stopped in the Athenaeum of Buenos Aires to pronounce that “la primera condición del poeta era crear, la segunda crear y la tercera crear” [“the first condition of a poet is to create, the second to create, and the third, to create”] (*Obra* 1339; *Manifestos* 42); with this declaration, Huidobro became known as a *creacionista*.<sup>16</sup> Although the poet himself asserted that “el creacionismo es una teoría estética general que comencé a elaborar [...]” [“*Creacionismo* is a general aesthetic theory that I began to elaborate...”] (*Obra* 1338; *Manifestos* 40), his artistic views might best be considered the result of a kind of aesthetic cross-pollination.

On the first page of *Horizon carré* [*Square Horizon*; 1917], Huidobro further explains his artistic procedure. Note its similarity to Gauguin’s: “Créer un poème en empruntant à la vie ses motifs et en les transformant pour leur donner une vie nouvelle et indépendante. Rien d’anecdotique ni de descriptif. L’émotion doit naître de la seule vertu créatrice. Faire un POÈME comme la nature fait un arbre” [“To create a poem is to borrow from life its motifs and transform them so as to lend them new and independent life. Nothing anecdotal or descriptive. Emotion should emerge strictly in concert with the virtue of creativity alone. Make a poem the way nature makes a tree”] (*Obra* 417; *Manifestos* 64). As we shall see, however, in much of Huidobro’s experimental work, he is far less concerned with emotion than he is with ludics, language, and

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<sup>16</sup> Hahn suggests that Huidobro was in fact trying to recover the original sense of the Greek word *poeisis*, which literally means “creation” (“*Altazor*, el canon” 14).

innovation. With regard to *Creacionismo*, perhaps Huidobro's most oft-quoted lines appear in his "Arte poética" ["Ars Poetica"] (1916)<sup>17</sup>: "Por qué cantáis la rosa, ¡oh, Poetas! / Hacedla florecer en el poema/ Sólo para nosotros/ Viven todas las cosas bajo el Sol/ El Poeta es un pequeño Dios" ["Oh Poets, why sing of roses! / Let them flower in your poems;/ For us alone/ Do all things live beneath the Sun/ The poet is a little God"] (*Obra* 391; Guss 3).<sup>18</sup> With his preference for connotative—rather than descriptive—poetry, and his conception of the artist as creator of an autonomous world, Huidobro thus shared significant aesthetic affinities with his contemporaries in the Parisian avant-garde, who championed the idea of art as experiment and revolt against tradition.

#### Huidobro in France

Arriving in Paris in December 1916, Huidobro found a friend in Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) and a mentor in the poet Pierre Reverdy (1889-1960), who translated many of his poems and guided him towards the Cubist style.<sup>19</sup> With Apollinaire, they published the magazine *Nord-Sud*, which Huidobro later recalled as "one of the principal organs of the great struggle for

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<sup>17</sup> Huidobro's "Arte poética" initially appeared in his volume *El espejo de agua* [*The Mirror of Water*]. There has been considerable debate concerning the date of its first publication—whether 1916 or 1918. See Admussen, Richard L. and de Costa, René. "Huidobro, Reverdy, and the *editio princeps* of *El espejo de agua*." *Comparative Literature* 24 (1972): 163-75.

<sup>18</sup> David M. Guss translated these lines into English. (*The Selected Poetry of Vicente Huidobro*. New York: New Directions, 1981.)

<sup>19</sup> I would be remiss not to mention Huidobro's significant friendship with the painter Juan Gris (1887-1927), who also assisted Huidobro in translating many of his Cubist poems into French. Susana Benko relates that "con Juan Gris [Huidobro] tiene gran afinidad. Esto se debe, posiblemente, a que el pintor es uno de los pocos cubistas que tiene la virtud de expresar *verbalmente* la esencia y la evolución del cubismo, además de presentar una enorme capacidad para conceptualizar el arte de su tiempo" ["with Juan Gris {Huidobro} has a great affinity. This is possibly due to the fact that the painter is one of the few Cubists who has the talent to express *verbally* the essence and evolution of Cubism, and moreover an enormous capacity to conceptualize the art of his time"] (83; Benko's emphasis). Cedomil Goic also notes "la estrecha colaboración entre el poeta y el pintor [...] entre 1917 y 1923 ["the close collaboration between the poet and painter... between 1917 and 1923"] (qtd in Huidobro *Obra* 413).



revolutionary art in those days” (qtd in Guss xii). Inspired by the work of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-98) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), both Huidobro and Apollinaire played with the visual dimensions of their poems, innovating cubistic word pictures, or *calligrammes*. In his biography of Huidobro, Volodia Teitelboim relates that, in April 1917, Apollinaire sent Huidobro his poem, “La cravate et la montre” [“The Tie and the Watch”], in the form of a *calligramme*, or painted poem (63); Huidobro, in response, commented to Apollinaire that he had attempted a few of his own while still in Chile. To be sure, Huidobro had already experimented with the form in his second book, *Canciones en la noche* [*Songs in the Night*; 1913], which antedates Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* (1918) by five years.

While the anti-mimetic, image-based nature of Huidobro’s *Creacionismo* would lead him to publish four books that can be regarded as Cubist poetry, *Horizon carré*, *Ecuatorial* [*Equatorial*; 1918], *Poemas árticos* [*Arctic Poems*; 1918], and *Hallali* [*The Kill*; 1918], as well as the poem *Tour Eiffel* [*Eiffel Tower*; 1918],<sup>20</sup> Huidobro was constantly seeking new modes through which to present his aesthetic. Between 1918 and 1922, he collaborated with French abstract painters Robert Delaunay and Sara Malvar as well as Spanish poet Gerardo Diego on a number of “painted poems,” which were exhibited in Paris in May, 1922.<sup>21</sup> Norma Angélica Ortega observes that, “la exposición no fue muy bien acogida debido a su ‘carácter avanzado,’ los poemas pintados tuvieron que ser retirados debido a la protesta del público” [“the exhibition was not well received on account of its ‘advanced character’; the painted poems had to be

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<sup>20</sup> In a 1919 interview with Ángel Cruchaga Santa María, Huidobro nonetheless affirmed that these five texts are “obras creacionistas” [“Creationist works”] (*Obra* 1638). It should be noted that the appellation “Cubist poetry” was one applied later by critics and not by the poets themselves.

<sup>21</sup> A Chilean painter and early theoretician of geometric art who also translated the first *Manifeste du surréalisme* into Spanish, Sara Malvar painted Huidobro’s favorite *calligramme*, “Moulin” (“Windmill”) and many others featured in the May 1922 exhibit entitled “Salle 14” (“Hall 14”).

removed due to the public's protest"] (263). Eliot Weinberger relates that another exhibit of the painted poems "caused a riot in Berlin" (viii). Huidobro's poems soon assumed still more visual dimensions. Ortega notes that, "en esta misma línea [Huidobro] colabora con Sonia Delaunay en la creación de vestidos y blusas-poema para los que se organiza un desfile en julio de ese mismo año" ["along these same lines {Huidobro} collaborates with Sonia Delaunay in the creation of poem-dresses and blouses for the organizers of a parade in July of that same year"] (263).<sup>22</sup> During this same period, "Vicente antipoeta y mago" ["Vicente antipoet and magician"] was busy preparing yet another new art form (*Altazor* IV, 282). Conscious of cinema's effect on his readers, and desirous of wider recognition for his art, the demiurgic poet, in keeping with the rich cultural zeitgeist, sought to pioneer a new mode of representation. The result: a novel *anti-novel*, or rather, a poem that masquerades as a "novela-film." Inspired by the Italian magician of legend,<sup>23</sup> Huidobro's *Cagliostro* is at once a playful critique of the act of movie-viewing, a parody of nineteenth-century melodrama, a suggestive story of a fabled necromancer, and an unorthodox, ludic treatise of *Creacionismo*. While an original creation to be sure, Huidobro's tale can be regarded also as an ingenious product of what Apollinaire termed "L'Esprit nouveau."

In *Cagliostro*, Huidobro's choice of a mage for his subject was anything but arbitrary. Magic and the surprise it produces were elements not incidental, but rather essential to the *creacionista* aesthetic and avant-garde art. The conception of the artist as demiurge, which would come to be a defining characteristic of modernism, coincided for many poets and painters with

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<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that in this enterprise Tristan Tzara, the founder of Dadaism, participated alongside Huidobro and Delaunay.

<sup>23</sup> Conte Alessandro Cagliostro (Giuseppe Balsamo) (1743-95).

an interest in magic itself. Teitelboim tells that in 1918, Picasso, at Huidobro's request, provided him with a wealth of information on the black art. Teitelboim furthermore intimates that not only Huidobro and Picasso, but many of their avant-garde friends engaged in activities related to the occult.<sup>24</sup> In the realm of poetry, magic was an important means for producing a quintessential avant-garde effect—surprise. In “L’Esprit nouveau et les poètes” [“The New Spirit and the Poets”; 1918], Apollinaire stresses the importance of shock for the new poets:

Il est tout dans la surprise. L’esprit nouveau est également dans la surprise. C’est ce qu’il y a en lui de plus vivant, de plus neuf. *La surprise est le grand ressort nouveau.* C’est par la surprise, par la place importante qu’il fait à la surprise que l’esprit nouveau se distingue de tous les mouvements artistiques et littéraires qui l’ont précédé

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<sup>24</sup> In the section of the biography titled “La zona oscura” (“The Dark Zone”), Teitelboim, directly after giving account of the correspondence between Picasso and Huidobro, hints that many in their circle took an active interest in the black art:

El 31 de mayo de 1918, Picasso contesta a Huidobro—quien veranea en Beaulieu, junto a Juan Gris y a Jacques Lipchitz—proporcionándole datos sobre ocultismo, fenómeno inasible, puerta de entrada a una región fantasmagórica que él desea traspasar. El pintor le da al chileno la información solicitada, acompañándola con el libro de Ernest Hello, *Fisionomías de Santos*.

Los estragos en el campo de batalla pintando el mundo real de la muerte impulsan a viajar por la magia. Consultas astrológicas a ver si escapan a las visiones dantescas que los rodean. Laicos, ateos, seculares conocidos sienten momentáneamente la seducción de lo diabólico. Suelen concurrir a misas negras y a sesiones de magia salomónica. Algunos prueban alucinógenos. Tal vez desaten el torrente regenerador en medio de la negación del principio de la vida. Hay que reafirmarla. Inventarla de nuevo. *Crearla por segunda o milésima vez. Lo intentarían.*

[On May 31, 1918, Picasso replies to Huidobro—who is spending the summer in Beaulieu, close to Juan Gris and Jacques Lipchitz—providing him details on the occult, unexplained phenomena, the gateway to a phantasmagorical region that he wishes to pass through. The painter sends the Chilean the requested information, enclosing with it a book by Ernest Hello, *Fisionomías de Santos* {*Physiognomy of Saints*}]

The ravages of the battlefield painting the real world of death propel them to travel by magic. Astrological consultations to see if they can escape the Dantesque visions surrounding them. Laymen, atheists, secular acquaintances momentarily feel devilish temptations. They have the habit of attending black masses and sessions of Solomonic magic. Some try hallucinogens. Perhaps they unleash a regenerative torrent amid the negation of the principle of life. They need to reaffirm it. *Invent it anew. Create it for the second or the thousandth time. They would try*] (65; Teitelboim's emphasis).

[Everything is in the effect of surprise. The new spirit depends equally on surprise, on what is most new and vital in it. *Surprise is the greatest source of what is new*. It is by surprise, by the important position that has been given to surprise, that the new spirit distinguishes itself from all the literary and artistic movements which have preceded it] (*Œuvres* 949; *Selected Writings* 233).

In Huidobro's poetry, surprise is created through the most innovative and mysterious of metaphors, by means of an unusual analogical link between two things, whose enigmatic semantic correspondence has remained hidden, undiscovered for so long that it astounds the unsuspecting reader. So bold and unusual are his metaphors, they often appear to make no sense. "Admiro a los que perciben las relaciones más lejanas de las cosas," ["I admire those who descry the most distant connections between things"] the poet once wrote (qtd in Mitre 82). For Huidobro, as for the avant-garde, the trite analogy—the product of imitation, convention and literary tradition—represents nothing but the writing of a sluggish mind. The astonishment produced by the mystery of an enigmatic semantic relation is akin to the wonder of creation. The poet who forges such new relations is thus in a sense—to steal a verse from Huidobro's "Arte poética"—"un pequeño Dios" ["a little God"] (*Obra* 391; Guss 3). And is not the little god, or demiurge, who so shocks his audience, not unlike the magician himself, whose art similarly astounds by virtue of its very inexplicability, by transcending the laws of nature? In his manifesto "Estética" ["Aesthetics"; 1935], Huidobro proclaims, "Es preciso creer en el arte como en un acto mágico [. . .] Es el gran misterio. Es el secreto inexplicable" ["It is essential to believe

in art as if it were a magical act... It is the great mystery. It is the inexplicable secret”] (*Obra* 1375).<sup>25</sup>

Huidobro conceives of the poet as mage, as a wizard able to alter signification and impose new meanings, and in so doing, amaze and enlighten his audience. Deeming the poet’s role to be transcendent, the *creacionista* pays special attention to the connotations of words, endeavoring to transport readers beyond the realm of their quotidian existence. In his manifesto *La poesía* [*Poetry*; 1921], he expounds this theory:

Aparte de la significación gramatical del lenguaje, hay otra, una significación *mágica* que es la única que nos interesa [. . .] Rompe con la norma convencional y en él las palabras pierden su representación estricta para adquirir otra más profunda y como rodeada de una aura luminosa que debe elevar al lector del plano habitual y envolverlo en una atmósfera encantada

[Apart from the grammatical meaning of language, there is another, a *magical* meaning, which is the only one that interests us... It breaks with the conventional norm and in it words lose their strict representation in order to acquire another that is more profound, as if it were surrounded by a luminous aura that raises the reader from his chair and wraps him in an enchanted atmosphere] (*Obra* 1296; emphasis added).

For Huidobro, “tout le jeu de l’assemblage des mots” [“the whole game of the assemblage of words”] is a “jeu conscient, mêm dans la fièvre du plus grand lyrisme” [“conscious game, even in the fiercest fever of lyricism”] (*Obra* 1318; *Manifestos* 14). In his

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<sup>25</sup> Huidobro was by no means alone in this view. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), in *L’imaginaire*, considers the poetic image a gateway to another reality: “L’acte d’imagination est un acte magique” [“The act of the imagination is a magic act”] (161).

view, such operations with the “significación mágica” of language can be conducted only by the poet, the true wizard of the written word, who possesses an extraordinary “superconscience” [“superconsciousness”]. In arguing that “the sorcerer and the poet have the same way of describing the magic reality, the reality beyond routine” (315), Claude Francis draws attention to Huidobro’s statement that “la superconscience est le moment où nos facultés intellectuelles acquièrent une intensité vibratoire supérieure” [“Superconsciousness is the moment when our intellectual faculties acquire a superior vibratory intensity”] (*Obra* 1319; *Manifestos* 16). In Huidobro’s *Creacionismo*, Francis contends, “intuition is substituted for reason, and therefore the poet steps into another reality, a magic world” (313). Notwithstanding the favorable comparison with sorcery, Huidobro would have been bedeviled by the suggestion that his poetry is composed without the aid of reason. And therein lies his principal objection to Breton.

#### Huidobro’s Response to Surrealism

Given their similar artistic trajectories in the French avant-garde, Huidobro’s sudden and yet unwavering opposition to Breton’s *Manifeste du surrealisme* (1924) “fue algo inesperado” [“was something unexpected”], de Costa points out (“Huidobro y el Surrealismo” 75). As young poets, both revered the work of the late French symbolists, particularly Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), as well as *Les chants de Maldoror* [*The Songs of Maldoror*] of Lautréamont (1846-1870). Both Breton and Huidobro entered the inner circle of the Parisian avant-garde in the same year (1917), in part through their contributions to the Cubist journal *Nord-Sud* (75; Caws 13-14). As de Costa notes, “Posteriormente, y hasta 1924, Breton y Huidobro colaboraron con frecuencia en las mismas publicaciones del cubismo y Dada” [“Subsequently, and until 1924, both Huidobro and Breton collaborated often in the same Cubist

and Dadaist publications”] (75). Both poets had important ties to Tristan Tzara and the Dada movement, both would later express appreciation for Lewis Carroll, and for both, the elder poets Apollinaire and Reverdy initially proved invaluable mentors.

With Reverdy, Huidobro shared a belief in the autonomy of the poem and rejected the idea of art as an imitation or mirror of the objective world. For the Cubist poets and painters, the process of composition involved a reduction of the subject to its basic forms, those which represented its intrinsic nature and made it recognizable to the world. In Reverdy’s view, “the image is not the momentary psychic response to a concrete word, but the analogical construct linking two objects of attention in a new relationship” (qtd in Greene 29). In Huidobro’s aesthetic of *Creacionismo*, the image plays a similar—no less important—role, uniting words from across the semantic spectrum and making possible the creation of new realities.<sup>26</sup>

Breton, who, as Shelley M. Quinn relates, was “deeply influenced by Pierre Reverdy’s ideas on imagery and their possible assistance in experiencing the marvelous” (123), quotes his fellow poet in the first *Manifeste du surréalisme*:

*L’image est une création pure de l’esprit.*

*Elle ne peut naître d’une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées.*

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<sup>26</sup> The metaphor inherent in such an analogically constructed image is the product of an “aesthetic idea” and the “aesthetic attributes of an object”—to use Kant’s terms—which “animate the mind by opening out for it a prospect into a field of kindred representations stretching beyond its ken” (177-78). Since the “aesthetic attributes of an object” can only be envisioned, the image is thus of paramount importance in Cubist and *creacionista* poetry. What Robert W. Greene writes of Reverdy’s poetic process is equally applicable to Huidobro’s:

Since the idées or conceptual characteristics of two distant réalités, when brought together, form the image, it is therefore by means of the conceptualization process that the poet creates the image. The new, Kantian means of the Cubist painters finds its way thus to the heart of Reverdy’s theory of the image (30).

*Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte—plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique... etc.*

*[The image is a pure creation of the mind.*

*It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.*

*The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality] (qtd in Breton *Manifestes* 34; qtd in Breton *Manifestoes* 20).<sup>27</sup>*

While conceding that he found “Ces mots” [“These words”] to be “très fort révélateurs” [“extremely revealing”] Breton protested that “L’esthétique de Reverdy, esthétique toute a posteriori, me faisait prendre les effets pour des causes” [“Reverdy’s aesthetic, a completely a posteriori aesthetic, led me to mistake the effects for the causes”] (*Manifestes* 34; *Manifestos* 20-21). For Breton, Reverdy’s theory did not provide an adequate explanation of the image’s origins. As Breton states later in the first manifesto, “il ne semble pas possible de rapprocher volontairement ce qu’il [Reverdy] appelle ‘deux réalités distantes’” [“it does not seem possible to bring together, voluntarily, what he {Reverdy} calls ‘two distant realities’”] (*Manifestes* 58; *Manifestoes* 36). “In Breton’s experience,” Willard Bohn observes, “truly remarkable images could never be created consciously because they derived their effect from irrational associations” (186).

Huidobro must have also admired Reverdy’s theory of the image, for he posits a remarkably similar idea in his *Manifeste manifestes*: “l’image est une révélation. Plus cette

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<sup>27</sup> Reverdy’s theory first appeared in his March 1918 contribution to *Nord-Sud*.



révélation sera surprenante, plus elle sera transcendante dans son effet” [“the image is a revelation. And the more surprising the revelation, the more transcendent it will be in its effect”] (*Obra* 1321; *Manifestos* 23). For Huidobro, however, the juxtaposition of two distant realities is achieved through a conscious act of will on the part of the poet: “La poésie doit être créée par le poète, avec toute la force de ses sens plus éveillés que jamais et le poète tient son rôle actif et non passif dans le rassemblement et l’engrenage de son poème” [“Poetry must be created by the poet, with all the force of his fully awakened senses, and the poet must play an active, not passive, role in the construction and coordination of the poem”] (*Obra* 1319; *Manifestos* 15). In his view, “L’image est l’agrafe qui les [‘deux réalités lointaines’] attache, l’agrafe de lumière” [“The image is the clasp that attaches them {‘two distant realities’}, the clasp of light”] (*Obra* 1321). In that same manifesto, clearly a response and a challenge to Breton’s first *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Huidobro also precisely explicates the origin of a *creacionista* poem:

Le poème créationniste naître seulement d’un état de superconscience ou de délire poétique [...] Dans l’état de superconscience l’imagination et la raison dépassent l’atmosphère habituelle, elles sont comme électrisées [...] la superconscience, le délire du poète naît d’une écorce cérébrale riche et bien nourrie. Dans le délire qui est bien plus beau que le rêve il y a toujours le contrôle de la raison (c’est un fait prouvé scientifiquement), le contrôle de la conscience qui dans le rêve naturel n’existent pas

[The creationist poem is born exclusively from a state of superconsciousness or poetic delirium... In this state of superconsciousness, imagination and reason pass beyond their accustomed climes, they act as if electrified...

superconsciousness, or the delirium of the poet, is born from a rich and well-

nourished cerebral crust. In this delirium which is far more beautiful than any dream, control by reason is always present (this is a scientifically proven fact); conscious control in which the natural dream doesn't exist] (*Obra* 1319; *Manifestos* 16-18).

Breton and Huidobro coincide in their conception of the image as resulting from the juxtaposition of two distant realities (an idea both derive from Reverdy), and both regard this juxtaposition as being the source of light. Yet whereas for Breton the spark originates from the juxtaposition proper, for Huidobro it seems to be ignited by the poet's own imagination and reason, which act "comme électrisées."<sup>28</sup> In Breton's opinion, "il est faux [...] de prétendre que 'l'esprit a saisi les rapports' des deux réalités en présence" ["it is erroneous... to claim that 'the mind has grasped the relationship' of two realities in the presence of each other"] (*Manifestes* 58; *Manifestoes* 38).

In *The Rise of Surrealism*, Willard Bohn propounds a persuasive argument to the effect that Breton valued Apollinaire's theory of the image because "it complemented Reverdy's theory," pinpointing "the origin of the images in question" (136-37). In 1920, Breton wrote "presque toutes les trouvailles d'images me font l'effet de créations spontanées. Guillaume Apollinaire pensait avec raison des clichés [...] étaient le produit de cette activité qu'il qualifiait de *surréaliste*" ["almost all the images I found give me the feeling of spontaneous creations. Guillaume Apollinaire thought with reason that all of these images were the product of this activity which he called *surrealism*"] (qtd in Bohn 136). Breton thus links his idea of the image

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<sup>28</sup> In the same manifesto, Huidobro also declares: "Il faut être un véritable poète pour pouvoir donner aux choses qui sont près de nous la charge suffisante pour nous émerveiller, il faut être poète pour enfilet les mots de tous les jours dans un filament Osram incandescent et que cette luminosité interne chauffe l'âme dans les altitudes où on nous précipite" ["It takes a genuine poet to be able to give to things which are close to us a sufficient charge to make us marvel. It takes a poet to stuff everyday words with an incandescent Osram filament and, with this internal luminosity, heat the soul at the altitudes where he precipitates us"] (*Obra* 1325).

as a spontaneous creation to a well-known passage in Apollinaire's preface to *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* [*The Mammaries of Tiresias*; 1918], in which the latter moreover declares "Quand l'homme a voulu imiter la marche, il a créé la roue qui ne ressemble pas à une jambe. Il a fait ainsi du surréalisme sans le savoir" ["When man resolved to imitate walking, he invented the wheel, which does not look like a leg. In doing this, he was practising surrealism without knowing it"] (qtd in Bohn 128; Slater 153-54). As Bohn relates, Breton, in his 1920 rephrasing of Apollinaire's proclamation, rendered the latter's phrase "sans le savoir" ["without knowing it"] as "par hasard" ["by chance"] (qtd in Bohn 135; Slater 154). Due to Apollinaire's untimely death in November of 1918, it would never be known if he would have indeed concurred with the theories posited by Breton in the first *Manifeste du surréalisme*; at any rate, as Bohn suggests, Breton seemed to have "grafted onto Apollinaire's notion of surrealism the idea of tapping the forces of the unconscious" (133), viewing "inspiration as a kind of creative accident that had its roots in the unconscious" (135).

Whereas Huidobro's aesthetic theory, like Breton's, suggests the influence of Apollinaire,<sup>29</sup> his theory of the image as emanating from the poet's 'superconscience' more closely resembles Reverdy's idea that "l'image est une création pure de l'esprit." Although Huidobro does not specifically state that the poet's approximation of two distant realities is voluntary, he nonetheless avers in his *Manifeste manifestes* that in the creation of an image "il y a toujours le contrôle de la raison" ["control by reason is always present"] (*Obra* 1319; *Manifestos* 18). Four years earlier, in a speech delivered in the Athenaeum of Madrid, Huidobro had declared that the poet's role was to discover a word's most mysterious allusions, condense

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<sup>29</sup> Apollinaire's aforementioned "L'Esprit nouveau et les poètes," with its emphasis on surprise as the aesthetic principle of the new age, is highly significant in this regard.

them on a superior plane and interweave them in his discourse, where the arbitrary would come to assume an enchanting role.<sup>30</sup> As de Costa observes, Huidobro's theory thus added a new element to the Cubist technique of juxtaposition: the arbitrary ("Huidobro y el Surrealismo" 77). In Surrealism, the approximation had to be involuntary, "en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale" ["in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern"] (Breton *Manifestes* 42; Breton *Manifestoes* 26).

De Costa explains that "la antinomia entre lo voluntario y lo involuntario" ["the antinomy between the voluntary and involuntary"] is the "punto central" ["key point"] in Huidobro's response to the first manifesto of Surrealism ("Huidobro y el Surrealismo" 77). "Para [Huidobro], el automatismo era una práctica censurable porque aminoraba la función creadora del poeta" ["For {Huidobro}, automatism was a reprehensible exercise as it diminished the creative role of the poet"] (77). Whereas Huidobro insisted that a poem "doit être créée par le poète" ["must be created by the poet"] (*Obras* 1319; *Manifestos* 15), Breton maintained precisely the opposite, arguing that a poem is not invented but rather received by the poet, from the unconscious flow of his thought (*Manifestes* 44-5). As de Costa points out, "Hacia 1925 éste era el mayor punto de divergencia entre el surrealismo y las otras tendencias vanguardistas: el automatismo y la importancia atribuida al aspecto inconsciente de la creación literaria" ["In 1925

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<sup>30</sup> "El poeta conoce el eco de los llamados de las cosas a las palabras, ve los lazos sutiles que se tienden las cosas entre sí, oye las voces secretas que se lanzan unas a otras palabras separadas por distancias inconmensurables, hace darse la mano a vocablos enemigos desde el principio del mundo, los agrupa y los obliga a marchar en su rebaño por rebeldes que sean, descubre las alusiones más misteriosas del verbo y las condensa en un plano superior, las entretreje en su discurso, *en donde lo arbitrario pasa a tomar un rol encantatorio*" ["The poet knows the echo of calls from things to words, he sees the subtle links that connect words to each other, he hears the secret voices that they give to other words separated by immeasurable distances, he makes words that have been enemies since the start of the world shake hands, he put them in groups and forces them—no matter how unruly they are—to travel in herds; he discovers their most mysterious allusions, condenses them on a higher plane, and interweaves them in his speech, *where the arbitrary assumes an enchanting role*"] (Huidobro *Obras completas* 1297; emphasis added).

this would prove the principal point of divergence between Surrealism and the other avant-garde movements: automatism, and the importance it attributed to the unconscious aspect of literary creation”] (“Huidobro y el Surrealismo” 77). In explicating the importance of unarticulated thought—‘*la pensée parlée*’—and the power of the subconscious to link distant realities (*Manifestes* 37), Breton felt the need to capture these unusual images, and elaborated his own technique of automatism and automatic writing. As a *creacionista* poet, Huidobro naturally objected to the secondary role Surrealism assigned to the artist’s conceptualization process and creative act. “En el momento inicial del surrealismo, para Breton el artista ni es creador, ni descubridor; es simplemente un medio: el estado onírico produce el poema” [“For Breton, in the initial moment of Surrealism, the artist is neither creator nor discoverer, he is only a medium: the oneiric state produces the poem”] (de Costa “Huidobro y el Surrealismo” 79). By contrast, in *Creacionismo* and *Nonsense* the artist effects a juxtaposition of distant realities through conscious manipulation.

Appearing in 1925, the year after the publication of Breton’s first manifesto and *Poisson soluble* [*Soluble Fish*, 1924], *Tout à coup*—Huidobro’s fourth book of poetry in French—provides what could be regarded as an ironic yet ludic response to Surrealism. The very title of the work alludes to the surprise, dislocation or disintegration caused by something unexpected, an important effect of Surrealism. And little more than the title serves as a guidepost for the reader, for like *Poisson soluble*, *Tout à coup* contains exactly thirty-two untitled poems.<sup>31</sup> In the first, Huidobro begins by drawing our attention to the problematic of chance: “Les deux ou trois charmes des escaliers du/ hasard sont incontestables” [“The two or three charms of the stairs of/ chance are indisputable”] (*Obra* 681). Yet the uncertain number of charms effected by chance

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<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, these are the only untitled poems Huidobro published during his lifetime.

hints that the role it plays is in fact eminently contestable, and disputable. And Huidobro's use of an anagram in the line ("charmes" ["charms"] for "marches" ["steps"])<sup>32</sup> seems anything but haphazard or unconscious.<sup>33</sup> In many other poems from *Tout à coup*, Huidobro employs an arbitrary rhyme, thus surprising the reader by playfully linking words without any apparent semantic connection.

Both *Poisson soluble* and *Tout à coup* employ generally coherent syntax to ease readers at first into contemplation of an image, and then startle and confuse them when the images suddenly acquire Surreal dimensions. Let us now consider the first sentence of *Poisson soluble*:

Le parc, à cette heure, étendait ses mains blondes au-dessus de la fontaine  
magique

[The park, at this time of day, stretched its blond hands over the magic fountain]

(Breton *Manifestes* 51; *Manifestoes* 77).

As Sydney Lévy explains, "we thus have at the outset a relationship similar to a metaphor (the park is like a woman), but which goes beyond it establishing total confusion or, as Breton would call it, a dissolution of elements into each other. By the time we reach the end of the first sentence another structure appears to complicate matters even further: the idea of the 'la fontaine magique' was already present in the first part of the sentence; as the spouting of the fountain resembles, especially at dusk or dawn, the offered hands" (29). Seemingly arbitrary

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<sup>32</sup> My deepest gratitude to Dr. Sydney Lévy for this astute observation, related to me at his home in May of 2006.

<sup>33</sup> René de Costa rightly notes some "ambivalence" on the part of Huidobro with regard to the role of chance in his art (*Careers* 101). In his *Manifeste manifestes*, the poet, in spite of his general tone of censure with regard to Surrealism, seems to almost make a concession to Breton's technique: "Évidemment, le hasard peut faire des choses... mais aussi il peut faire d'autres... Il ne faut pas accorder plus d'importance à l'élément *imprévu* qu'à n'importe quel autre élément de la poésie" ["Obviously, things can be made by chance... but they can also be made in other ways... it isn't necessary to accord more importance to the *unforeseen* than to any other element of poetry"] (*Obra* 1345; *Manifestoes* 73).

juxtapositions disguised in conventional syntax have a similarly startling, disorienting effect on the reader in *Tout à coup*. The first stanza of poem “30” reads

Madame il y a trop d’oiseaux

Dans votre piano

Qui attire l’automne sur une forêt

Épaisse de nerfs palpitants et de libellules

[Lady there are too many birds

In your piano

Dragging autumn over a thick

Forest of palpitating nerves and dragonflies] (Huidobro *Obra* 711; qtd in Guss

71)<sup>34</sup>

After the first line, each successive verse only further distorts the image evoked by the lines prior.<sup>35</sup> As in *Poisson soluble*, readers of *Tout à coup* may become increasingly confused by the surprising surreal images as they progress through the text. In this way, the conventional syntax leads the reader to an existence that is “ailleurs” [“elsewhere”], to a kind of *surreality* (Breton *Manifestes* 74; *Manifestos* 47). De Costa observes that Huidobro’s “studied discontinuity of the Cubist system gives way here to a word flow that is syntactically supportive of what is semantically subversive. Altering just a single term in a seemingly predictable word pattern creates a disjunction that takes the reader by surprise” (*Careers* 99). (As we shall see, this procedure has much in common with Nonsense, which Roger B. Henkle calls a “rigidly

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<sup>34</sup> This translation of Huidobro’s poem “30” from *Tout à coup* was done by Geoffrey Young.

<sup>35</sup> If “oiseaux” [“birds”] were changed to “rossignols” [“nightingales”] for instance, the distance between the juxtaposed elements [i.e. “rossignols” and “piano”] would not be nearly as great, since the song made by both could serve as a readily recognizable semantic link; instead, the poem’s elusiveness produces what for some may be a mystifying effect.

controlled anarchy, in a straightjacket of conventional verse forms and rhyme schemes” [116].) While Huidobro himself cared more for reason than rhyme, his mode in *Tout à coup* nonetheless resembles that of Nonsense. “By slipping the unconventional into otherwise conventional contexts,” de Costa explains, “the poet eases the reader into the realm of the extraordinary, momentarily making it seem plausible” (*Careers* 99-100).

Using conceptual tools provided by phenomenological psychopathology (the study of secondary states of consciousness), Marta Rodríguez S. of Madrid’s Complutense University conducted a series of studies to interpret the poetic delirium described by Breton and Huidobro in their respective manifestos. In her book *Delirio y metáfora [Delirium and Metaphor]*, published in 2000, she argues that Breton’s experience as an assistant in the psychiatric hospital of Saint Dizier and Huidobro’s time as a student of psychology and parapsychology at La Sorbonne may have significantly informed their understanding of poetic delirium, as both in their manifestos tend to reflect a modern conception of the brain and are quite close to recent cognitive theories. Whereas Breton’s idea of psychic automatism reflects the functioning of the brain in a pre-delirious state, Huidobro’s theory of a ‘superconscience’ corresponds to delirium proper, she posits. Delirium, she contends, is an aesthetic principle common to the modes of production of both Surrealism and *Creacionismo*. Thus, Rodríguez explains, Surrealism and *Creacionismo* are two aesthetics which contradict each other in their methods but are reunited in their effects (100).

It merits pointing out that Huidobro, in his critique of Surrealism, “no condenó la estructura de la imagen surrealista sino su origen” [“did not condemn the structure of the Surrealist image, only its origin”] (de Costa 79). His fundamental belief in the idea of artist as creator naturally forced him to draw objection to Breton’s theories in the first *Manifeste*



regarding the origin of the work of art. Both Breton and Huidobro admired the image borne of a gossamer link between two distant realities. “It is clear,” Eric Sellin considers, “if we may pursue the comparison, that should the poles of the image be too far removed, no commutation or arc occurs, and the image is absurd or at best intentionally contradictory” (115). Yet an image borne of such a gossamer link—one perhaps invisible to the audience—was new, frequently surprising, and in accordance with Apollinaire’s theory of the “L’Esprit nouveau”; it brought together not just distant realities, but disparate aesthetics: those of Surrealism, *Creacionismo*, and Nonsense.

#### “El Simple Sport de los Vocablos”: *Altazor*’s Metalinguistic Game

In *Altazor*, Huidobro voluntarily creates Nonsense by playing with signification, divesting language of definite meaning, and inventing words himself. It merits pointing out that the Nonsense operations do not begin in earnest until the third canto, after the ludic prose poem of the preface, the lengthy exposition of the first canto, and the homage to the poet’s muse in the second.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, as Hey has noted, the final canto, while approaching Carroll’s

“Jabberwocky” in terms of its radical illegibility, might best be described as the deliberate

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<sup>36</sup> Even Huidobro’s dismissal of Christianity assumes a playful tone. “Adiós hay que decir adiós / Adiós hay que decir a Dios” [“Good-bye one must say good-bye / Good-bye one must say to God”] (IV, 239-40). Jaime Concha notes that the poet’s allusion to Genesis in the preface is also “puro ludismo, ejercicio y voluntad del juego” [“sheer play, practice and volition of the game”] (qtd in Huidobro *Obra* 1592):

Hice un gran ruido y este ruido formó el océano y las alas del océano.

Este ruido irá siempre pegado a las olas del mar y las olas del mar irán siempre pegadas a él, como los sellos en las tarjetas postales.

.....  
Después tracé la geografía de la tierra y las líneas de la mano.

Después bebí un poco de cognac (a causa de la hidrografía)

[I created a great crashing sound and that sound formed the oceans and the ocean waves.

That sound will be stuck forever to the waves of the sea and the waves of the sea will be stuck forever to that sound, like stamps to a postcard.

.....  
Then I etched the geography of the earth and the lines of the hand.

Then I drank a little cognac (for hydrographic reasons)] (Huidobro *Altazor* 56; Weinberger 5).

transcription of unadorned sound. Nonetheless, the Nonsense of the middle cantos is the mechanism through which the poet transforms language; it stands as perhaps the epic's most impressive experiment and achievement. In these cantos, Huidobro employs a panoply of Nonsense devices that playfully pry apart linguistic conventions. A veneer of arbitrariness disguises the poet's purpose, which, should we venture a guess, is none other than to revive verse by compiling a catalog of its creative possibilities. In Canto III he speaks of his sport:

Y puesto que debemos vivir y no nos suicidamos

Mientras vivamos juguemos

El simple sport de los vocablos

De la pura palabra y nada más

Sin imagen limpia de joyas

(Las palabras tienen demasiada carga)

[And since we must live and not kill ourselves

As long as we live let us play

The simple sport of words

Of the pure word and nothing more

With no images awash with jewels

(Words carry too much weight)] (III, 142-47)

Altazor's sport of words, however, proves more elaborate and subversive than simple. As Alan Schweitzer points out, "el poeta no rehuye los excesos de un lenguaje extravagante" ["the poet does not shy away from the excesses of an extravagant language"] (419); Huidobro's epic poem—or *antipoem*—may be effectively read as a metalinguistic creation, in which traditional poetry is soundly rejected and grammar itself dissolves, phonologically, morphologically,

syntactically and semantically into pure sound. George Yúdice observes that “En cada una de estas zonas Huidobro explota las reglas de producción lingüística hasta destruir su funcionamiento” [“on each of these levels, Huidobro exploits the rules of linguistic production to the point of destroying their function”] (190). Yet throughout his elaborate experiment with language, Huidobro retains his playfulness (Ana Pizarro reminds us that his tone remains “fundamentalmente juguetón” [“fundamentally playful”] [*Sobre* 11]) whilst contriving, or conjuring, an avant-garde tour de force that functions as “un resumen y un summum de todas las rupturas posibles” [“a summary and an encyclopedia of all possible ruptures”] (Yúdice 203).

In *Altazor*, Huidobro creates a character made of language itself, whose fall (“del mar a la fuente” [“from the sea to the source”]) signals a call for a new form of poetic expression, a break from the banal styles and hackneyed images of the past (I, 54). As with much of modernist and avant-garde art, his is an aesthetic carved out of cataclysm. Like his contemporaries, Huidobro felt the need to abandon linguistic norms and conventional modes of writing, which had accomplished little in the way of new forms, and had at any rate done nothing to forestall the onset of war. “[...] en este año de 1919/ Es el invierno/ Ya la Europa enterró todos sus muertos/ [...] se me cae el dolor de la lengua” [“In this year 1919/ It is winter/ Europe has now buried all its dead {...} Pain falls from my tongue”] (I, 113-15, 224).<sup>37</sup> The “simple sport de los vocablos” in essence is a cathartic exercise, a playful way of exorcising the demons that had begun to haunt the Western world. “Let’s not kill ourselves,” the poet seems to say, “but forget for a moment the dangerous games of our leaders, and return to child’s play.” After the grave tragedy of the Great War, a fresh approach to literature was needed, fittingly epitomized by Huidobro in the laughter, language and play of children. Huidobro’s “idea of poetry as sport,” writes Cecil Wood, “does

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<sup>37</sup> Begun in or around 1919, the first edition of *Altazor* did not appear until 1931 (Madrid: C.I.A.P.).

not indicate the mere use of *jitanjáfora*, but refers to the ‘ocio lúdico’ [‘playful leisure’] of creation.<sup>38</sup> Such creation was to serve the purpose of providing a satisfaction, a therapy, a means of escape from the anguish which Altazor in his fallen state had come to symbolize” (207). Huidobro sought a new form of expression, one that might extricate man from the modern dilemma: “Liberación, ¡Oh! si liberación de todo / De la propia memoria que nos posee” [“Freedom Oh yes freedom from everything/ From the memories that possess us”] (I, 290-91). The poem however, set in space, removed from the reaches of Earth’s atmosphere, for the most part sidesteps the battle of the Allies and the Central Powers, addressing instead the power of words. It is a poem about language that wages war on convention, signification and trite expression.

The transformation of language into Nonsense occurs through ludic attacks on both syntax and semantics, and the playful hijacking and colliding of morphemes. Though a pioneer in poetic sport, Huidobro in his disregard for common syntax was not without his modernist precursors. In his *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* [*Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*] (1912), Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) declared “Bisogna distruggere la sintassi, disponendo i sostantivi a caso, come nascono” [“it is necessary to break apart syntax and arrange nouns at random, in the way that they are born”].<sup>39</sup> Pierre Reverdy’s article “Sintaxis,” published in April of 1918 in *Nord-Sud*,<sup>40</sup> echoes Marinetti’s proclamation: “Pour un art nouveau

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<sup>38</sup> “*Jitanjáfora*,” which has no precise equivalent in English, can be loosely defined as a verse, phrase or expression made up primarily of words that are invented and largely devoid of meaning.

<sup>39</sup> After his first ride in an aeroplane, Marinetti “felt the ridiculous absurdity of the old syntax inherited from Homer. A furious need to liberate words, liberating them from the prison of the Latin sentence!” (qtd in Weinberger *x*).

<sup>40</sup> L.C. Breunig notes: “With Reverdy, Huidobro helped to found the review *Nord-Sud*. Although only four years Huidobro’s senior, Reverdy acted as his mentor, translating his early work and guiding him towards the cubist style” (195).

une syntaxe nouvelle était à prévoir; elle devait fatalement venir mettre dans le nouvel ordre les mots dont nous devons nous servir. Les mots eux-mêmes devaient être différents” [“A new art demanded a new syntax, one that inevitably arranged the words we use in new ways. The words themselves had to be different”] (81-82).<sup>41</sup> In *Altazor*, Huidobro comically proposes resuscitating language by exploding syntax entirely:

Todas las lenguas están muertas  
 Muertas en manos del vecino trágico  
 Hay que resucitar las lenguas  
 Con sonoras risas  
 Con vagones de carcajadas  
*Con cortacircuitos en las frases*  
*Y cataclismo en la gramática*  
 [All the languages are dead  
 Dead in the hands of the tragic neighbor  
 We must revive the languages  
 With raucous laughter  
 With wagons of cackles  
*With circuit breakers in the sentences*  
*And cataclysm in the grammar]* (III, 121-27, emphasis mine)

Federico Schopf perceives a similarity between *Altazor*'s proclamation and that of Apollinaire:

“De manera equivalente a la de Apollinaire en ‘La Victoire,’ el poeta altazoriano proclama muertas todas las lenguas ‘en manos del vecino trágico,’ esto es, de los poetas que repiten

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<sup>41</sup> Translation courtesy of Dr. Warren F. Motte.

inútilmente fórmulas gastadas” [“In the same way that Apollinaire does in ‘La Victoire,’ the poet of *Altazor* proclaims all the languages dead ‘in the hands of the tragic neighbor,’ i.e. in the hands of the poets who uselessly repeat hackneyed formulas”] (7). Schopf likewise notes the ludic aspect of the poet’s proposal: “Su propósito es resucitarlas—rehacerlas, recrearlas—desde la risa y el juego” [“His intention is to revive them—redo them, recreate them—through laughter and play”] (7). With respect to syntax, however, only occasionally do we see true violations. Yúdice notes that in *Altazor* “La verdadera ruptura de la sintaxis se logra muy raramente” [“True breaches of syntax are rarely achieved”] (199). More often, as is the case in *Tout à coup* and in much of surrealist prose, we have a word flow that is syntactically supportive of what is semantically subversive. Nonetheless in places Huidobro does interrupt syntax, such as Canto VI, where he eliminates verbs altogether: “Ala ola ole ala Aladino/ El ladino Aladino Ah ladino dino la” (VI, 39-40). Invoking the legendary character from the children’s story *Arabian Nights*, “Aladino” [“Aladdin”], “whose lamp held the genie that made all things possible,” Huidobro evokes the infinite possibilities of *Altazor*’s new means of expression and alludes to his incantatory power as poetic necromancer (Wood 230). Wood observes how “the word ‘Aladino’ is then broken down, and used in its new form to refer to a new language (‘ladino’), whose potential is indicated by a further decomposition of the word into ‘Ala,’ ‘ola,’ etc., suggesting the freedom of flight and the vastness of the sea” (230). And while this decomposition might appear arbitrary childish whimsy, the particular words the poet chooses have meaning not only in Spanish but in Arabic: “Ala” (Spanish: “wing”; Arabic: “God”); “Ola” (Spanish: “wave”; Arabic: “greatest”),<sup>42</sup> thus augmenting the potential ambiguity of the line.

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<sup>42</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Leila Baradaran Jamili for this observation.

Huidobro's unhinging of semantics is twofold, involving play with the signification of extant words and also the creation of new words. In both cases his ludic transgressions assume the character of Nonsense. With respect to lexical invention, Huidobro creates both portmanteaux and neologisms. If, as Altazor laments "Las palabras tienen demasiada carga" ["Words carry too much weight"] (III, 147), innovative wordplay can free language from the encumbrance of accumulated connotations:

Empiece ya

La farandolina en la lejantaña de la montaña

El horimento bajo el firmazonte

Se embarca en la luna

Para dar la vuelta al mundo

Empiece ya

La faranmandó mandó liná

Con su musicuí con su musicá

[Crank it up

The farandolin in the hillaway farsides

The hearizon under the hovens

Is boarding the moon

To go round the world

Crank it up

The faranmandole that manned a linn

With its musicoo with its musical] (V, 476-483)

While the roots of the simple portmanteau words in these lines may be easy to unearth (e.g. “lejantaña de la montaña” [a shuffling of *lejanía de la montaña*], “horimento bajo el firmazonte” [a recombination of *firmamento bajo el horizonte*]), the particular meaning and reason for the amalgamations remains elusive, and therefore the “tension between divergence and synthesis of meaning”—to apply Tigges’ criterion for a nonsensical portmanteau—is not quite resolved. Nor is our grasp on the neologisms (“farandolina,” “faranmandó,” “liná,” “musiquí,” musicá”) any less slippery. Yet whereas isolated fragments of *Altazor* might seem inscrutable if read alone, through the context of the poem as a whole they acquire the glimmer of meaning. In regard to the lines quoted above, Hahn writes “Aunque el fragmento citado utiliza las pirotecnias verbales propias del ‘Nonsense,’ y leído fuera de contexto bien pudiera parecer ‘sin sentido,’ ese pasaje y otros semejantes adquieren un determinado sentido dentro del ámbito global de *Altazor* y su utopía” [“Though the excerpt cited utilizes the verbal pyrotechnics typical of ‘Nonsense,’ and if read out of context might well seem to ‘lack sense,’ this passage and other similar ones acquire a particular meaning within the total sphere of *Altazor* and its utopia”] (5). While Hahn does not offer his own interpretation of that meaning, which I would suggest seems quite general and not particular at all,<sup>43</sup> Hey posits that the Nonsense of *Altazor* is an attempt to reinvigorate language (155), an idea that is consonant with Altazor’s precept “Hay que resucitar las lenguas” [“We must revive the languages”]. The poet himself has already announced his intention of making ludic sport: by playfully creating new words, Huidobro lessens the semantic weight of language and in doing so lightens the mood of the poem, as “lejantaña de la montaña” [“hillaway

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<sup>43</sup> Hahn considers that “las razones por las que este pasaje y otros análogos están presentes en *Altazor* no son las mismas que movían a Edward Lear y a Lewis Carroll” [“the reasons why this passage and others like it are present in *Altazor* are not the same ones that actuated Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll”] (“sentido” 5), yet does not specify what he believes those reasons to be. I would agree Huidobro’s reasons are indeed different from those of his nineteenth-century progenitors: his focus is the metapoetics of creation. His general approach nevertheless is the same as theirs: ludic.



farsides”] itself sounds more sprightly and less somber than “lejanía de la montaña” [“hillside faraway”]. In another passage, Hey notes how Huidobro deliberately uses Nonsense to twist and ambiguate meaning:

Sin hacer caso de los meteoros que apedrean desde lejos

Y viven en colonias según la temporada

El meteoro insolente cruza por el cielo

El meteplata el metecobre

El metepiedras en el infinito

Meteópalos en la mirada

[Never minding the meteoroids that pelt from afar

And live in colonies according to the seasons

The insolent meteoroid crosses the sky

The meteojoid the meteotoid

The meteovoids in the infinite

The meteonoid in a glance] (IV, 287-92)

With “meteoro” as his point of departure, Huidobro unwinds a string of lexical inventions. Though “no existe ninguna relación etimológica” [“no etymological connection exists”] between the Spanish suffix “-oro” and the Spanish word “oro” [“gold”], Hey explains, we are able to follow the game in the next line when the conjurer replaces the suffix “-oro” with the words for other metals—“plata” [“silver”] and “cobre” [“copper”] (152). With “El metepiedras” the magician starts to stagger the mind, using a singular article with a plural ending to evoke other potential significations for the new word, possibilities he has in effect already hinted at through a form of the verb “apedrear” [“to throw stones at”] in the first line of the sequence (152). By the

time we reach “*Meteópalos*,” we have no article preceding the neologism, which could be read as a noun, a verb in the indicative or even a verb in the imperative. As Hey points out, “La sintaxis de este pasaje ya tiene una enorme ambigüedad potencial gracias a la presencia del *Nonsense*, y nos es casi imposible establecer una sola interpretación de esta línea” [“The syntax of this passage now has an enormous potential ambiguity thanks to the presence of *Nonsense*, and it’s virtually impossible for us to establish only one interpretation of this line”] (152).<sup>44</sup> With circuit breakers in his lines, Huidobro reduces the semantic charge of words, essentially heeding Reverdy’s call to use new words in the service of a new art, and following Marinetti’s bidding to break apart syntax, albeit arranging the nouns only ostensibly at random. The multiplication of potential meanings lightens the mood, and in so doing Huidobro has played with Nonsense to liberate and levitate language for the creation of a new modernist aesthetic.

In addition to inventing new words, Huidobro also plays with the signification of existing ones using a variety of Nonsense techniques in *Altazor*. Antipoet, magician, demiurge—*Altazor*—as Huidobro’s alter ego, regards poetry as sport, a way of evading the constraints of language. Wood writes that “according to Huidobro, the use of language in its traditional form had been exhausted in the writing of poetry” (205). María del Carmen González-Cobos Dávila and María Luisa García Nieto Onrubia draw a similar conclusion in their essay “Destrucción y creación en *Altazor*: El hallazgo de la palabra mágica” [“Destruction and Creation in *Altazor*: The Discovery of the Magic Word”]: “la palabra cotidiana se ha desgastado de tal manera que su potencia expresiva llega a ser insuficiente para poder cumplir con la tarea que le asigna

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<sup>44</sup> What Hey writes of Huidobro’s portmanteaux could likewise be applied to those of Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*: “la tarea de precisar el significado exacto de cada palabra creada pueda ser innecesaria. El medio puede ser el mensaje; un juego intelectual que produce una satisfacción sencilla para el lector” [“the task of determining the exact meaning of each created word might be unnecessary. The medium could be the message; an intellectual game that results in a simple pleasure for the reader”] (151).

Huidobro. La literatura ha abusado y extraído todo el jugo al vocablo” [“the quotidian word has become worn out in such a way that its expressive power has become inadequate for performing the function that Huidobro assigns it. Literature has overused words and emptied them of substance”] (78). Consider, for example, Huidobro’s transformation of the rose, traditional symbol of beauty, fragility and transience. In the preface *Altazor* encounters the Virgin “sentada en una rosa” [“seated on the rose”] who instructs him “Sé triste, más triste que la rosa, la bella jaula de nuestras miradas y de las abejas sin experiencia” [“Be sad, sadder than the rose, that beautiful cage for glances and inexperienced bees”] (57). Yet as the language of the poem becomes more experimental, the metaphors grow more daring and the rose loses its usual signification:

Después del corazón comiendo rosas  
 Y de las noches del rubí perfecto  
 El nuevo atleta salta sobre la pista mágica  
 Jugando con magnéticas palabras  
 Caldeadas como la tierra cuando va a salir un volcán  
 Lanzando sortilegios de sus frases pájaro  
 [After the heart-eating roses  
 And the nights of the perfect ruby  
 The new athlete leaps on the magic track  
 Frolicking with magnetic words  
 Hot as the earth when a volcano rises  
 Hurling the sorceries of his bird phrases] (III, 108-13)

The prosopopoeia and the new athlete, with his magnetic words and sorceries of bird phrases, are but a prefiguration of what the poet has in store for us. By the end of the fourth Canto, a linguistic breakdown and general disintegration of grammar has begun. Huidobro himself emerges as the new athlete, and his poem the magic track upon which he plays with words and conjures a sort of bird language, in his quest for “una música de espíritu” [“a music of the spirit”] (I, 605). The magic track includes nonsensical necromancy, as shapes shift and boundaries dissolve; Tigges describes such “imprecision or mixture” as a Nonsense “device” (57). In the fifth Canto Altazor himself metamorphoses into a rosebush, and the rose becomes a flowering projection of his new language:

Ahora soy rosal y hablo en lenguaje de rosal

Y digo

Sal rosa rorosalía

Sal rosa al día

Salía al sol rosa sario

[Now I'm a rosebush speaking rose language

And I say

Go rose rosarosaray

Grow rose this day

Go rosary rose that rows away] (V, 515-19)

Stewart posits that “In each fiction where the author becomes a character and the sense of reading and writing become implicated in the text, the boundary between fiction and reality—between text and context—is dissolved and reformed, and the interpreted, fictive nature of reality is emphasized” (111). While the identification of Huidobro with Altazor has been duly noted, as

has the poet's explicit inclusion of himself in the text ("Aquí yace Vicente antipoeta y mago" ["Here lies Vicente antipoet and magician"] [IV, 282]), the transformation of the poetic voice here points to the problem of "identity," which Tigges holds to be a "crucial element in Nonsense" (78), and corresponds to what Stewart calls nonsensical "play with boundaries" in narrative fiction (85-112). Tigges considers that "In establishing an identity, one by definition avoids both nothingness and everythingness. But in nonsense identity is highly insecure and erratic, and changes take place frequently" (78); in the fifth Canto, protean Altazor—thaumaturge himself like Huidobro—creates and assumes new identities by virtue of his words alone, and the poetic voice changes accordingly, as he transforms from "luciérnaga" ["firefly"] (504), to "rosal" ["rosebush"] (515), to "pequeño volcán" ["small volcano"] (521), to "pájaro" ["bird"] (532), to "mar" ["sea"] (541) and, finally, to "el rey" ["the king"] (589). "In Nonsense," Tigges writes, "a fictional reality is created through language, which simultaneously represents this reality" (86-87).<sup>45</sup>

Yet it is through the lexical invention and deliberate ambiguity characteristic of Nonsense that Altazor—or rather Huidobro—transforms signification and language itself. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure contends that "the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community" (648). Nonetheless, Huidobro, through his construction and configuration of neologisms and *jitanjáforas*, seems to achieve some degree of success in tweaking the established meanings of words. In the passage above, the juxtaposition of the Spanish *rosa* ["rose" or "pink"] with the

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<sup>45</sup> Referring to the theories of Winfried Nöth (as expounded in Nöth's book *Literatursemiotische Analysen zu Lewis Carrolls Alice-Büchern* [Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1980]), Tigges posits that the "anomalies" of Nonsense "can be created in various ways, namely by means of semiotic transformation, of non-differentiation of levels and of reciprocal determination of levels, especially the *determination of 'reality' through language (word-magic)*" (37; emphasis mine). Lisa Ede's theory of Nonsense similarly suggests how Altazor's 'reality' is in fact created through a Nonsense procedure: in her view nonsense is "a world of words come to life, a world whose insistently self-defined reality is almost completely linguistic" (6).

neologism *sario* adds another connotation to this word so overused in traditional poetry. One may think of a *rosario* ["rosary"], maybe of a Hindu woman stepping out in the sun with a rose in her sari, or perhaps a pink *saurio* ["saurian"]. Whether Huidobro had intended to give his verse a reptilian dimension we can only speculate, yet what is certain is that meaning has been altered. Playfully. In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida asserts that "writing [...] must necessarily operate from already constituted units of signification, in the formation of which it has played no part" (95). Let us once more consider the verse "Sal rosa rorosalía" ["Go rose rosarosaray"]. Here the word *rosa*, after the magician Huidobro commands it to leave ("Sal"), indeed leaves behind its traditional signification. Is this prosopopoeia? For what reason might one ask a flower to leave? Perhaps for the purpose of changing its meaning. Huidobro is working from—and toying with—the "already constituted units of signification." Altazor himself in the first Canto informs us "Anda en mi cerebro una gramática dolorosa y brutal / La matanza continua de conceptos internos" ["A brutal painful grammar walks through my brain / The continual massacre of internal concepts"] (278-79). Could "Sal rosa rorosalía" be a kind of *cortacircuito* ["circuit breaker"] for an overused symbol, a ludic resuscitation of poetic language? If we remember Huidobro's famous cry: "Por qué cantáis la rosa, ¡oh poetas! / Hacedla florecer en el poema" (*Obra* 391), we might be inclined to agree with Jorge Schwartz's argument that Huidobro "recupera tradições esclerosadas (como a imagem da rosa) para renová-las em notáveis composições lingüísticas, chegando a uma etapa mais madura e radical em *Altazor*" ["picks up threadbare conventions {such as the image of the rose} in order to renew them in notable linguistic compositions, arriving at a more mature and radical stage in *Altazor*"] (*Vanguardia* 24).

In the aforementioned verse from Canto V, we may also observe how the jitanjáfora *rorosalía*, itself devoid of meaning, acquires some degree of intelligibility from the words which precede it (“Sal rosa”). Julia Kristeva postulates that “el significado poético a la vez remite y no remite a un referente; existe y no existe, es al mismo tiempo un ser y un no-ser” [“the poetic meaning simultaneously refers and does not refer to a signified; it exists and does not exist, it is at the same time a being and a nonbeing”] (*Semiótica II* 64). In this verse the signifier, “rorosalía,” derives its meaning entirely from the text, with the words “Sal rosa” shaping our interpretation, although to make sense of the three words together we would be forced to consider the poem as a whole, as we have just done in the preceding paragraph. *Rorosalía*, of course, “es un no-ser” [“is a nonbeing”]; it exists only in the mind of Altazor. By constructing meaning through the text itself, Huidobro succeeds not only in liberating the rose from its traditional poetic connotations, but also in granting some degree of autonomy to his poem. An objective common to much of avant-garde art, Alvaro Salvador suggests, was the creation of “an exclusively artistic realm, constructed only in accord with the laws of art, with no reference to external reality” (90). In Nonsense, as in this passage, language creates its own reality. Ana Pizarro distinguishes in *Altazor*

una voluntad de avanzada hacia la disolución del referente, propio de las proposiciones teóricas de los manifiestos de propuesta mayor en el camino de la vanguardia. [...] hay un diferente funcionamiento de la significación—cuya aspiración suprema la constituye el despojo de toda referencialidad [“a principal movement toward the dissolution of the referent, in accordance with the theoretical propositions of the major manifestos of the avant-garde. {...} there

is a different operation with regard to meaning itself, which ultimately aspires to divest itself of all referentiality”] (“América” 33).

And yet, however syntactically complex or meticulously constructed the verse “Sal rosa rosalia” may seem upon careful inspection, to the casual reader it still bears the appearance of a child’s simple utterance. In this way a façade of childlike arbitrariness disguises the poet’s cleverly created Nonsense and subtle play with signification.

Aside from reinvigorating stale images such as the rose, Huidobro employs Nonsense techniques to toy with the meaning of trite allusions. Perhaps the most salient case in point springs into view in the fifth canto, where an unorthodox litany of one hundred and ninety-three “molinos” [“mills”] (here truncated for reasons too obvious to mention) work to confound and beleaguer the reader:

Jugamos fuera del tiempo

Y juega con nosotros el molino de viento

Molino de viento

Molino de aliento

Molino de cuento

.....

Así eres molino de viento

.....

El paisaje se llena de tus locuras

[We play outside of time

And the windmill plays along

Windmill station



Mill of inspiration

Mill of narration

.....

And so you are windmill

.....

The landscape fills with your madness] (V, 239-42, 431, 437)

Especially in Spanish letters, a reference to a mill often is an allusion to what is perhaps the most celebrated scene in *Don Quijote*—that of the mad knight-errant charging windmills he believes to be giants. Given that the first and last mills on Altazor’s list are indeed wind-powered, we can hypothesize that Huidobro is expressing exhaustion and playing with this most hackneyed of all allusions by sporting an exhaustive, playful list of mills. The madness of the one hundred and ninety-three different mills echoes the madness of the banal and that of Quijote himself. The words “tus locuras” at the end of the series could thus be interpreted as disparaging the author of such conventional allusions, or poking fun at Quijote himself, whose craziness at charging windmills, the poet might be suggesting, is akin to the madness of infinitely repeating stale formulas. With the exhaustive list Huidobro himself subversively plays with tradition, exploring new possibilities for the iconic image. The implications of the game are thematic inasmuch as they are morphological: here, Yúdice observes, “se exhibe el poder creativo del lenguaje en el nivel morfológico” [“he demonstrates the creative power of language on a morphological level”], referring to the cavalcades of mills the poet assembles, simply by order of their suffixes (194).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Yúdice writes: “Aquí Huidobro lleva *ad absurdum* uno de los mecanismos de la creatividad del lenguaje, el de las *solidaridades sintagmáticas*, como lo denomina de Saussure. Es importante notar que Huidobro está señalando las *posibilidades* casi infinitas del lenguaje al reproducir esta operación mecánica tan larga” [“Here Huidobro applies *ad absurdum* one of creative devices of language, that of *syntagmatic solidarities*, as de Saussure calls it. It is important to note that Huidobro is calling attention to the near-infinite *possibilities* of language through his reproduction of this lengthy mechanical operation”] (193; Yúdice’s emphasis).

That the play occurs “out of time” further steepens it in Nonsense; it is anticausal, removed from cause and effect, verging on the infinite.

In his playful attacks on established meaning and convention, Huidobro employs various Nonsense “procedures” (to use Stewart’s term), or elements of what Tigges dubs the “Nonsense repertoire,”<sup>47</sup> every one of which flirts with, dances about, or unabashedly avails itself of the arbitrary. These include “serializing” (such as listing and counting) (Tigges 59), and “infinite causality” (as in concatenation or chain verse) (Stewart 123; 138). A list such as the aforementioned series of mills assumes the manner of Nonsense because of the implied arbitrary relationship between each of its elements; to use Stewart’s phrasing, it involves “a play with the possibility of infinity” (116). In Tigges’ view, “A nonsensical series is a series without cause and effect” (58). As Alain Robbe-Grillet has pointed out, “Causality and chronology are really the same thing in traditional narrative. The succession of facts, the narrative concatenation as is said today, is based entirely on a system of causalities: what follows phenomenon A is a phenomenon B, the consequence of the first; thus, the chain of events in the novel” (5). While *Altazor* of course is no novel or traditional narrative, it nonetheless describes a progressive linguistic transformation—a progression that is playfully interrupted by a variety of lists that threaten infinity.<sup>48</sup> “If we think of the list as occurring in time as well as in space,” Stewart suggests, “we

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<sup>47</sup> In Huidobro’s poetry, as Nonsense is not transformed from common sense but created out of nothing, I find Tigges’ terms “Nonsense device” and “Nonsense element” more appropriate; his poetry contains “elements” of the Nonsense “repertoire” popularized by Lear and Carroll, and Huidobro uses various “Nonsense devices” [inventing words, listing, mirroring, playing with syntax, concatenation, toying with causality, etc.] in the creation of his art. Furthermore, as Hahn has noted, much of his poetry in *Altazor* and *Ver y palpar* can be said to bring together “los rasgos típicos” [“the typical features”] of the Nonsense literature of Lear and Carroll (5).

<sup>48</sup> With regard to the intentionality of the playful interruptions in the text, Mireya Camurati writes “Ya observamos que desde el ‘Prefacio’ el poeta mantiene un control para evitar que las imágenes obtengan fuerza de descripción, o se organicen en secuencia narrativa. Esto lo consigue con los mecanismos del absurdo, el humor, la irreverencia, o con técnicas aplicadas directamente a los elementos constitutivos de la imagen” [“We can observe that from the ‘Preface’ the poet takes pains to avoid allowing the images to gain descriptive power, or become organized in

begin to imply a causal relationship between the events of the list that is arbitrary and nonsensical” (138). Such is the case in the lines cited above from Canto V: Huidobro arbitrarily lists mills, concerned perhaps more with the suffixes and sound of the string than with anything else. Furthermore, his list is “antihierarchical,” a characteristic typical of a Nonsense series, in which, Stewart explains, “Elements are added one to another without a significance to their order [...] Those at the top are no more important than those at the bottom” (136). Antihierarchical and anticausal, the list in theory could go on forever; this Nonsense is thus a product of self-perpetuating play, Altazor’s “clave del eterfinifrete” [“key to infiniternity”] (IV, 335).

One particular variation on this kind of “play with infinity” (Stewart 116-45) that merits our attention is a Nonsense device Huidobro employs both in *Altazor* and *Ver y palpar*, which Stewart dubs “infinite causality” (138-43). In the following sequence, which can be described as “concatenation or chain verse,” content is subordinated to form, and the reader’s attention is drawn to the artifice itself. As with Huidobro’s unceasing series of mills, the list “present[s] a crisis of closure” (Stewart 139), and causality is rendered arbitrary. The first and perhaps most striking appearance of this device in *Altazor* comes in Canto III:

Basta señora arpa de las bellas imágenes

De los furtivos como iluminados

Otra cosa otra cosa buscamos

Sabemos posar un beso como una mirada

Plantar miradas como árboles

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narrative sequence. He succeeds in his aim with devices of the absurd, humor, irreverence and with techniques he applies directly to the constituent elements of the image”] (*Poesía* 158). Although she does not refer to Nonsense specifically, the devices she mentions share characteristics similar to those of Nonsense and perform functions akin to those of Nonsense devices: they interrupt potential narrative sequences and inhibit images from describing a vivid, imaginable external reality.

Enjaular árboles como pájaros

Regar pájaros como heliotropos

Tocar un heliotropo como una música

.....

Etc. etc. etc.

[Enough lady harp of the beautiful images

Of clandestine illuminated “likes”

It’s something else we’re looking for something else

We already know how to dart a kiss like a glance

Plant glances like trees

Cage trees like birds

Water birds like heliotropes

Play a heliotrope like music

.....

Etc. etc. etc.] (III, 65-72, 104)

In the opening lines of this sequence, the poet announces his wish for “otra cosa” [“something else”]—something other than the images and trite similes of traditional poetry: in what follows he introduces a chain of Nonsense verse, marked by stark, arbitrary juxtapositions and an ending that is absent. Such a series, Stewart considers, “can threaten infinity by open form, by the addition of an unrestricted number of elements. Any list that ends in *etc.* threatens infinity in this way” (135). In all varieties of “play with infinity,” she expounds, “play has an infinite number of elements with which to make infinite use” (127). In Nonsense, Tigges writes, arbitrariness “often features as a linking device [...] and may lead to the collocation of the most unexpected objects

or events” (70); the passage above serves as an example in point. Yúdice notes Huidobro’s fondness for *Maldoror*<sup>49</sup> and observes that in these lines, “Huidobro pone al descubierto un procedimiento (la comparación) que ya había sido violentado en la obra de Lautréamont con yuxtaposiciones tan impertinentes como: [...] ‘beau comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d’une machine à coudre et d’un parapluie’” [“Huidobro exposes a procedure that had already been exploited in the work of Lautréamont with such absurd juxtapositions as: {...} ‘fair as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing machine and an umbrella’”] (186-67; Lautréamont 193).<sup>50</sup> In Yurkievich’s view, Huidobro “concierta un encadenamiento de comparaciones disparatadas” [“orchestrates a chain of absurd comparisons”] here “para establecer al verbo sus poderes mágicos” [“to establish the magical powers of the verb”] and that the poetic prestidigitator “se esfuerza por extraerle a las imágenes y a las metáforas todo su poder semántico” [“is striving to extract from the images and metaphors all their semantic power”] (93). By transgressing the bounds of traditional, comprehensible metaphors, Huidobro effectively reduces the semantic charge of language. And while his aim may be serious, his manner is playful. As he casually collocates unrelated words or “distant realities,” his list acquires the character of a Nonsense chain device. Like Lautréamont and Apollinaire, his

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<sup>49</sup> In his manifesto “Yo encuentro,” Huidobro writes: “[...] encuentro muy hermoso la siguiente cita del mismo Lautréamont: ‘Beau comme la loi de l’arrêt de développement de la poitrine chez les adultes dont la propension à la croissance n’est pas en rapport avec la quantité des molécules que leur organisme s’assimile’” [“{...} I find quite beautiful the following citation from the same Lautréamont: ‘The law of arrested development governing the adult bosom is beautiful, given the propensity for growth, but it does not accord with the quantity of molecules that the organism assimilates’”] (*Obra* 1343; *Manifestos* 69).

<sup>50</sup> Yúdice directs attention to Lautréamont’s avowedly disingenuous metaphor in *Maldoror*: “En la estrofa 12 del Canto I se hace alarde de la falta de veracidad en la comparación y por lo tanto se atrae la atención a su condición de artificio literario: ‘Toutes ces tombes, qui sont éparées dans un cimetière, comme les fleurs dans une prairie, *comparaison qui manque de vérite*, sont dignes d’être mesurées avec le compas serein du philosophe’” [“In the twelfth strophe of Canto I he points out the lack of truth in a comparison and as a result calls attention to its condition as a literary device: ‘All these tombs that are scattered about the cemetery like flowers in a meadow (*a simile lacking truth*) are worthy of being measured by the serene orientation of the philosopher’”] (186-87; Lautréamont 51; Yúdice’s emphasis).

aesthetic provokes rupture and surprise; while a departure from poetic tradition to be sure, his art stands apart from much of the avant-garde, ironically, by simple virtue of its Nonsense, which in and of itself serves only to accentuate the quintessential avant-garde traits of surprise and rupture.

By the time we reach *Altazor's* seventh and final canto, all signification has successfully and unfortuitously been extirpated: only sounds remain. For Octavio Paz, it is a triumph: “[...] cada una de las palabras o pseudopalabras que dice Altazor (o el pájaro *tralalí*) es un objeto vivo y que, por serlo, ha dejado de significar. El lenguaje del canto final de *Altazor* ha alcanzado la dignidad suprema: la del pleno ser. La superioridad del ser sobre el sentido es, desde Platón, radical: el sentido depende del ser” [“{...} every one of the words or pseudo-words that Altazor (or the *tralalí* bird) utters has attained the supreme dignity: that of full being. The superiority of being over meaning is, according to Plato, radical: meaning is dependent on being”] (13). Such an absence of sense, however, does not entrench the epic in the canon of literary Nonsense: unlike Carroll and Joyce, Huidobro has created ambiguity not by multiplying potential senses but by eradicating all meaning from language. Paz astutely notes the aspects in which Huidobro’s technique in *Altazor* coincides with and differs from that of Carroll:

El procedimiento favorito de Huidobro en los últimos cantos de *Altazor* no es otro que el de Lewis Carroll [...] Sin embargo, hay una diferencia esencial entre Huidobro y el poeta inglés [...] Lewis Carroll se propuso aumentar hasta el máximo la pluralidad de significados de la palabra [...] El resultado fue una mayor riqueza de sentidos, no una anulación del significado. James Joyce extremó el método y aumentó la comprensión de las palabras (diez o quince en una) para multiplicar los sentidos [...] La tentativa de Huidobro se despliega en la dirección

precisamente contraria: en los últimos cantos de *Altazor*, el translenguaje del poeta tiende a convertirse en un idioma hecho de vocales y una que otra consonante, como la *ele*, en la que cada forma verbal ha dejado de significar. No acumulación de sentidos: progresivo ocaso de significaciones

[Huidobro's favorite procedure in the final cantos of *Altazor* is none other than that of Lewis Carroll {...} Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between Huidobro and the English poet {...} Lewis Carroll sought to bestow the greatest plurality of meanings on a word {...} The result was a greater wealth of significations, not an obliteration of meaning. James Joyce maximized the method and increased the comprehension of words (ten or fifteen in one) in order to multiply the senses {...} Huidobro's enterprise moves in precisely the opposite direction: in the final cantos of *Altazor*, the poet's idiom tends to be a language made of vowels and just a consonant or two (such as the letter *l*) in which no verbal form carries any meaning. There is not an accumulation of senses, but a gradual decline of signification] (13).

The “decline of signification” in *Altazor*'s final pages described by Paz differs so radically from the Nonsense of Carroll that Hey has commented that the Nonsense of Huidobro's epic is almost exclusive to the middle cantos (149). The absence of meaning at the end is no accident. Not only has its absence been foreshadowed in the prior cantos, it has been deliberately, consciously and perhaps a bit deceptively created, through the poet's conscious and canny attempt to let the arbitrary assume an enchanting (and misleading) role. As we sit at our respective dissecting-tables analyzing the text of *Altazor*, we are confronted with and at times even confounded by its ambiguities. “Mientras bailamos sobre el azar de la risa” [“As we dance on the chance of

laughter” (V, 473)], we can be sure that Huidobro’s own “sewing machine” and “umbrella,” his words and his juxtapositions, are not all aleatory and arbitrary. Like the sounds of the bird *tralalí* repeated in the seventh canto,<sup>51</sup> or the sequence of birds whose names reproduce a familiar musical scale,<sup>52</sup> clear indications of intentionality are scattered throughout the poem. While Yurkievich contends that the poet “Se puede desafiar el azar, buscar en lo aleatorio y arbitrario [...] los matrimonios deslumbrantes” [“He can defy chance, and search for scintillating connections in the aleatory and arbitrary [...]”] (91), in *Altazor* Huidobro doesn’t so much defy chance but rather manipulates its appearance and effects for the purpose of reviving and lightening language. Lightening language of its semantic weight runs contrary to, and to an extent precludes the possibility of revealing scintillating connections. But in the verbal play of *Ver y palpar* we can find both the qualities of Nonsense and the creative coruscations of a new kind of total poetry.

#### Metamorphosing Metaphor: Nonsense in *Ver y palpar*

Whereas Reverdy calls the *image* “une création pure de l’esprit” [“a pure creation of the mind”] (73; qtd in Breton *Manifestoes* 20), Huidobro in his manifesto “Estética” [“Aesthetics”] proclaims the *poem* should be “una pura creación del espíritu” [“a pure creation of the mind”] (*Obra* 1374). A significant distinction, as Huidobro by the time of his composition of *Ver y palpar* [*To See and Feel*] had come to place greater value on independent literary creation than on meaning itself. His own aesthetic of *Creacionismo* had moved beyond the bold metaphors of

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<sup>51</sup> See *Altazor* (IV, 334-39 and VII, 1-3); in the final section of this chapter I specifically address the bird’s return.

<sup>52</sup> “Pero el cielo prefiere el rodoñol/ Su niño querido el rorreñol/ Su flor de alegría el romiñol/ Su piel de lágrima el rofañol/ Su garganta nocturna el rosoñol/ El rolañol/ El rosiñol” [“But the sky prefers the nighdongale/ Its favorite son the nighrengale/ Its flower of joy the nighmingale/ Its skin of tears the nighfangale/ Its nocturnal throat the nighsongale/ The nighlangale/ The nightingale”] (IV, 193-99; emphasis mine).



his image-based, cubistic poems and at times approached a new kind of quasi-surrealistic Nonsense verse that deemphasized visually.<sup>53</sup> In essence, he sought not a descriptive but a creative art that acts in its totality as a representation of its subject. While *Ver y palpar* itself is a heterogeneous volume of poems composed over a period of ten years (1923-33), and begun during the time Huidobro was composing *Altazor*,<sup>54</sup> our focus in this section is on a few of its ludic and experimental “Poemas Giratorios” [“Revolving Poems”] that employ Nonsense devices to lend his art an arbitrary appearance. By availing himself of Nonsense elements in *Ver y palpar*, Huidobro tests the elasticity of the image, obfuscating any potential semantic connection between its juxtaposed realities, and in so doing lays an emphasis on form. If, as Tigges reasons, “nonsense must be approached literally, whereas the language of poetry is approached figuratively,” then the Nonsense devices here certainly serve Huidobro’s purpose (42). In using them to divest individual images of meaning, Huidobro forces us either to read each poem

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<sup>53</sup> In spite of its reduced optic dimension, *Ver y palpar* seeks to heighten awareness of the modes of perception. Belén Castro Morales observes that for Huidobro, “las fases psicológicas del proceso creador se ordenan desde la percepción del mundo a través de los sentidos abiertos a toda información recóndita [...] hasta la elaboración de un mundo nuevo, humanizado por el poeta tras haber procesado desde el inconsciente hasta la conciencia una poesía que, tendiendo a lo absoluto, electriza e ilumina, descubre esencias y correspondencias y entrega su alquimia original en versos que no deben ser ‘sonsonetes de la oreja’ ni nebulosas vaguedades, sino construcciones orgánicas. Idea significativa, porque en *Ver y palpar* proliferan las alusiones a los cinco sentidos, y sinédoques como manos, ojos y oreja se diseminan y divagan por textos donde el yo poético se refiere a su contacto con el mundo y a la subjetividad de sus percepciones. El mismo título del libro cobra así sentido, y enfatiza la importancia que Huidobro da en esos poemas al ‘ver’ y al ‘palpar’ como formas de apropiación subjetiva de la realidad” [the psychological stages of the creative process are arranged starting from a perception of the world through the five senses open to all hidden information {...} up to the elaboration of a new world, humanized by the poet after he has processed from the unconscious to the conscious a poetry which, reaching for the absolute, electrifies and illuminates, discovers essences and correspondences and delivers its original alchemy in verses that should be neither ‘buzzings of the ear’ nor nebulous, vague expressions, but rather organic constructions. A significant idea: for *Ver y palpar* abounds in allusions to the five senses; and synecdoches like hands, eyes and ears are scattered throughout texts in which the poetic I makes reference to his contact with the world and the subjectivity of his perceptions. The title of the book itself thus acquires meaning, and underscores the importance Huidobro gives in these poems to ‘seeing’ and ‘feeling’ as ways of subjectively appropriating reality”] (1522).

<sup>54</sup> Cedomil Goic notes that “*Altazor* encuentra [...] algunos ecos ulteriores. El más importante de ellos se halla en su libro *Ver y palpar* (1941), que le sigue en el orden de publicación de sus libros poéticos, diez años después, pero cuya cronología de composición corresponde a los años 1923-33” [“*Altazor* hears [...] a few posterior echoes. The most important of them is in [Huidobro’s] book *Ver y palpar* (1941), which follows it in order of publication of his books of poetry, ten years later, but the chronology of its composition corresponds to the years 1923-33”] (qtd in Huidobro *Obra* 722).

literally, or to consider each one as a whole, and explore the possibility of a hermetic meaning. The arbitrary appearance and Nonsensical aspects of the content thus compel us to consider the frame of each piece and its potential metapoetic qualities. Within the autonomy of play action, inside its self-contained sphere, which is completely removed from the realm of reality, the demiurgic founder of *Creacionismo* can enjoy what Eugen Fink, theoretician of ludics, describes as “an almost limitless creativity” (24).

As he invokes not verisimilitude but the veneer of chance, Huidobro often sports Nonsense devices to steep his poetry in magic. Such is the case with “Fuerzas naturales” [“Natural Forces”]:

Tres miradas

para cambiar la niña en

volantín

.....

Cinco miradas

para volver a encender las estrellas

apagadas por el huracán

.....

Ocho miradas

para cambiar el mar

en cielo

Nueve miradas

para hacer bailar los

árboles del bosque

[Three glances

to change the girl into

a kite

.....

Five glances

to relight the stars

blown out by the hurricane

.....

Eight glances

to change the sea

into sky

.....

Nine glances

to make the trees in the wood

dance] (944; *Selected* 163)<sup>55</sup>

Once again, as he does with the virtually endless list of “molinos” [“mills”] in *Altazor*’s fifth canto, Huidobro employs the Nonsense device of seriality. He begins with one glance, and stops at ten, but given the absence of any clear connection between the items listed, the series seems as if it could go on indefinitely: another instance of self-perpetuating play, or “play with infinity,” to use Stewart’s designation (116-43). In Viguers’ opinion, Nonsense “takes great pleasure in long lists of things that have nothing to do with each other” (141). Stewart posits that in seriality, “when the focus is placed on the counting, on the ‘form’ and not on the ‘thing’—not on the

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<sup>55</sup> This translation is the work of David Ossman and Carlos Hagen.

everyday-life classification of content—the play with infinity tends to nonsense, for the focus has turned to pure form and the self-perpetuation of counting for counting’s sake” (134). In “Fuerzas naturales,” with no salient metaphors drawing our attention, and the content consisting of a list, we are compelled to consider the poem in its totality. Many of Huidobro’s critics have noted the possibility of a metapoetical interpretation here—namely, that the natural forces herein expressed might in fact be those of “Vicente antipoeta y mago,” proclaiming his powers as demiurge and mage. Wood considers that Huidobro “masterfully uses the Word to produce new creations, valid and beautiful *per se*. He reemphasizes [...] the poet’s facility in creating new elements with the ‘relative’ look of his eyes which see things as he desires. In ‘Fuerzas naturales,’ he uses the power of his look to ‘play’ with the various manifestations of nature” (252). While de Costa and David Bary have argued that *Ver y palpar* falls outside the canon of Huidobro’s true *creacionista* works, the speaker here indeed seems the selfsame *creacionista* who in 1914 asserted his Emersonian creative powers and declared himself master over nature. Yúdice notes echoes of Rimbaud and the anti-mimetic quality of the poem—“en la tradición de *Une Saison en Enfer* o *Les Illuminations*, de un imaginismo completamente inverosímil” [“in the tradition of *Une Saison en Enfer* {*A Season in Hell*} or *Les Illuminations* {*Illuminations*}, of a completely unbelievable power of imagining”] (222), furthermore observing that “Huidobro siempre espera que el poema tenga las mismas fuerzas orgánicas, si bien autónomas, que la naturaleza. De ahí, pues, un título como ‘Fuerzas mentales’ [sic] para un poema que se organiza sobre la base de la numeración” [“Huidobro always wishes for his poems to have the same organic—albeit autonomous—forces as nature. Wherefore, then, a title such as ‘Mental Forces’ {sic} for a poem that is organized on the basis of numeration”] (241). Notwithstanding Yúdice’s minor error regarding the poem’s title, his observation is valid and insightful. Here we appear to have a

deliberate creation of the artist who proposed “Faire un POÈME comme la nature fait un arbre” [“Make a poem the way nature makes a tree”]: the poem in its entirety serves as an illustration of its subject; the natural forces could be those of the creator who exercises his powers over nature (*Obra* 417). Yurkievich comments that in *Ver y palpar* Huidobro adopts “montajes más abstractos, el arreglo numérico, la composición geométrica. ‘Fuerzas naturales’ es un poema de construcción paralela y de rigurosa progresión aritmética” [“more abstract montages, numerical arrangements, geometrical compositions. ‘Natural Forces’ is a poem of coordinate construction and rigorous arithmetic progression”] (109). With regard to Huidobro’s exacting precision in this poem and the other “Poemas Giratorios” of *Ver y palpar*, it bears repeating that Carroll himself was a mathematician and that mathematical precision is a quality common to Nonsense. In her biography of Edward Lear, Vivien Noakes proposes a definition of Nonsense verse, which bears at least a superficial resemblance to that of Surrealist poetry, in the sense that both typically exhibit an uneasy balance or tension between orienting and disorienting elements: “perhaps it could be said that incongruity of characters, situations, or words, plus a predictable, stable element such as numbers, choruses, alliteration or, paradoxically, an insistence upon the correct use of words, equals nonsense” (223). In “Fuerzas naturales,” the incongruous elements of the list, coupled with the familiar sequence of numbers, lend a Nonsensical quality to the poem’s content, forcing us to consider it holistically as we shape our interpretation.

Yet perhaps the orienting element that Huidobro incorporates with the greatest frequency in his Nonsense devices is the anaphora. Indeed the quintessential anaphoral poem in *Ver y palpar* is “Ronda” [“Round”], which could be said to best exemplify the *creacionista*’s attempt at a “total” poetry. The poem can be described as “total” in the sense that it is self-contained and

complete in and of itself, and does not rely on literary conventions or metaphoric associations for its meaning or importance. Here is the text in its entirety:

El viento pasea a la luna

Y las banderas caen sobre el mar

Golpea golpea

La luna abre la puerta

Entrad señoras entrad señores

Las velas caen sobre el mar

Y la montaña cargada de cadenas

Espera aquí abajo el juicio final

El viento pasea al ojo

Y los cabellos caen sobre el mar

Golpea golpea

El ojo abre la puerta

Entrad señoras entrad señores

Las voces caen sobre el mar

Hay un insecto milenario

Que frota sus nervios en la vida

El viento pasea al corazón

Las lágrimas caen sobre el mar

Golpea golpea

El corazón abre la puerta

Entrad señoras entrad señores

Los dedos caen sobre el mar

El mar cae en el vacío

El vacío cae en el tiempo

Y yo cazo conejos blancos

En la palma de tu mano

[The wind carries the moon

And the flags fall upon the sea

Knock knock

The moon opens the door

Come in ladies come in gentlemen

The sails fall upon the sea

And the mountain laden with chains

Awaits the last judgment here below

The wind carries the eye

And the locks fall upon the sea

Knock knock

The eye opens the door

Come in ladies come in gentlemen

The voices fall upon the sea

There is an ancient insect

Rubbing its nerves in life

The wind carries the heart

The tears fall upon the sea

Knock knock

The heart opens the door

Come in ladies come in gentlemen

The fingers fall upon the sea

The sea falls into emptiness

The emptiness falls into time

And I am hunting white rabbits

In the palm of your hand] (962)

If, as Hahn has suggested, Huidobro had declared the poet's vocation to create with the intention of recovering the original sense of the Greek word *poiesis*, which literally means "creation" ("Altazor, el canon" 14), then it would not be far-fetched to surmise that the *creacionista* here elaborated a poem that recaptures the original sense of the Greek word *anaphora*, which literally means "to carry or bring back," or "to repeat." In alternating stanzas, the wind carries the moon,



eye, and heart, just as the poem itself transports the reader. The repetition and repetitive movement created by the anaphora give the poem a circular quality, making it, in essence, round. Thus the form and action of the poem serve to suggest its subject. What Stewart writes of *Finnegans Wake*, where the last sentence is completed by the first sentence, proves equally true here: “the reader is caught up in the game, and the author stands outside the circle, controlling the machinery of circularity” (133). In her view, “Circularity is the shape of play” for it is “an activity centered in itself that is both reversible and repeatable” (133); she calls it another type of “play with infinity” for it is another “method for extending discourse” indefinitely and thus a Nonsense device (131). Hahn, without mentioning the anaphora specifically, notes how Huidobro “despliega todos los mecanismos clásicos del ‘Nonsense’” [“employs all the standard Nonsense devices”] in “Ronda”—in particular, “la circularidad” [“circularity”]—and how the structure of the poem represents its subject (“sentido” 8):

Desde el mismo título da un primer paso hacia la esfera del ‘Nonsense,’ al apuntar hacia ese tipo de canción que los niños danzan, al mismo tiempo que cantan. A menudo la ronda tradicional posee una estructura circular, que repite la figura que realizan los niños tomados de la mano. La ‘Ronda’ de Huidobro también tiene la estructura de un círculo, recuperando así el sentido original de la palabra ‘ronda’ [From the very title {the poem} takes a first step toward the sphere of Nonsense, by pointing to a type of song children dance and sing to. Often the traditional “ronda” has a circular structure, which is echoed in the circle the children make as

they hold hands. Huidobro's 'Ronda' also has the structure of a circle, recovering thus the original sense of the word "ronda"] (7).<sup>56</sup>

While circularity has been repeatedly linked to Nonsense, repetition itself has also been recognized as a Nonsense device. In Stewart's view, "Repetition endows the object with self-generation and self-perpetuation" (121). Indeed, if "Ronda" intends to address the cyclical nature of creation, Huidobro's use of repetition (and the anaphora, with its repetitive nature) is no doubt felicitous. "Ironically," Stewart explains, "repetition, whose nature is seen as ongoing, can only achieve this quality of ongoingness by 'swallowing' the ongoing quality of context, by holding context *still*" (120-21; Stewart's emphasis).

Huidobro further draws our attention to the form of the poem and suffuses it with timelessness in the final stanza through his employment of the Nonsense device of "concatenation or chain verse": "Los dedos caen sobre el mar/ El mar cae en el vacío/ El vacío cae en el tiempo."<sup>57</sup> His use of this variety of *mise-en-abyeme* is particularly significant here, for it sets up the stunning surprise of the conclusion: "Y yo cazo conejos blancos/ En la palma de tu mano." Prior to the penultimate line, and especially in those lines immediately preceding it, the poem has been wholly abstract, in large part supernatural, and the first person not once has been used. For the speaker then to inform us he has been hunting white rabbits is startling enough, yet the play with dimension in the final line renders us astonished—or at the least, a mite perplexed:

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<sup>56</sup> Although the Spanish word "ronda" is often translated as "round" in English, it bears mention here that "ronda" in Spanish is also used to refer specifically to children holding hands, dancing and singing in a circle; perhaps the title of this poem might be best rendered as "Circle."

<sup>57</sup> "Concatenation or chain verse," a form of "nonsense causality" (Stewart 139), which we looked at in the preceding section on *Altazor*, Huidobro clearly shows a fondness for: it appears three times in *Altazor* (III, 68-103; IV, 232-36; V, 602-09) and in four other poems from *Ver y palpar* ("Más allá y más acá" ["Further Away and Nearer"], "Ronda de la vida riendo," ["Song of the Laughing Life"], "En" ["In"] and "Fin de cuentas" ["End of the Story"]).

What sort of rabbit-hunting takes place in the palm of a hand? Whose hand can accommodate not one—but several—rabbits, at the same time allotting space for venatics? Moreover, the hand is *your own*—“tu mano.” A literal reading thus is rather impossible, yet the absence of any defined context makes a figurative one quite indefensible as well. Yet if we adopt Holquist’s view of Nonsense as “a closed field of language in which the meaning of any single unit is dependent on its relationship to the system of the other constituents,” we can see how metafiction—or, in this case, metapoetry—and Nonsense are closely connected (150). While Holquist offers his definition directly subsequent to a discussion of Carroll’s *Hunting of the Snark*, a poem teeming with neologisms, the absence of a defined context in “Ronda” forces us to examine the poem holistically and search for a hermetic meaning, even though we understand each of its individual words. If metaphor and Nonsense both constitute a violation of the laws of semantics, it is, in Tigges’ view, “only the (re)contextualization that saves metaphor as such from being non-sensical” (34). Huidobro’s use of concatenation, circularity and repetition in this poem hinder the development of an intelligible context that might give it clear meaning. For Hahn, “hay un cierto parentesco entre esos conejos blancos que son cazados en los últimos versos de ‘Ronda,’ y el Conejo Blanco de *Alicia en el país de las maravillas*” [“there is a certain kinship between these white rabbits that are hunted in the final lines of ‘Ronda,’ and the White Rabbit of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*”] (“sentido” 9). Just what that kinship might be however remains somewhat nebulous, excepting that all of the rabbits in question appear in a text with significant Nonsense elements. I would like to suggest another interpretation, one certainly not incompatible with Hahn’s: the speaker in the poem seems to be playing the role of a magician (or an anti-poet/magician perchance) before an audience, performing tricks with the wind, and soliciting audience participation (“Entrad señores entrad señoras”; “Golpea golpea”); the white rabbits

could then be an allusion to the famous trick in which an enchanter produces rabbits from a velvety black top hat.<sup>58</sup> In any case, the Nonsense elements in the poem contribute to its magical effects, giving an appearance of arbitrariness to the final lines and thereby inspiring surprise, leaving us to marvel at the wonder of Huidobro's creation.

Arbitrariness for Hahn is the most salient Nonsense element in *Ver y palpar* (5). Whereas as we saw in *Tout à coup* Huidobro occasionally appears to invoke the arbitrary to address the problematic of chance—and possibly poke fun at Breton's postulate of *écriture automatique*, in *Ver y palpar* he seems less interested in voicing criticism of Surrealism than in appropriating and tweaking the method to serve his own purposes.<sup>59</sup> Yet Huidobro does address the role of the arbitrary in his art, most notably in “Sin por qué” [“Without Reason”], a poem that playfully “balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning”—to use Tigges' chief criterion for Nonsense (47). Following is the complete text:

Arum arum  
 Por qué he dicho arum  
 Por qué ha venido a mí sin timonel  
 Y al azar de los vientos  
 Qué significa esta palabra sin ojos  
 Ni manos de estrella  
 Tú las has puesto en mi cabeza  
 Es la noche que la trajo a mis oídos

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<sup>58</sup> Colin McDowell notes that the first known magician to pull a rabbit out of a hat was Louis Comte in 1814.

<sup>59</sup> An exception may be “Panorama encontrado o revelacion del mundo” [“Panorama Discovered, or Revelation of the World”] the sole prose poem in the collection, which Camurati considers could be a parody of Surrealist automatic writing (*Poesía* 181-86). Nonsense, according to Tigges, cannot be a parody, “since it is the prime characteristic of nonsense not to make a ‘point’ or draw a moral, not to satirize, to ridicule or to parody, and not even primarily to entertain” (49-50).

La noche de mi oído abierto a los peligros  
Después de un largo camino de bosques en marcha  
Y el sueño pronto  
Pronto prontooo

Arum arum  
Arum en mi cerebro  
Arum en mis miradas  
Toda mi cabeza es arum  
Mis manos son arum  
El mundo es arum  
Arum el infinito  
Arum me cierra el paso  
Es un muro enorme ante mis pies

Arum del sufrimiento girando en su molino  
Arum de la alegría  
De mi fatiga y de mis vertigos  
Quiero morir  
He naufragado al fondo de mi alma  
En algo repentino y sin raíces  
Arum me mata  
Dulce asesino tan gratuito

Como el canario de alta mar

Arum arum

[Humm humm

Why have I said humm

Why has it come to me without a helmsman

And at the whim of the winds

What does this word mean without eyes

Or a star's hands

You have put it into my head

It is the night that brought it to my ears

The night of my ears open to dangers

After a long road of marching forests

And prepared sleep

Sleep soon

Soon sooooo

Humm humm

Humm in my brain

Humm in my glances

My whole head is humm

My hands are humm

The world is humm

Humm the infinite

Humm closes off my path  
 It is an enormous wall in front of my feet  
  
 Humm of suffering turning in its mill  
 Humm of happiness  
 Of my fatigue and my dizziness  
 I want to die  
 I've shipwrecked at the depths of my soul  
 On something sudden and rootless  
 Humm kills me  
 Sweet murderer so gratuitous  
 Like the canary of the high seas  
 Humm humm] (*Obra* 986-87; *Selected* 186, 188)<sup>60</sup>

Here it would appear that Huidobro is availing himself of the arbitrary for the express purpose of questioning the arbitrary. An express purpose however would endow the poem with sense, and hence diminish the significance of its Nonsense elements, most notably the neologism “arum” and the arbitrary itself. Yet the poem’s entire meaning—or lack thereof—hinges on the word “arum” [“hummm”], which itself has no meaning. So much so that “Arum arum,” the first and

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<sup>60</sup> This fine translation is the work of David Ossman and Carlos Hagen. N.b.: The translators have rendered Huidobro’s neologism “arum” as “hummm,” which for many Anglophones likely suggests some relation to the word “hum”; however, no such connection should be inferred: “hum” in Spanish translates alternately to “zumbido,” “zumar,” “tararear,” and “canturrear.” Yúdice notes ““Arum,” en francés e ingles, es una flor (‘cala’ en español). Huidobro, sin duda, no pudo no saberlo. No obstante, este sentido no entra para nada en el poema; dice explícitamente el poeta que la palabra le llegó al azar” [““Arum,” in French and English, is a flower {‘cala’ in Spanish}. Huidobro, without doubt, must have known so. Nonetheless, this sense is not included at all in the poem; the poet explicitly says that the word came to him by chance”] (238). Perhaps “arum” could be meant to suggest the German word “warum” [“why”], yet we have no knowledge indicating that Huidobro at the time of this composition had any degree of command over the German language (notwithstanding his later work as a war correspondent for the Allies in World War II, during which time he alleged to have stolen Hitler’s telephone).

final line, serves as the poem's parenthesis. Yúdice addresses the paradox, observing that in the final stanza "se hace hincapié otra vez en la gratuidad de la palabra absoluta, situación paradójica ya que la motivación estriba en la arbitrariedad pura y no en su integración en un sistema de relaciones que rige la composición" ["special emphasis is put on the gratuitousness of the absolute word—a paradoxical situation given that the motivation lies in the sheer arbitrariness and not in its integration in the system of relations that governs the composition"] (239). In this sense "arum" would be the agent of an insidious arbitrariness, the "sweet murderer so gratuitous," perhaps bending the volition of the speaker. Yurkievich draws a similar conclusion, yet stresses the poet's intentionality here: "Huidobro descubre y explota la arbitrariedad del signo lingüístico" ["Huidobro uncovers and exploits the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign"] (107). Not disclosing the meaning of the linguistic sign "arum" or offering intelligible metaphors, Huidobro instead exploits the word's arbitrariness, forcing us to focus on the text as a whole as we seek to decipher it. Yurkievich observes that in so doing, the poet "Intensifica la tendencia centrípeta del texto que lo impulsa a convertirse en discurso autónomo. Es decir, acentúa la tendencia formalista" ["intensifies the centripetal tendency of the text, causing it to become an autonomous discourse. In other words, he accentuates its formalist tendency"] (107). Referring to *Ver y palpar* more generally, Yurkievich notes how the particular language of the poet effects the text's removal from reality. In his estimation,

Huidobro no solo desgaja sus criaturas metafóricas del ámbito de la experiencia posible, hasta convertirlas en entidades que existen solamente en y por el lenguaje; también descalabra el sistema usual, introduciendo quiebras que rompen con la normalidad sintáctica, con la estructura de la frase canónica, con las relaciones, con las concordancias consideradas como normales



[Not only does Huidobro pluck his metaphoric creatures away from the ambit of possible experience, to the point of turning them into entities that exist exclusively in and through language; he also splits the usual system open, introducing cracks that break apart standard syntax, the structure of conventional phrases, and the connections and concordances considered natural] (107).

In many of *Ver y palpar*'s "Poemas Giratorios," however, Huidobro maintains mainly standard syntax while breaking the bounds of metaphor with Nonsense devices. In "Sin por qué," his incantatory reiteration of the neologism "arum" precludes the formation of comprehensible metaphoric images. At times we have one conceivable part of an image, but "arum" as the second part renders it void. (We know for example that "It ['arum'] is an enormous wall in front of my feet"; yet not knowing what "arum" is, we can only guess at what exactly the image might mean.) Caracciolo Trejo ventures that "arum" could be "un signo de lo infinito o lo desconocido o lo subterráneo" ["a sign of the infinite, or the unknown, or the subterranean"] and speculates that with the poem Huidobro "Se advierte el vértigo de un absoluto, tal vez la proximidad del precipicio del absurdo o el arribo a alguna otra frontera de nuestro ser. Y todo esto por imperio de esa presencia incomprensible, esa palabra—'arum'" ["warns us of the vertigo of the absolute, perhaps of our nearness to the precipice of the absurd, or of our arrival at some other frontier of our being. So much he accomplishes just through the sovereignty of that incomprehensible presence, that word—'arum'"] (122). Without a fixed meaning, the word opens itself up to a potential multiplicity of meaning; the poem would make sense if we substituted many other words—"love," "war," "madness," to name but a few—for "arum." Thus the arbitrariness of the empty signifier "arum" shrouds the poem in mystery.

Nonetheless Huidobro's use of the arbitrary here is deliberate. Like Carroll himself, who was known for his "compulsive orderliness"—(Holquist notes that the Nonsense pioneer "worked out a system for betting on horses which eliminated disorderly chance"), the founder of *Creacionismo* would insist on complete control over his creations (148). In the opinion of Castro Morales, what the poet brings into play here is "azar selectivo" ["selective chance"]: "Parece ser el azar selectivo el que practica Huidobro en sus poemas de *Ver y palpar*, y no el puro automatismo del primer surrealismo, aunque lo aleatorio y el subconsciente sean temas y fuente poética del libro" ["It appears to be selective chance that Huidobro is practicing in his poems of *Ver y palpar*, and not the pure automatism of the first Surrealism, even though the subconscious and the aleatory are themes in and the poetic inspiration for the book"] (1521). If we for a moment hazard the hypothesis that the speaker in "Sin por qué" is in fact Huidobro himself, and scrutinize the text for hints of metapoetics, perhaps we might reach a conclusion that the demiurgic poet distrusts that which comes to him "al azar de los vientos" ["at the whim of the winds"], that he has a certain distaste for the arbitrary, that it in fact disturbs and distresses him, that it kills him ["Arum me mata" {"Humm kills me"}] for it calls on him to cede control of his creation. Like automatism itself, "arum" operates without a helmsman— "en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison" ["in the absence of any control exercised by reason"] (Breton *Manifestes* 42; Breton *Manifestoes* 26). If we ventured such an interpretation, we could read the poem as perhaps representing Huidobro's relation to Surrealism. But of course it would be nonsense to impose a clear meaning where the absence of any clear meaning has been already established.

For Huidobro to cloak his elaborations of Nonsense in the semblance of the arbitrary is wholly consonant with the calls in his manifestos for "la gran síntesis" ["the great synthesis"]

(*Obra* 1370).<sup>61</sup> Pronounced the poet in his 1931 manifesto “Total”: “Queremos un ancho espíritu sintético, un hombre total, un hombre que refleja toda nuestra época, como esos grandes poetas que fueron la garganta de su siglo” [“We want an all-encompassing, expansive spirit, a total man, a man who reflects all of our epoch, like those great poets who were the throat of their century”] (1371). The mere mention of the “throat” at once recalls Huidobro’s statement from his “Manifeste peut-être” [“Manifesto Mayhaps”] (1925): “si le meilleur poème peut se faire dans la gorge, c’est parce que la gorge est le juste milieu entre le cœur et le cerveau” [“if the best poem can be made in the throat, this is because the throat is the midpoint between the heart and the brain”] (*Obra* 1361; *Manifestos* 105). Interpreted metonymically, the heart and brain can be seen as corresponding to the unconscious and conscious mind. Whereas the arbitrary might appear unreasoned or capricious, Nonsense and its devices always are the products of a conscious mind. As Huidobro himself expounded in a 1937 interview, “El poeta baja a las profundidades del alma, sube a la superficie y busca el contacto cósmico. He ahí las fuentes de la creación” [“The poet descends to the depths of the soul, rises to the surface and looks for the cosmic contact. Here is the source of creation”] (*Obra* 1640). For Huidobro, the great poets, those who are the throat of their century, possess the unique power to make such cosmic contact: “El poeta es el puente que va del universo al hombre” [“The poet is the bridge that extends from the universe to humankind,” ordained the *creacionista* in his 1935 manifesto “Estética” {“Aesthetics”}] (1374). And just as in “Total” Huidobro had called on the poet to reconcile dichotomies such as “La realidad contra el sueño, el sueño contra la realidad” [“Reality versus dream, dream versus reality”], in a few of *Ver y palpar*’s “Poemas Giratorios” (1369) he hints at the need for a synthesis of oppositions.

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<sup>61</sup> “Después de tanta tesis y tanta antítesis,” penned Huidobro in his manifesto “Total” [“Total”], “es preciso ahora la gran síntesis” [“After so much thesis and antithesis, it is time now for the great synthesis”] (*Obra* 1370).

One such composition, and perhaps the Nonsense piece *par excellence* of *Ver y palpar*, “Los señores de la familia” [“Members of the Family”] has attracted as much critical attention as any in the volume. Ludic in character, it features a host of traditional Nonsense elements and devices: arbitrariness, repetition, simultaneity, incongruity, even abnormality:

Los ojos contra los ojos

El espacio contra el espacio

Señor qué hora es

No puedo contestarle

Soy el sobrino de la luna

La nariz contra la nariz

La luna contra la luna

Señora qué día es hoy

Yo no puedo contestarle

Soy la hija del viento norte

La cabeza contra la cabeza

El viento contra el viento

Señor qué ciudad es está

Yo no puedo contestarle

Soy el padre del mar

La boca contra la boca

El mar contra el mar

Señora a dónde va este camino

Yo no puedo contestarle

Soy la prima del tiempo

La oreja contra la oreja

El tiempo contra el tiempo

Señor qué distancia tiene la vida

Yo no puedo contestarle

Soy el tío del cielo

Las voces contra las voces

La tierra contra la tierra

Los pies contra los pies

El cielo contra el cielo

La familia de mudos tiene sangre de violín

Sale con el pie derecho a las calles de nuestros paisajes

Corta la naturaleza con un puñal

Y se aleja sobre un ojo que se pierde en el espacio

[Eyes to eyes

Space to space

Sir what time is it

I can't tell you

I'm the moon's nephew

Nose to nose

Moon to moon

Lady what day is it

I can't tell you

I'm the north wind's daughter

Head to head

Wind to wind

Sir what city is this

I can't tell you

I'm the sea's father

Mouth to mouth

Sea to sea

Lady where does this road go

I can't tell you

I'm time's cousin

Ear to ear

Time to time

Sir how long is life

I can't tell you

I'm the sky's uncle

Voices to voices

Earth to earth

Feet to feet

Sky to sky

The family of mutes has violin blood

Steps out on the streets of our landscapes right foot first

Cuts nature with a dagger

And goes off on an eye lost in space] (*Obra* 957-58; Guss 169, 171)<sup>62</sup>

The poem engages all of what Eberhard Kreutzer deems to be the principal characteristics of Nonsense: “incongruence of a text leaving the expectations of sense unfulfilled, visual distortion of observed reality, and pseudo-logical connections, arising from a playful delight in abnormality” (qtd in Tigges 45). In addition, it employs the Nonsense device Stewart defines as “simultaneity,” which often involves a “juxtaposition of incongruous worlds” (156). Just as “the conversations of *Alice in Wonderland* move towards simultaneity and away from the direction and logic of everyday life,” the little dialogues in “Los señores de la familia” similarly upset our expectations of sense (156-57): “The nonsense conversations are continually halted by gaps in any common stock of knowledge, by a clash between members’ biographical situations, and by a systematic use of randomness rather than a purpose at hand” (157). Thus, any question posed in

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<sup>62</sup> David M. Guss translated this poem into English.

such an exchange will never receive a satisfactory reply. Not only are the replies arbitrary, so are the poem's rules of repetition, Yúdice has observed.<sup>63</sup> As is the case in "Ronda," content is subordinated to form. Such repetition and rearrangement corresponds to a Nonsense "operation" Stewart terms "arrangement and rearrangement within a closed field" and involves "a radical shifting of form away from its content" (171, 193). Camurati points out how the poem's playfulness reflects the autonomy of a game (having rules that are entirely its own) and the autonomy of its world from that of everyday reality:

Parece que Huidobro intentara utilizar aquí el sentido ritual y a veces de iniciación al misterio que poseen muchos juegos infantiles. En las interpretaciones más modernas del juego se valora la capacidad de liberación que éste denota, lo mismo que su coherencia interna conseguida mediante la sujeción a leyes que le son propias. También la capacidad de constituirse como un ente autónomo, como una estructura creada fuera de la realidad habitual

[It appears here that Huidobro is attempting to capture the rituality and the mysterious aspect of initiation that characterize many children's games. Today's scholars have praised the emancipative capacity of the game, as well as its internal coherence, which is achieved through subjection to a set of rules that are its own. Also they applaud its capacity to set itself up as an autonomous entity, as a structure created outside of everyday reality] (181).

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<sup>63</sup> In reference to some of Huidobro's more complicated elaborations in *Ver y palpar*, Yúdice notes "En otros poemas se fabrican formas estróficas complejas (y, como toda forma estrófica, arbitrarias) conforme a reglas especiales de entrelazamiento. En 'Los señores de la familia,' por ejemplo, los sustantivos del primer verso tienen que remitir a las partes del cuerpo, los del último verso a los elementos naturales que se repiten luego en el segundo verso de la siguiente estrofa" ["In other poems he fabricates complex stanzaic forms (which, like all stanzaic forms, are arbitrary) in accordance with special rules of interweaving. In 'Members of the Family,' for example, the nouns in the first line must refer to parts of the body, and those in the final line to elements of nature that reappear later in the second line of the following stanza"] (236).



With the poem's content seemingly devoid of intelligible images and meaning, the game itself prevails, and the poem's structure captures our attention. As in the other "Poemas Giratorios," writes Guillermo Sucre, "el principio constructivo vuelve a dominar [...] sobre la materialidad misma del lenguaje" ["the constructive principle again prevails over the very materiality of language"] (125). Moreover, the members of the family themselves, far from being flesh and substance, are wholly ludic, linguistic entities, of an ilk one might encounter in the Nonsense of Edward Lear. Hahn suggests that "estos señores de la familia existen única y exclusivamente por efecto del lenguaje: son seres verbales, que más bien parecen extraídos de la literatura infantil" ["these members of the family exist only because of language: they are verbal beings, who rather seem to have been borrowed from children's literature"] ("sentido" 7). What makes the poem so striking is the way it raises and dashes our expectations through standard Nonsense elements that first orient and then completely disorient us. Hahn comments on how "desde el título mismo el lector es instalado en el ámbito de la costumbre y de lo familiar, es decir, de lo sólito, con fórmulas de cortesía como 'señor' o 'señora,' para de inmediato ser desplazado hacia un orden insólito, que entra en conflicto con las premisas establecidas" ["from the very title readers are placed in the sphere of the usual and the familiar—i.e., of the ordinary, with forms of courtesy such as 'sir' and 'lady'—only to be moved immediately into an extraordinary realm, which comes into conflict with their established premises"] (7). From the quotidian familiarity of the title ("Members of the Family") to the final words ("lost in space") the poem is structured to systemically surprise us, as we are reft from the world we know and left in the realm of the uncanny.

## Losing Gravity in Ludic Space

As is the case with Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*, Huidobro's Nonsense poems from *Ver y palpar* seem to request a literal reading. What Michael Holquist writes of the *Snark* poem likewise holds true for "Los señores de la familia": "the work could only be perceived as what it was, and not some other thing" (147). Through his play with arbitrariness and repetition, Huidobro creates an autonomous world of Nonsense in the poem—"autonomous" in the sense that it defies explanation through the laws of external reality. Nonetheless, as in his other Nonsense poems and *Altazor*, this hermeticism does not preclude the possibility of the poems having meaning in and of themselves. In spite of Oscar Wilde's admonition "Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril" (8), I will again hazard a few conjectures here regarding what I see as an abstruse metapoetics. While in "Ronda" and "Fuerzas naturales" Huidobro offers overt, if recondite, references to creation itself, the founder of *Creacionismo* is subtler still in *Altazor* and "Los señores de la familia." In the latter, the "familia de mudos [...] Corta la naturaleza con un puñal/ Y se aleja sobre un ojo que se pierde en el espacio" ["family of mutes {...} Cuts nature with a dagger/ And goes off on an eye lost in space"] (*Obra* 958; Guss 171). Given that these are the lines of a poet who in his very first manifesto proclaimed "No he de ser tu esclavo, madre Natura; seré tu amo" ["I do not have to be your slave, Mother Nature; I shall be your master"] (*Obra* 1295), the description of an abnormal family who "cuts nature with a dagger" in a wholly anti-mimetic Nonsense poem might hint at the poet's own departure from realistic representation. That such an abstract family should thence "[go] off on an eye lost in space" could be a playful suggestion of what happens to the visual dimension of a poem when its subject is removed from the real world. Indeed we have come a long way from the image-based Cubist poetry of Huidobro's Parisian period. Like *Altazor*, the family of mutes vanishes in

theoretically infinite space: the poem offers us no pictorial point of reference at which to direct our gaze. The absence of a realistic visual dimension is typical of Nonsense, which as we have seen in this poem “hovers between presence of meaning (of whatever kind), especially of poetical sense [...], and its utter absence” (Tigges 109-110). In this way Wim Tigges distinguishes Nonsense from fantasy, noting that “[Tzvetan] Todorov explicitly excludes” the possibility of a meaning of poetical sense in his definition of literary fantasy.<sup>64</sup> Hahn, for his part, finds a principal characteristic of Nonsense to be its “autonomía de lo real” [“independence from reality”] as “no remite a nada exterior a ella” [“it does not refer to anything outside itself”] (“sentido” 4).

Likewise, in the final cantos of *Altazor*, looking for meaning is akin to hunting for a *snark*: if diligent, we may uncover the hint of a metapoetics, no more. In *Altazor*, as in *Ver y palpar*, writes Yúdice, we can observe the “desestructuración [...] de lo que suele considerarse ‘poético.’ Es decir, se rompe con el lenguaje figurado. A partir de *Altazor*, la mayor parte de las combinaciones lingüísticas en la poesía de Huidobro se tienen que leer literalmente, no hay alternativa” [“destructuring {...} of what used to be considered ‘poetic.’ In other words, it breaks with figurative language. From *Altazor* on, the majority of the linguistic combinations in Huidobro’s poetry have to be read literally; there is no alternative”] (220). In the final canto, not even a literal reading is possible; the “poetry” is purely sounds: “Ai aia aia/ ia ia ia aia ui/ Tralalí” [“Ahee aheeah/ eeah eeah eeah aheeah oohee/ Tralalee”] (VII, 1-3). Nonetheless, the

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<sup>64</sup> In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Tzvetan Todorov explains and gives precise definition to the genre of the fantastic: “In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, [...] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences this event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us [...] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25).

trace of a hermetic meaning can be deciphered by attentive readers who recall the end of the fourth canto: “El pájaro tralalí canta en las ramas de mi cerebro/ Porque encontró la clave del eterfinifrete/ Rotundo como el unipacio y el espaverso/ Uiu uiui/ Tralalí tralalá/ Aia ai ai aaia i i” [“The bird tralalee sings in the branches of my brain/ For I’ve found the key to the infiniternity/ Round as the unimos and the cosverse/ Oooheooo ooheoohee/ Tralalee tralala/ Aheeah ahee ahee aaheeah ee ee”] (IV, 334-39).<sup>65</sup> The singing of the bird in Altazor’s brain presents a happy contrast to his painful headache in the first canto, when “Anda en mi cerebro una gramática dolorosa y brutal” [“A brutal painful grammar walks through my brain”] (I, 278). By playing “El simple sport de los vocablos” [“The simple sport of words”] (III, 144), Altazor (and his poetic alter ego, Huidobro) thus moves further from the pains of the real world and the confines of poetic tradition, and closer to infinity and eternity. With “unipacio” [“unimos”] and “espaverso” [“cosverse”], Huidobro avails himself of a favorite recourse of Nonsense, the portmanteau. With “eterfinifrete” [“infiniternity”] he employs yet another, the palindrome. In this way, his play is both creative and suggestive. As Eugen Fink points out, play, which occasionally involves a “withdrawal from the real world” (25), is both “activity and creativity—and yet it is close to eternal things” (22). Yúdice considers that

El palíndromo ‘eterfinifrete’ es una verdadera clave no sólo porque reúne palabras claves del poema—éter = aire, espacio; fini = fin o infinito—sino porque encarna en su lectura reversible el dispositivo contradictorio (ascenso = descenso, destrucción = creación, etcétera) que rige el poema

[The palindrome ‘eterfinifrete’ is a true key, not only because it brings together key words in the poem—“éter” {ether} = air, space; “fini” = end or infinity—but

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<sup>65</sup> Weinberger’s departure from a verbatim translation here is significant: the Spanish “encontró” (literally “he [or “she” or “it”] found”) refers to the bird, not to the protagonist, Altazor.

also because in its reversible reading it embodies the contradictory mechanism (ascent = descent, destruction = creation, etc.) that governs the poem] (197).

Whereas a ludic approach to art was by no means uncommon among the Parisian avant-gardists, Huidobro's playful manipulation of Nonsense elements in *Altazor* and *Ver y palpar* distinguishes his work from that of the other poets. Despite the sometimes aleatory appearance of his poems, Huidobro's occasional metapoetical references and aesthetic treatises—in particular his polemical objection to Surrealism in *Manifeste manifestes*—inform us that his is a consciously artistic creation. “Je nie absolument l'existence de l'arbitraire en art” [“I categorically deny the existence of the arbitrary in art”], the poet wrote in 1925 (*Obra* 1343; *Manifestos* 68). Notwithstanding Huidobro's decided eagerness to highlight the originality of his work, he did admit to its seeming arbitrariness—albeit with a caveat: “peut-être quand vous proclamez le fortuit et l'arbitraire vous êtes plus que jamais loin des deux” [“perhaps when you extol the fortuitous and the arbitrary you are further than ever from both”] (*Obra* 1322; *Manifestos* 27). Appearances aside, Nonsense is after all a highly contrived form. As James Rother affirms, “Anyone familiar with Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* or Edward Lear's ‘The Dong with the Luminous Nose’ can attest to the fact that classical Nonsense is anything but a random activity [...] On the contrary, it is almost always a solemn business, maintaining the strictest of controls over both its inferences and effects” (187). Through the conscious creation of Nonsense, Huidobro simultaneously revives language and fashions a unique aesthetic. In Hey's view, the Nonsense of *Altazor* “parece ser una tentativa a revivificar el lenguaje por el empleo de una nueva serie de reglas coherentes entre sí, pero que infringen las reglas del lenguaje convencional” [“appears to be an attempt to revive language through the employment of a new series of rules that are coherent in themselves, but which infringe the rules

of conventional language”] (155). Early in the epic *Altazor* agonizes and deplors the depleted power of hackneyed language and trite poetry:

Poesía aún y poesía poesía

Poética poesía poesía

Poesía poética de poético poeta

Poesía

Demasiada poesía

Desde el arco-iris hasta el culo pianista de la vecina

Basta señora poesía bambina

Y todavía tiene barrotes en los ojos

[Poetry still and poetry poetry

Poetical poetry poetry

Poetical poetry by poetical poets

Poetry

Too much poetry

From the rainbow to the piano-bench ass of the lady next door

Enough poetry bambina enough lady

It still has bars across its eyes] (III, 51-58)

Huidobro, who dubs himself “antipoeta y mago” [“antipoet and magician”] in the following canto (IV, 282), seeks emancipation from the confines of convention through his play, and in so doing frees his poetry from images and liberates metaphor itself from the binds of semantics. The result: language at times so radically illegible that it appears arbitrary or even wholly devoid of meaning.

If we regard the avant-garde as not a continuation of Romanticism but a total rupture or swerve in the history of literary representation, Huidobro's use of Nonsense in *Altazor* and *Ver y palpar* is a quintessential avant-garde maneuver, for through it he manages to swerve from the avant-garde itself, and inspire surprise through the creation of a new form that melds automatic writing—its effects and appearances—with Nonsense verse. Yúdice observes that in this way Huidobro “se aleja de lo poético, de las imágenes. Hay que notar que este alejamiento es aún más radical que el de los surrealistas que siempre se mantienen dentro del ámbito de la imagen” [“moves away from the poetic and from images. It merits attention that this departure is even more radical than that of the Surrealists, who remain always within the realm of the image”] (231). Through his play with Nonsense, Huidobro avails himself of an English tradition, executing a swerve, or—to use the Lucretian term—a clinamen, from the French avant-garde. By consciously availing himself of the arbitrary, Huidobro is exercising his power as lord of his creation and injecting the aleatory—an ostensibly purposeless element—into his art.

Huidobro's aesthetic of *Creacionismo*, with its corresponding conception of the artist or poet as a little God, might perhaps be best understood in the light of Anaxagorean chaos and primeval time. In *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) explicates Anaxagoras' (c. 500-428 BCE) theory of the *nous*, or faculty of ideas, which “carries in itself the origin and the beginning of motion” (98). Nietzsche, whose influence on Huidobro has been duly noted,<sup>66</sup> writes that “Among all the questions dealing with motion, none is more

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<sup>66</sup> Hahn, José Quiroga and Daniel Mesa Gancedo, among others, have discussed the resemblance of *Altazor* to Nietzsche's Superman in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*] (see Hahn, Oscar. *Vicente Huidobro o el atentado celeste* [*Vicente Huidobro, or the Heavenly Crime*]. Santiago, Chile: LOM Ediciones. 41-53; Mesa Gancedo, Daniel. “Los ecos seculares y la voz de *Altazor*” [“The Secular Echoes and the Voice of *Altazor*”]. *Iberoamericana* 23 (1999): 5-20; Quiroga, José. “El entierro de la poesía: Huidobro, Nietzsche y *Altazor*” [“The Burial of Poetry: Huidobro, Nietzsche and *Altazor*”]. *Modern Language Notes*. *MLN* 107 (1992): 342-62); Huidobro himself explicitly mentions the philosopher and philologist in a note titled “*Silvana Plana*” (*Obras* 732) and in *Papá, o el diario de Alicia Mir* (where the author's alter ego proclaims “De cuando en cuando Dios se vuelve loco y se

annoying than the one which asks for its starting point. For though one may imagine all the other movements as causes and effects, the one original primal motion has still to be explained” (100). For Anaxagoras, the “one original primal motion” therefore had to lie outside this system of “movements as causes and effects”; hence he would say that “*Nous* has the privilege of free random choice; it may start at random; it depends only on itself, whereas all other things are determined by something outside themselves. *Nous* has no duty and hence no purpose or goal which it would be forced to pursue” (qtd in Nietzsche 112). Thus, when Huidobro alludes to Genesis and writes unorthodoxly of creation in the nonsensical preface to *Altazor*, or more generally, when he exercises his power as demiurge and founder of *Creacionsimo*, he in a sense acts as the Anaxagorean *nous*, fabricating through his own personal choice the universe of his art, which in his view had no duty to mirror external reality. Like *Altazor* himself, who in falling through space is not subject to the laws of gravity, Huidobro sidesteps the laws of mimesis and the gravity of the world by engaging in ludic sport. Nietzsche declares that “The Spirit [*nous*] of Anaxagoras is a creative artist” whose goal, Heraclitus (535-c. 475 BCE) would say, is “a game” (112). The childlike quality of Huidobro’s language in much of *Altazor* and *Ver y palpar* epitomizes the innocence of space, in its vastness still uncontaminated by man and war, and echoes the youthful Nonsense of Lear and Carroll. In Sigmund Freud’s (1856-1939) view, “every child at play behaves like an imaginative writer” (“Relation” 45); Vicente Huidobro may be the inverse, imagining and creating like a child at play. For, as posits Heraclitus, “In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to-be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence” (qtd in Nietzsche 62).

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cree un grande hombre. Hace algunos años se creyó Nietzsche” [“Every once in a while God goes crazy and thinks he is a great man. Some years ago he thought he was Nietzsche”] [73]).



## CHAPTER III

Reading through the Hourglass: The Play of Macedonio's *Museo*

. . . around the time Joyce was finishing the *Wake*, starting its firstlast sentence, Macedonio, just outside Huidobro's circle, began tasting the spherical delicacies of Nicolasa, turning the "key to infiniternity," unrolling a perpetual repertory of the novel. . . .

We are all readers, characters, and authors of *Museo de la novela de la Eterna* [*The Museum of Eterna's Novel*; 1967<sup>1</sup>], suggests Macedonio Fernández (1874-1952). Like Borges's story "The Library of Babel," his experimental open novel, ever so unwilling to begin, and cleverly bypassing an end, knows no bounds. To this end, to forgo an end, the text, with a ludic presentation of absence,<sup>2</sup> invites the reader's playful participation. Unceasingly defying convention, and occasionally even comprehension, the *Museum* proffers hidden pleasures for those who venture through its porous walls. In the *Museo*, Macedonio (referred to universally by his unusual forename) plays—with humor, with the novel, with the sublime—but always with

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<sup>1</sup> Macedonio began the *Museo* "around 1925" and worked on it "for the next twenty-seven years, producing five full manuscripts in total" before his death in 1952 (Schwartz xv). Through the efforts of his son, Adolfo de Obieta, the text was first published in 1967 by the Centro Editor de América Latina (CEAL) in Argentina.

<sup>2</sup> "Presentación en el arte, y en la vida. De un uso sabio de la Ausencia" ["An artistic and realistic, though prudently deployed presentation of Absence"] (*Museo* 133; *Museum* 1).

sense, with our capacity for rationalizing, interpreting, and understanding, suggesting new possibilities through his creation of artful Nonsense.

For Macedonio, eccentric author, philosopher, and guru to Argentina's young avant-gardists, Nonsense, by virtue of its power to thwart reason, provides a portal to the infinite. By tricking the intellect, even if only for an enchanted moment, he seeks to engender in the reader a belief in his own inexistence, and in so doing liberate him from fear of bodily death. In availing himself of sublime and absurd Nonsense, Macedonio plays with, and often transcends, standard novelistic, rational, and existential limits. In one of the *Museo*'s countless prologues,<sup>3</sup> which pretend to precede—yet nonetheless appear to comprise part of—the principal text, the sage informs us, “Somos un soñar sin límite y solo soñar. No podemos, pues tener idea de lo que sea un no-soñar” [“We are a limitless dream and only a dream. We cannot, therefore, have any idea of what non-dreaming may be”] (*Museo* 158; *Museum* 21). As one might infer from this perception, Macedonio has no qualms applying his metaphysics to the novel. In the heterogeneous *Museo*, he not only suggests the reader participate as an author of the text, but also encourages him to imagine himself as a character: “Lo que yo quiero es [...] ganarlo a él [el lector] de personaje, es decir que por un instante crea él mismo no vivir” [“What I want is {...} to win him {the reader} over as a character, so that for an instant he believes that he himself does not live”] (*Museo* 174; *Museum* 32). In his view, such a “conmoción total de la conciencia” [“total commotion of consciousness”] (*Museo* 152; *Museum* 16), if momentous, should nonetheless prove congenial for the reader, in serving to alleviate the unsettling prospect of death:

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<sup>3</sup> Seemingly—though not in fact—infinite, the prologues number “between fifty-seven and sixty” —“depending on whether you count the dedications, the post-prologue, and the blank page dedicated to the reader's indecision” (Schwartz xv).

Sepa el lector que esta impresión, nunca hecha sentir por la palabra escrita, a nadie, esta impresión que se inaugura con mi novela en la psicología de la humanidad, en la naturaleza de la conciencia de hombre, es una bendición para toda conciencia, porque esta impresión oblitera y liberta del miedo nocional e intelectual que llamamos temor de no ser

[The reader should know that this impression, never before achieved for anyone by the written word—this impression that, along with my novel, seeks an introduction into the human psyche, in the natural consciousness of man—is a benediction for all consciousness, because this impression obliterates and liberates the mental or emotional fear that we call the terror of ceasing to exist] (*Museo* 174; *Museum* 33).

Such is the surprise Macedonio designs for the reader of his *Museo*: in vanquishing sense (i.e. the reader's awareness of his existence), he contrives to vanquish mortality (the fear and/or recognition thereof). In devising an aesthetic that will obliterate sense (an admitted “provocación a la escuela realista” [“provocation to the realist school”] [*Museo* 173; *Museum* 32]), Macedonio thus proposes the reader exchange life for art, experience its eternity in a daydream. Yet in his playful enterprise “operar [...] un ‘choque de inexistencia’ en la psique de él, del lector, el choque de estar allí no leyendo sino siendo leído, siendo personaje” [“to effect a ‘shock of inexistence’ in the psyche of the reader—the shock of being here, not reading, but being read, being a character”] (*Museo* 175; *Museum* 34), Macedonio perhaps courts an adverse metafictional, metaphysical shock—that of the reader, in the manner of the phantom from Borges's “Las ruinas circulares” [“The Circular Ruins”], imagining himself “No ser un hombre, ser la proyección del sueño de otro hombre” [“Not to be a man, to be a projection of another man's dreams”] (“ruinas”

77; “Circular” 63)... A shock indeed, tantamount to the one Alice receives from Tweedledee—  
 “And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you’d be?” (Carroll 165) In this  
 chapter I will demonstrate how Macedonio plays with Nonsense to access the illusive nature of  
 reality.<sup>4</sup>

### Freedom from Sense

In “Para una teoría de la humorística” [“Toward a Theory of Humor”], Macedonio  
 describes two principal ways of hindering the reader’s capacity for rational thought, both of  
 which can, in his opinion, serve as a source of liberative pleasure.

Pueden crearse dos momentos, únicos genuinamente artísticos, en la psique del  
 lector: el momento de la nada intelectual, por la Humorística Conceptual, mejor  
 llamada Ilógica de Arte, y el momento de la nada del ser concienical, usando de  
 los personajes (Novelística) [...] para hacer el lector, por un instante, creerse él  
 mismo personaje, arrebatado de la vida

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<sup>4</sup> Whereas this study marks the first examination of *The Museum of Eterna’s Novel* in the context of literary Nonsense, the text itself having only recently (2010) been made available in English, the fiction of Macedonio’s “friend and protégé” Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) has oft been a focus of practitioners of literary Nonsense (Thirlwell v). If Borges, who first read *Alice* as a child (Burgin 54), did not speak specifically of Carroll with his friend, they almost certainly discussed his ideas. Stewart in her study discusses nine of Borges’s stories, as well as his *Libro de los seres imaginarios* [*Book of Imaginary Beings*; 1969]. Tigges, for his part, finds that in Borges’s fiction “nonsense procedures and motifs abound,” and cites examples of the latter: “the mirror, the labyrinth, non-existent languages, the lottery, dreams and numbers, a complete memory,” adding that “Borges turns the whole universe into a kind of metaphysical Wonderland” (222). In his 1971 article on Nonsense in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, M. R. Haight includes Borges in his list of “Writers of nonsense” (along with Carroll, Lear, Beckett, Joyce, Ionesco, Rabelais and Aristophanes), maintaining that “the nonsense they write has a keynote: absurdity” (247). Alfred J. Mac Adam, in a comparative study, juxtaposes Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” with Carroll’s “Hunting of the Snark,” arguing that both texts “combine specific strains of mock epic—the mock wisdom epic and the mock quest epic—with very personal autobiographical allegories about the artist’s loss of identity in a life given over to the manipulation of language” (122). Later in this chapter I cite Chloe Nichols’s 2007 article on Borges and Carroll, in which she suggests that the former was “a student of Carroll’s uses of logic,” and that both writers were “prolific in originating what are called *hypostats*, specific mythic figures created out of the metaphoric capacity of the mind, and representing, in concentrated form, a cluster of ideation which a culture for some purpose must express, and give play to in the common mind” (3).

[In the psyche of the reader only two genuinely artistic moments can be created: the moment of intellectual nothingness, attained through Conceptual Humor— better named Illogic of Art, and the moment of nothingness of the conscious being, using characters {the novel} {...} to make the reader, for an instant, believe himself a character, snatched from life] (260; my translation).<sup>5</sup>

In Macedonio's estimation, both of these moments, albeit provocatively engendered, nonetheless have a positive effect on the reader. With respect to "Conceptual Humor," he explains, "el Absurdo, o el milagro de irracionalidad, creído por un instante, libere al espíritu del hombre, por un instante, de la dogmática abrumadora de una ley universal de racionalidad" ["the Absurd, or miracle of irrationality, believed for a brief moment, liberates the spirit of man, for an instant, of the overwhelming dogma of a universal law of rationality"] (302; *Macedonio* 28). Although in his somewhat polemical treatise Macedonio expresses disagreement with Sigmund Freud as to the cause of said humor, the two notably seem to concur that its pleasing effect derives from the thwarting of reason. In the psychoanalyst's view, "the hilarious humor [...] weakens the inhibiting forces among which is reason, and thus again makes accessible pleasure-sources which are burdened by suppression" (*Wit* 193-94). Yet whereas Freud concludes that "the technique of absurdity in wit corresponds to a sense of pleasure" (194), Macedonio goes even further, pronouncing that the "temática dominante (de 'la Comicidad y el Chiste') tenía que ser esencialmente una referencia a la felicidad, al placer" ["dominant theme {of 'Jokes and Humor'} must be, in essence, an allusion to happiness, to pleasure"] ("humorística" 304; *Macedonio* 29).

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<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, wherever possible, I use the extant published versions of Macedonio's work in English. Of Macedonio's lengthy essay on humor, Jo Anne Engelbert has translated a few excerpts and included them in her wonderful anthology *Macedonio: Selected Writings in Translation* (Fort Worth: Latitudes Press, 1984).

With regard to his other stated method of opposing reason, which aims to bring about “the nothingness of the conscious being,” Macedonio explains “para mí es un mérito que un procedimiento artístico conmueva, conturbe nuestra seguridad ontológica y nuestros grandes ‘principios de razón,’ nuestra seguridad intelectual” [“for me it is a merit that an artistic technique can move, can disturb our ontological security, our great ‘principles of reason,’ our intellectual security”] (“humorística” 303; *Macedonio* 28). He then elucidates this technique, of special importance in the *Museo*, clarifying why in his view it contributes to “la riqueza y la posibilidad de la vida” [“the richness of the possibilities of life”] (“humorística” 303; *Macedonio* 28):

si con actitudes o dichos de un personaje de novela consigo por un momento que el lector sintiente, vivo, se crea ‘personaje’ vacío de existencia, sentirá por lo mismo la liberación de la muerte, es decir que su noción de que ha de morir es poco consistente puesto que cabe en su experiencia, en su vida en suma, que ocurra el hecho mental de creerse muerto, en lo que creerse es un vivir [if through the actions or words of a character in a novel I manage to make the live, conscious reader believe for a moment that he is a ‘character’ lacking in existence, he will, as a result of this, feel himself liberated from death, that is, he will feel that his notion that he has to die is inconsistent with what his experience has shown him, that in the sum total of his life experiences there is space for the mental phenomenon of believing oneself dead in which the believing itself is, of course, living] (“humorística” 303; *Macedonio* 28; translator’s [Engelbert’s] emphasis).

In the *Museo*, Macedonio applies yet one more technique for the purpose of overwhelming the reader's powers of reasoning—that of invoking the sublime. That Macedonio should resort to such a realm in an effort to stir the reader bears little surprise, for, as Edmund Burke observes, “the whole experience of the sublime depends on its effectiveness in thwarting or suspending the operation of reason” (Marvick 74). If the act of imagining oneself within a fictional reality (i.e. of dreaming oneself a character) is not sublime in itself for the reader, Macedonio confounds us with Eterna, who, insofar as we are able to grasp her essence as a character, could be construed as a personification of eternity. Yet “Por eso su imposible, el de ser comprendida” [“That's her impossibility, that she can't be understood”] (*Museo* 385; *Museum* 208). Even “El autor” [“the author”] (referred to in the third person) confesses, or pretends to confess, “todavía no sé si [...] nació un personaje o no aquí, Eterna” [“I still don't know {...} if a character, Eterna, has or has not been born”] (*Museo* 358-59; *Museum* 186-87), allowing that “ella es Misterio, que nunca conocí” [“she is a Mystery I have never grasped”] (*Museo* 142; *Museum* 9). Indeed, for what Immanuel Kant writes of “the infinite” pertains as well to the eternal: “the mere ability even to think it as a whole indicates a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense” (102). In his estimation, “the voice of reason [...] requires totality” (102); wherefore “infinity comprehended [...] is a self-contradictory concept (owing to the impossibility of the absolute totality of an endless progression)” (104). Notwithstanding its frustration of the intellect, Macedonio's invocation of the sublime, like his use of “Conceptual Humor” and his conjuring of a vertiginous fictional reality for the reader, may nonetheless have a positive effect, in accordance with Kant's theory of “the delight in our estimate of the sublime” (105):

The feeling of the sublime is [...] at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with the ideas of reason (106).

Of course, *Eterna* herself is not the novel's only suggestion of eternity. Apart from other seeming incomprehensibilities, the book, with its "preexistir anterior" ["prehistory of existence"] (*Museo* 269; *Museum* 114), lack of a definitive end, widespread references to self-perpetuating play (for, after all, "el envi6n de contar lo todo lleva a m1s contar" ["the obligation to tell everything leads to telling more"] [*Museo* 185; *Museum* 42]), and Nicolasa the cook's "perfectamente esf6ricos" ["perfectly spherical"] delicacies ("no sabiendo los ge6metros en su escr6pulo por d6nde empezarlo [hall1ndose ante un infinito sin comienzo]" ["the geometers couldn't decide where to begin eating them {having found themselves confronted with an infinity}"]) (*Museo* 241; *Museum* 90-91), moreover presents us with a "Pr6logo a la eternidad" ["Prologue to Eternity"], avowing that "las cosas no comienzan; o no comienzan cuando se las inventa" ["things do not begin; or they don't begin when they are created"] (*Museo* 139; *Museum* 7). By toying with the sublime, and inducing the reader to contemplate such limitlessness, Macedonio perhaps draws even closer to educating "a moment of nothingness of the [reader's] conscious being."

Peruvian critic Luis Alberto S1nchez refers to Macedonio's play with rational processes as a kind of "meta-nonsense," or "metaphysics of nonsense," and indeed, his manipulation of the reader's sense-making procedures involves numerous operations common to Nonsense literature (qtd in Engelbert "Macedonio" 9). Later in this chapter I will reveal how many of his ludic transgressions in the *Museo* can best be understood as Nonsense techniques; first, however,



worthy of note is how Macedonio's essential aesthetic maneuver, that of undermining reason, prepares the reader for entry into an illusory reality and helps to establish a paradigmatic realm in Nonsense literature, wherein we find a reconfiguration of the laws of space and time, and the negation of cause and effect.<sup>6</sup> For Macedonio Fernández, as Alicia Borinsky points out, "el momento en el cual se suspende el curso racional del pensamiento, haciéndole incurrir en el absurdo, es liberador. Es un momento que libera de la racionalidad. [...] se hace posible la liberación del yo, regido por el tiempo y la causalidad" ["the moment in which the rational course of thought is suspended, plunging one into the absurd, is liberating. It is a moment that frees one from rationality { ... } it makes possible the liberation of the self, governed by time and causality"] (30). Macedonio's defiance of reason, however, does not move the reader into the domain of the fantastic, or place the *Museo* in the genre of absurdist fiction. With the one, unavoidable exception of *Eterna*,<sup>7</sup> the text does not feature elements uncanny or supernatural, and it satisfies Tigges' criterion for differentiating between the absurd and Nonsense proper, in that the language of the *Museo* does not "represent a senseless reality" (as does absurdist fiction), but rather strives to "create a reality," i.e. a new reality, for the reader (128).<sup>8</sup> After all, the

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<sup>6</sup> In *An Anatomy of Nonsense*, Tigges observes that "prominent themes [in Nonsense literature] are those to do with cause and effect, with time and space" (77).

<sup>7</sup> Whereas "el hechizo de la Eterna que desata pasados y ata nuevos pasados sustituyentes" ["Eterna's talent for undoing the past and tying on new, substitute pasts"] (*Museo* 354; *Museum* 183) might of course be called a supernatural ability, the concept of eternity (Creationists aside) is not supernatural, and is consistent with both Aristotle's *Physics* and modern scientific theory. Given that concepts such as love and intelligence can be, and have been, personified in art without incurring the denomination "supernatural" or "fantastic," why should that of eternity be different? That said, how else to personify eternity? How better to portray Eterna's relation to "the past"? I ask *you*, reader!

<sup>8</sup> A further indication that Macedonio's definition of "el Absurdo" corresponds to that of Nonsense proper can be seen in the importance he assigns to the pure, unadulterated word:

Poseedora desde hace siglos de este signo que tiene de divino una perfecta asensorialidad, la humanidad no ha hallado hasta ahora, sin embargo, el noble uso artístico genuino, de la Palabra. Al contrario, con verdaderas abyecciones se ha complacido en despojarla de su esencialidad divina con la predilección por las palabras sonoras y su ridículo acompasamiento en ritmo y rima y la rebusca infantil de las más manoseadas asociaciones de "Palabra" e "impresiones de vida"

essential action of the *Museo*, as we shall see, takes place in the reader's mind. And to liberate the reader from temporal and causal laws—in effect, from the fear of his own mortality, Macedonio must free him from the confines of conventional sense. Yet accomplishing such emancipation may necessitate a gentle nudge. Or, as the emancipator puts it, a “violenta acomodación mental” [“violent mental accomodation”] (*Museo* 247; *Museum* 95).

### Egging the Reader On, à la Humpty Dumpty

In the *Museo*, disruptive Nonsense operations serve to further Macedonio's aim of unsettling the reader's conventional practices and beliefs. In Engelbert's opinion, what Macedonio is attempting equates to nothing less than “a conscious assault upon the closed structures of a culture obsessed with images of finality” (“Macedonio” 9). With regard to Macedonio's efforts to thwart reason, she holds that “The intention of his fiction is exactly the same as that of his humor: to supply a life-giving alternative to the closed structures of Western art and what they signify” (10). Yet the rupture Macedonio seeks is at once aesthetic, (il)logical, and ontological. “No es azaroso” [“It's no coincidence”], Dario González writes,

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[Holder for centuries of a sign that has a divine, perfect asensoriality, humanity so far has nevertheless not discovered the noble, genuinely artistic use of the Word. On the contrary, with truly despicable acts it has satisfied itself in stripping the Word of its divine essentiality through a predilection for sonorous words and their accompaniment in rhythm and rhyme, and the infantile search for the most hackneyed associations of the “Word” and “lifelike impressions” (*Papeles de reciénvenido* 185-86).

Whereas in absurdist fiction, Tigges writes, “the ‘reality’ is not primarily created by the language” (128), for Macedonio, as Borinsky points out, “el absurdo debe ser creado exclusivamente por la palabra” [the absurd must be created by the word exclusively”] (33). In her view, “El ansia [de Macedonio] de una literatura basada en la pureza de la palabra lo ubica muy cerca de Vicente Huidobro” [“{Macedonio's} yearning for a literature based on the purity of the Word situates him very close to Vicente Huidobro” ], whom, we may recall, in *Altazor* calls for “El simple sport de los vocablos/ *De la pura palabra y nada más/ Sin imagen limpia de joyas/* [The simple sport of words/ Of the pure word and nothing more/ With no images awash with jewels] (III, 144-46; emphasis mine).

que Macedonio hable [...] de la absurdidad humorística y de la irrealidad novelesca como efectos paralelos. El vínculo entre ambos efectos señala el desplazamiento de la relación que los filósofos tradicionalmente establecen entre la lógica y la ontología, en el sentido de que los principios últimos de la una se corresponden con los de la otra. La estética de Macedonio exige la superación de la perspectiva lógico-ontológica en su conjunto, o al menos la tentativa de su destrucción a través de una pura estrategia ilógico-novelística [that Macedonio talks {...} of the humorous absurd and of novelistic unreality as parallel effects. The link between the two effects points to the displacement of the relation that philosophers traditionally establish between logic and ontology, in the sense that the essential principles of each one correspond to those of the other. Macedonio's aesthetic calls for the supersession of the combined logical-ontological perspective, or at least an attempt at its invalidation through a pure illogical-novelistic approach] (205-06).

The purpose of said supersession or invalidation is the same as that of Macedonio's use of the sublime: to stir the reader. Whereas the sublime may startle us into a realization of the limits of our knowledge, and of how the scope of space and time exceeds our comprehension, the destruction of the traditional logical-ontological perspective pushes us to look beyond accepted beliefs and imagine other possibilities.

In one provocative case in point, Macedonio, after adverting to “el personaje de la no-existencia” [“a non-existent character”], “el personaje que sueña con la novela y el personaje con quien la novela sueña” [“a character that dreams the novel and the character of whom the novel dreams”], prods the incredulous reader:

Qué me dices de la Identidad, [...] Lo que se piensa al tenderse a dormir, lo que se sueña maravillosamente durmiendo y lo que se piensa despertando ¿qué yo común tienen?, y no sabemos que hemos dormido (siempre creemos al despertar que por lo menos estábamos despiertos muchos minutos antes) y no sabríamos nunca que hemos dormido si otras personas (que pueden ser sólo soñadas) no nos lo dijeran, como no nos consta directamente de nuestro nacimiento sino lo que nos dicen otros que no supieron que nacían. Y si ellos no lo saben de sí mismos ¿cómo les creemos?

[What can you tell me about Identity? {...} What you think when you lie down to sleep, what marvels you dream of, and what you think on awaking—what do these states have in common? And we don't know that we've slept (we always believe when we wake up that we were awake at least several minutes before), and we wouldn't know if we had slept if other people (who could be just dreams themselves), didn't tell us, just as we don't directly experience our birth but are told about it by others, who don't know anything directly about their own births. And if they don't know themselves, how can we believe them?] (*Museo* 226; *Museum* 78)

In this way Macedonio slyly works to undermine reason, fuse wakefulness and dreaming, and induce the reader to question the nature of his existence. In his “Ilógica de Arte” [“Illogic of Art”], the humorous tone serves to catch the reader off guard, permitting the author to trick “los guardianes intelectivos en la mente del lector” [“the intellectual guardians in the reader's mind”] and engender a “creencia en lo absurdo [...] por un momento” [“fleeting belief in the absurd”] thus liberating him “de esa lógica que nos dice todos los días: ‘puesto que todos mueren, tú has

de morir,' o 'no hay efecto sin causa'" ["from that logic that tells us every day: 'since everybody dies, you must die,'<sup>9</sup> or 'there is no effect without a cause'" ("humorística" 303; *Macedonio* 29). ("In nonsense," Tigges notes, "the link between cause and effect is always tenuous and frequently nonexistent" [78].) By calling into question the invincibility of cause-and-effect, challenging commonly held beliefs, or merely proposing absurdities, Macedonio rouses and engages the reader.

Part of Macedonio's purpose in provoking the reader is to inspire him to play more of a participatory role—i.e. not just to ponder his book deeply, but to take an unprecedented step further and actually invent his own version of it. For such an untried and unheard-of authorial collaboration to occur, the conventional, passive reader must be jolted into action. At times Macedonio confronts the reader with Nonsensical absurdities as a way of subtly encouraging him to exercise his imaginative resources. Notwithstanding his aforementioned aim of making the reader believe he is a character, Macedonio nevertheless asserts that he has "confiado [...] el desempeño de [su novela]" ["entrusted the execution of {his} novel"] to his "personajes" ["characters"] (*Museo* 176; *Museum* 35). Other passages he claims not to have written, such as a section of chapter III subheaded "Espacio que ocupa aquí un diálogo sin autor o prosa no autorístico" ["Space wherein a dialogue without author, or non-authored prose, takes place"]

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<sup>9</sup> In the case of the passage from the *Museo* that I have just cited, the effect (though it also serves to promote a belief in one's personal eternity), is quite the opposite—as if Macedonio wished to free us from that logic that tells us, "since everybody believes they have been born, you must have been born"—a suggestion analogous to the one he presents in the "Prólogo a la eternidad" ["Prologue to Eternity"], that "las cosas no comienzan; o no comienzan cuando se las inventa" ["things do not begin; or they don't begin when they are created"] (*Museo* 139; *Museum* 7), and reinforcing his idea that "Somos un soñar sin límite y sólo soñar" ["We are a limitless dream and only a dream"] (*Museo* 158; *Museum* 21). Although his manner is more subtle, Macedonio's purpose thus is not unlike that of Tweedledee in *Through the Looking-Glass*, who directly calls into question Alice's beliefs regarding the nature of her reality (Carroll 165). (As I will later make clear, the arguable protagonist of the *Museo* is, of course... the reader.) Other absurdities, such as Quizágenio's ["Maybegenius's"] announcement that "*Hoy es el cumpleaños de la Inexistencia*" ["Today's birthday is Nonexistence"] (*Museo* 250; *Museum* 97), indirectly incite the reader to question the sense of accepted conventions, like celebrating moments in time, evoking perhaps Humpty Dumpty's explication of "un-birthday presents" (Carroll *Through the Looking-Glass* 185-86).

(*Museo* 307; *Museum* 144). “In the Macedonian reform program,” Naomi Lindstrom posits, “startling the reader is of utmost importance” (34). “By confronting the reader with something deliberately ‘de mareo’ [“vertiginous”<sup>10</sup>], the author can shock him into abandoning his accustomed attitudes and behaviors,” she explains (34). In her view, Macedonio’s *Museo de la novela* anticipates Roland Barthes’ call for “writerly literature” through its “liberation of the reader’s inventive energies” (33). A quarter-century after Macedonio had by all accounts completed most of the *Museo*, Barthes wrote in *S/Z* (1970), “the goal of the literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader” (4). Even before the *Museo*’s appearance, Macedonio, ever conscious of his audience and the impediments to true communication, had joked with the reader about switching roles. In *Papeles de reciénvenido* [*Newcomer’s Papers*; 1944], he suggests that “somos dos descontentos de lo que estamos: yo escribiendo, usted leyendo, y de buena gana nos intercambiaríamos” [“we are both dissatisfied with what we are doing: I with writing, you with reading, we might willingly trade places”] (117). While Lindstrom applauds this proposal, citing “the inventive capacities of the reader” and “the author’s desire for an active response to his communication” (31), it might best be understood as a humorous avant-garde ploy to overturn the status quo of early twentieth-century literary activity, which in the *Museo* becomes a playful offer that moreover supports his anti-realist aesthetic. In an extraordinary Nonsense operation, Macedonio’s ultimate gesture in the *Museo*, entitled “Al que quiera escribir esta novela” [“To

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<sup>10</sup> Literally, “of dizziness.” This phrase, whose significance to Macedonio’s compositional strategy I will later address, Lindstrom borrows from his “Prosas de mareo” (*Papeles* 171-72).

Whoever Wants To Write This Novel”] (*Museo* 421; *Museum* 237), serves to actualize the novel’s eternity. In a sense, we are all authors of the *Museo*.... How? Because the eternal novel has infinite space.

#### Absence of Sense (A Plenitude of Absence)

If Macedonio’s text was in reality inspired by a loved one’s absence,<sup>11</sup> it nevertheless stands as the presentation of absence artistically rendered. In the *Museo* his play with Nonsense creates an unstable axis of meaning, which in turn enables and guides the reader’s play. Such play encompasses a comprehensive range of literary elements, varying from words, names, pages, blank pages, theses, parentheses, and characters to nonexistent characters, footnotes and chapters, fusing and confusing all, and leading the text to transcend conventional limits of novelistic form. No fixed axis grounds the reader from taking imaginative flights of fancy; no definitive structure of meaning imposes parameters on the creative possibilities that the book offers the reader. Through his Nonsense operations, Macedonio plays with the boundaries of the novel, ambiguating and suspending meaning, leaving us an open door to the *Museo*’s illusory world.

Perhaps the amorphous, indeterminate quality of the text may be understood best in relation to what Jacques Derrida writes of structure, sign and play. While the *Museo* does feature

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<sup>11</sup> In the prologue titled “Hogar de la no existencia” [“A Home for Non-Existence”], Macedonio writes “mi novela tiene lo sagrado, la fascinación de ser el Dónde a que descenderá fresca la Amada volviendo de una muerte que no le fue superior” [“my novel has the sacred vocation and the allure to be the Where from which the Beloved will come, fresh, returned from a death that couldn’t best her”] (*Museo* 156; *Museum* 19). Per Tigges’ strict definition, the author’s “emotional involvement” in the text, as evidenced most notably in his “Poema sin término” [“endless, immutable poem”] for “la cambiante Eterna” [“ever-changing Eterna”] that comprises the entirety of Chapter XV (*Museo* 388; *Museum* 210), precludes classifying the *Museo* in the genre of literary Nonsense, which in his view “is characterized by four essential elements: an unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning, lack of emotional involvement, playlike presentation, and an emphasis, stronger than in any other type of literature, upon its verbal nature” (55). Nevertheless, Macedonio’s striking use of the other three elements in the *Museo*, as well as his singular and sundry Nonsense operations, warrant the prominent role of his text in my study, the first ever to examine his work in the context of literary Nonsense.

focal points—namely, love, death, eternity, and fiction, suggesting the presence of a message, its structure is fluid, its center unestablished, and its axis loose; therefore we are never sure which are the integral parts, for not one is wrapped up in unequivocal signification. In Derrida’s view, “the function of this center [is] not only to orient, balance, and organize [...] but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure [will] limit what we might call the play of the structure” (“Structure, Sign and Play” 83-84). With the play of Nonsense operations such as shifting boundaries and denying discourse, Macedonio disrupts the presence of meaning in his text, by qualifying or negating the sense of what has been said. Derrida posits that “Play is the disruption of presence,” and that “Play is always play of absence and presence” (93). Indeed: the unrigid structure of the *Museo* invites play, and the text, in consequence, wavers between presence and absence of meaning. Furthermore, for the reader and would-be author of the *Museo*, the lack of a center proffers infinite possibilities for creation. By leaving the text incomplete, without firm shape or set meaning, Macedonio invites the reader onto the field of play—in Derrida’s estimation, “a field of infinite substitutions” because “there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions” (91).

Of all the *Museo*’s indefinite aspects, most (and therefore least) salient may be the actual boundary of the text. While “the novel” itself overreaches nearly every conventional definition of said literary form, featuring not merely prose but also essays, letters, poems, and frequent dramatic dialogues, it is preceded by unprecedented scores of prologues, which, blank pages notwithstanding, occupy more space than does all of the subsequent material alleging to be “the novel.” In “The Parergon,” Derrida maintains that “the whole analytic of aesthetic judgment forever assumes that one can distinguish rigorously between the intrinsic and the extrinsic [...] Hence one must know [...] how to determine the intrinsic—what is framed—and know what one



is excluding as frame and outside-the-frame” (*Truth in Painting* 63). In the *Museo*, Macedonio deliberately labors to confound conventional notions of novelistic structure, form and frame. At times, in a suggestive, ludic denial of authorship, he personifies elements of his discourse, such as the “Prólogo que entre prólogos se empina para ver dónde, allá lejos, empieza la novela” [“Prologue that Stands on its Tiptoes to See How Far Away the Novel Begins”] (*Museo* 276; *Museum* 121). One rather brazen prologue even makes mischief, in mock defiance of the author’s intentions; with feigned chagrin, Macedonio imparts, “está originando entre todos un prólogo mudable, que, me avisan, se anda cambiando de página” [“among all the prologues there has arisen the moveable prologue, which, they tell me, is going around changing pages”] (*Museo* 227; *Museum* 78). So purportedly loose is the structure, the author would have us believe his text is still in the process of being written.<sup>12</sup> Midway through the “Prólogo que se siente novela” [“Prologue that Feels like a Novel”], Macedonio, in pretended despair, writes “tengo asunto un prólogo no empezado, y pueda quedarse donde lo sea de la Novela, como ansía, diré en él lo que sería una falsa minucia dicho en la Novela y debe decirse en alguna parte pero no en ella” [“what I’ve got here is a prologue that’s not even started, and it should be put wherever I need to say something unimportant about the Novel, out of anxiety, something that needs to be said

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<sup>12</sup> To this end, the question of whether Macedonio deliberately avoided publishing the *Museo* during his lifetime is a matter of some debate. The implied composability of the text and the ways in which it evokes eternity suggest an existential kinship with “El hombre que fingía vivir” [“The Man who Feigned to Live”], a character whom Macedonio seeks to maintain “en algún aspecto parcial de su realizarse” [“in the state of being partially realized”] (*Museo* 210; *Museum* 65). With sly, absurd humor, he tells us “el no existir de un libro se obtiene entre el prometerlo y el publicarlo [“a book’s non-existence is obtained between its being promised and its being published”] (*Museo* 210; *Museum* 65); his “ha sido vuelta a prometer tres veces en cumplimiento de la primera promesa que hice de ella” [“has been promised three times already, just to fulfill the first promise”] (*Museo* 187; *Museum* 44). In Engelbert’s opinion, Macedonio “never quite finished the novel—partly because he had so much fun working on it that he didn’t want it to end, and partly because it was *completely in keeping with its aesthetic for it to remain in a fluid state of perpetual revision*” (*Macedonio* 11; emphasis mine).

somewhere but not IN the novel”] (*Museo* 257; *Museum* 104; translator’s emphasis).<sup>13</sup> Yet just what is unimportant, or important about “the novel”? In the “Nonsense operation” she describes as “play with the boundaries of discourse” (85), Stewart avers that authors often “play on our assumptions as to what ‘the point’ of the text will be” (93-94). The riddling *Museo* thus “manipulate[s] the expectations of the audience regarding interpretive boundaries” (94). Even Macedonio’s “Guía a los prólogos” [“Guide to the Prologues”] does scant more than tease the reader; this passage, located not before but in the middle of the other “prologues,” begins with an interesting and unexpected announcement: “Estoy habilitando comodidades y un nuevo Capítulo para escenas y personas sobrevenidas” [“I’m furnishing a new Chapter for leftover characters and scenes”] (*Museo* 212; *Museum* 66). So where exactly does the actual “novel” begin? The author, after a “Nota de posprólogo” [“Postprologuery Note”] and a few [“observaciones de ante-libro”] “Prenovelistic Observations”—the neologisms aptly denoting the text’s inventive deviations (*Museo* 278; *Museum* 122; italics mine), leaves a page “para que en ella se ande el lector antes de leer en su muy digna indecisión y gravedad” [“for the reader to linger, in his well-deserved and serious indecision, before reading on”], with the heading, “Éstos ¿fueron prólogos? y ésta ¿será novela?” [“Were Those Prologues? And Is This The Novel?”] (*Museo* 281; *Museum* 123). His playful, transgressive Nonsense operation thus confronts the reader with the “problem of defining the boundaries of the fictive text” (Stewart 100).

Notwithstanding his sometimes self-deprecating (and deceptive) humor regarding the text’s incompleteness, Macedonio appears fully aware of his play with boundaries and departure

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<sup>13</sup> Literally, “Una falsa minucia” means “a false minor detail”; Macedonio’s language thus refers directly to a concern [or purported concern] about the need [or purported need] to include not just irrelevancies but also erroneous information about “the novel.” In either case his procedure corresponds to a specific Nonsense operation Stewart designates as “misdirection,” which involves “an extension as well as a realignment of meaning,” and forces the reader to “consider new interpretations, extending the horizon of meaning available to the text” (93). Suffice it to say Macedonio cannot be taken at his word.

from established forms. In “La Conquista de Buenos Aires” [“The Conquest of Buenos Aires”] the one chapter of “la novela” [“the Novel”]<sup>14</sup> in which the author dances around the idea of an eventful plot, we come across the conundrum of the “sobre-carta” [“envelope-letter”], itself suggestive of the larger mind game Macedonio plays with the reader by ignoring accepted conventions and traditional boundaries (*Museo* 354; *Museum* 183). The “sobre-cartas, es decir cartas escritas en los sobres repartidas en todos los asientos de tranvías y ómnibus” [“envelope-letters, letters written on envelopes and dispersed among all the tramway and bus seats”] came “con premio al que acertara si era un sobre con carta o una carta sin sobre” [“with a prize to whomever could tell if it was an envelope with a letter or a letter without an envelope”] (*Museo* 354; *Museum* 183).<sup>15</sup> Yet by this point in the book the reader has probably inferred he too is not so much reading a letter (or a novel) as he is examining (and puzzling over) it from the outside.

If the formal boundary of Macedonio’s text appears absent, or uncertain, so too does the purport of much of his discourse, in which contradictory and misleading information foreground

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<sup>14</sup> While Macedonio likely might, I have no particular wish to cause any confusion for the reader between “La Novela” (untranslated in Schwartz’s English version of the book), the name given to the residence of the character known as “El Presidente” [“The President”], and “la novela” [“The Novel”], the section of the text referred to as such in the prologues, and which directly follows the “observaciones de ante-libro” [“Prenovelistic Observations”]. The estancia “La novela,” another personified novelistic element, also itself is suggestive of Macedonio’s “novela” in that it too evokes eternity. In Chapter I, the house speaks. What does it say? “Por mí pasan los hombres, los inmortales hombres pasan pero inmortales” [“Men pass through me, immortal men”] (*Museo* 285; *Museum* 127). As a place where the characters practice their “afición al artístico no-ser” [“affection for artistic non-being”], it serves as one more point of ingress into the eternal (*Museo* 285; *Museum* 127).

<sup>15</sup> This enigma of the frame, and its corresponding intent “dotar a Buenos Aires de misterio, que nunca tuvo” [“to give Buenos Aires a mystery it never had”] (*Museo* 354; *Museum* 183) so that the city “quedaría eternamente conquistada para la Belleza y el Misterio” [“would be forever ruled by Beauty and Mystery”] (*Museo* 352; *Museum* 181) may lead one to wonder to what extent Macedonio conflates beauty, mystery, and perhaps Nonsense in his anti-realist aesthetic, wherein “la Imposibilidad, de situaciones y caracteres” [“the Impossibility of situations and characters”] is “el criterio para clasificar algo como artístico” [“the sole criterion in classifying something as artistic”] (*Museo* 146; *Museum* 12). In the *Museo*’s final prologue, he seems to suggest that his attempt to engender an idea of inexistence is truly an artistic endeavor, as it implies an outright departure from lifelike representation and a move toward Nonsense: “labor de genuina artisticidad; artificiosidad fecunda para la conciencia en su efecto de fragilizar la noción y certeza de ser, de la que procede la universal intimidación de la igualmente absurda y vacua noción verbal del no-ser” [“it’s a genuinely artistic labor; artificiality is fertilized in the consciousness in its attempt to undermine the notion and the certainty of being, from which follows the universal intimidation of the equally absurd and vacuous verbal notion of non-being”] (*Museo* 422; *Museum* 238).

the nature of interpretation and nudge the reader into rethinking the very role of communication. Given Macedonio's aim to disrupt "la mismidad del lector" ["the self-sameness of the reader"] (*Museo* 168; *Museum* 28) and effect "la deleznableidad o imitabilidad de la identidad personal, el eterno zafarse de la continuidad individual" ["a certain slippage of personal identity, the eternal escape of individual continuity"] (*Museo* 202; *Museum* 56), it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that he believes he can "serle interesante [al lector] en lo que muestro de mi dudar y variar" ["be interesting to him {the reader} in what I show of my doubt and inconstancy"] (*Museo* 191; *Museum* 47). Yet when Macedonio delivers a case in point just four lines later—"No es eso lo que quise decir" ["This isn't what I wanted to say"] (*Museo* 191; *Museum* 47)—his readers may be nonplussed nonetheless. Should the negation be construed as an example of purposed inconstancy, or, *contrariwise*—as Tweedledee would say—a retraction of his earlier statement? Such "discourse that denies itself" constitutes a particular Nonsense procedure that Stewart classifies among "Reversals and Inversions" (72-77), and which Tigges describes as a kind of "Mirroring" that "operates in the presentation of a 'topsyturvy world,' a world beyond the looking-glass" (56). Near the end of the same prologue we find a further instance of such Nonsense. Macedonio, alluding to unspecified "imperfecciones" ["imperfections"], alleges, "No creo haber hecho una novela fiel a la plena doctrina poseída" ["I don't believe I've made a novel that's faithful to the doctrine that it expresses"] (*Museo* 193; *Museum* 48-49). Again, we find ourselves in an interpretive quandary: ought we to regard the disclaimer as a display of humility, or as a deliberate provocation (of the reader), in a ludic and suggestive manifesto on inconstancy and incongruity?<sup>16</sup> What's more, in the ensuing prologue the discontinuity continues, with

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<sup>16</sup> The possibility of the latter interpretation merits mention. In his theory "de Arte, particularmente de la Novela" ["of the Art of the Novel"] (*Museo* 193; *Museum* 48), to which he devotes the bulk of the prologues, Macedonio explicates different facets of his departure from convention. "La congruencia (identidad) de los caracteres hace

Macedonio seeming to repudiate his (pretended?) “imperfecciones”: “Ha sido dable, al fin, la novela modelo” [“We are now able to present the model novel”], he begins, after the surprising title: “Cómo ha sido posible, al fin, la novela perfecta” [“How, in the End, the Perfect Novel Is Possible”] (*Museo* 194; *Museum* 50). “The most essential characteristic [of Nonsense],” Tigges avers, “is that it presents an unresolved tension, which in my definition I refer to as a balance between presence and absence of meaning” (51).<sup>17</sup>

While in the preceding paragraph I have presented a possible explanation for some of Macedonio’s denials of discourse—namely, that they could be seen as in keeping with an aesthetic which seeks to disrupt the reader’s consciousness, his sameness, the cementation of his identity, etc., other bits of misleading information have less potential meaning. Particularly perplexing is his false enumeration. Could Macedonio be a bad counter? Perhaps, yet perhaps not. What to make of Macedonio’s dividing the “¿Prólogo cuádruple?” [“Fourfold Prologue?”] into *three* distinct sections, each separated by a space break? In the third section, the closing paragraph could offer a clue—“El Arte empieza sólo al otro lado de la veridicidad” [“Art begins only on the other side of truth-telling”], or so asserts the uncandid author (*Museo* 268-70; *Museum* 114-16). Is he telling the truth? Of “El hombre que fingía vivir” [“The Man who

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encantadores a los novelistas de la novela mala o correcta: esta congruencia nunca se mostró en una novela y no la hay en la vida” [“Continuity {identity} of the characters makes sorcerers out of the bad or conventional novelists: this continuity was never shown in a novel nor does it exist in life”] (*Museo* 226; *Museum* 78). Is Macedonio, who deems “inconsistente fidelidad de personaje” [“an inconsistent fidelity in {a} character”] to be sufficient grounds for withdrawing him from the novel (*Museo* 229; *Museum* 80), offering a purposive demonstration of this inconsistency in his own discourse?

<sup>17</sup> In his “Prólogo de desesperanza de autor” [“Prologue of Authorial Despair”], Macedonio again employs self-denying discourse to intensify the tension between presence and absence of meaning. Prefacing his remarks with the statement, “El desorden de mi libro es el de todas las vidas y obras aparentemente ordenadas” [“The disorder of my book is the same disorder of all apparently well-ordered lives and works”], he ultimately concludes with an equivocal disclaimer: “Por lo que digo en el encabezamiento, no tengo nada de qué disculparme” [“Although I said otherwise in the opening, I don’t have anything to apologize for”] (*Museo* 248-49; *Museum* 96). Perhaps, in accordance with his ideology (or pursuant to his playful aesthetic), consistency or an inflexible order would be something to apologize for. Or has he changed his mind? (If so, which of his myriad preliminaries might he be referring to?) Whatever the case, his unexpected reversal leaves the reader with an unsettling ambiguity.

Feigned to Live”] (“Único personaje que necesita explicación. Y la tiene doble” [“The only character who needs explaining. He’s already been explained twice”]), Macedonio writes, “Puede ser que no le consiga más que una [explicación], aunque prometo dos. ¡Otra incongruencia!” [“It could be that I’ll only give him one explanation, though I’ve promised two. Yet another inconsistency!”] (*Museo* 208; *Museum* 63) Nevertheless, with the next sentence he seems on the brink of decrypting his aesthetic: “Pero ya dije, o lo diré adelante, que empleo todo recurso, y entre ello las incongruencias, para desafiar con lo artístico o verosímil” [“But I already said, or I’ll say so later on, that I use any recourse, including inconsistencies, to confront the artistic or verisimilitude”] (*Museo* 208; *Museum* 63). Could we say Macedonio is “consistently inconsistent?” Posits Stewart, “the flaunted incompetence of nonsense presents a further play with paradox [...]: nonsense as a *mistake-on-purpose*” (206). Yet do inconsistencies and mistakes-on-purpose clarify or obfuscate his meaning? Macedonio treads a hazardous path. In Lindstrom’s observation, he “entrusts discussion of the most essential matters to a form of disclosure bordering on nonsense. Esthetic and metaphysical questions become the subject matter of silly joking” (103). In her view, such a playful approach entails risk, for “Even if readers do not take his self-deprecations literally, they may still come to regard him as no more than an eccentric humorist,” given that “the image of the innovator as purely a jester has been common among even some of his greatest admirers” (108). Operating outside the laws of communication, with self-denying discourse that “proceeds by cancelling itself out” (Stewart 72), Macedonio “play[s] trickster, changing the rules of the game, undercutting the reader’s assumptions” (73).

As an outlaw of novelistic art, Macedonio moreover seeks to shift the traditional paradigm of characterization. Like the *Museo* itself, his personages have loose edges and zero

limits. Bound neither to the novel nor even, at times, to their own identity, the unfettered characters are but slightly sketched, “ahumadamente entrevistados y en acciones y hechos truncos” [“smokily glimpsed and in truncated actions and facts”] (*Museo* 175; *Museum* 34). Macedonio makes clear their unfinished nature to the reader—some in fact are scarcely characters at all, their vague contours serving to underscore the novel’s own status as a sort of text-in-the-making. Apart from “El hombre que fingía vivir” [“The Man who Feigned to Live”], who, by virtue of his “idoneidad para el prolijo no-ser y una asiduidad de faltar casi enternecedoras” [“real flair for non-being and quite endearing proclivity towards absence”] is relegated to the status of a footnote (*Museo* 211; *Museum* 65), there is “ese personaje faltador, porque toma en serio su papel de Viajero” [“this character who is missing, because he takes his role of Traveler seriously”] (*Museo* 227; *Museum* 78), and “Deunamor, el No-Existente Caballero” [“The Lover, the Gentleman Who Doesn’t Exist”] (*Museo* 156; *Museum* 19),<sup>18</sup> who has been “reducido a un cuerpo sin conciencia” [“reduced to a body without consciousness”] (*Museo* 198; *Museum* 53). For these “characters” with their different qualities of absence, and in particular, for the Traveler, who almost always is elsewhere, Macedonio includes a foil, Federico, the exasperating, virtually ubiquitous “Chico del largo palo” [“Boy with the Long Stick”], who, “si tiene ausencia es ésta tan roída que su primer llegar ya es frecuente y como 5.<sup>a</sup> edición de presencia” [“if he has any absence it is so diminished that his first arrival is already frequent and in its fifth edition of presence”] (*Museo* 166; *Museum* 27). So repellent is the nature of his presence, his near omnipresence—“Lugares donde no esté, muy solicitados, no se consiguen ni de los revendedores de su ausencia” [“Places where he can’t be found—very sought after places—can’t be gotten

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<sup>18</sup> “Literally, *Deunamor* means ‘Of A Love,’ or ‘Ofalove,’ to preserve the neologism, as *Deunamor* is actually a phrase: *De un amor*” (Schwartz xxiii). (Translator’s note—Margaret Schwartz).

even from the resellers of his absence”] (*Museo* 164; *Museum* 26), he casts a positive light on the idea of absence.

What’s more, so vast is Federico’s presence, it surpasses the bounds of the novel. The author, yielding to his entreaties, grants him access to “la novela” in a prologue.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, however, he resembles several other characters who possess an extra-novelistic existence. Like the *Museo*’s indefinable boundaries, their entities are sublime in scope, transcending the traditional limits of the novel. Denying authorship of his characters, Macedonio alleges rather that he adopted them, “con cuidadosa selección y sabiendo cómo se habían conducido en otras novelas” [“having selected them carefully based upon their conduct in other novels”] (*Museo* 176; *Museum* 35). Eterna, we learn, “figuró en Lady Rowena” [“finds herself in Lady Rowena”] (of Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*), and “se llamó Leonora en Poe” [“was called Leonor in Poe”] (*Museo* 200; *Museum* 55). As one character intimates to Macedonio, his troupe may have

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<sup>19</sup> In the prologue entitled “Entrada en prólogo de Federico” [“Federico’s Entrance In The Novel, As Prologue”], Macedonio writes, “he consentido lo que él me pidió cuerdate: que le formara antecedentes acordándole un acceso a prólogo que ablande su ingreso a la novela” [“I’ve consented to what he’s sensibly asked of me: that I make antecedents for him, giving him access in a prologue that will ease his ingress into the novel”] (*Museo* 217; *Museum* 71). In negotiating thus with “the Boy with the Long Stick,” Macedonio shakes the boundaries of convention, emancipating not only the character but the “novela” too from traditional literary limits that would forbid direct character-author discourse or any such imbrication of a text and its prologue; moreover, in doing so, Macedonio reverses himself and also provides misleading information, for Federico already has made a previous appearance in the prologue titled “A los lectores que padecerían si ignorasen lo que la novela cuenta” [“For Readers Who Will Perish If They Don’t Know What The Novel Is About”] (*Museo* 159-66; *Museum* 22-27), wherein Macedonio declares an intention to exclude the Boy from the novel, and in so doing playfully asks, with a hint of absence, that the audience appreciate the benefits of readerly provocation:

Si alguna imperfección halla todavía el lector en el pasaje subsanado, en la explicación presente pídele apreciar la tranquilidad de la lectura que hasta esta página le he resguardado con mis esfuerzos que en ese momento culminaban para no dejar entrar en la novela al Chico del largo palo, quien no se haría rogar para incomodar todo empezando por dejarlo caer sobre algún pasaje apacible de este relato y esgrimiendo siempre esa larga catástrofe por todo el lugar escénico trocado en pista de su tirantillo y despejado al punto de su aparición por todos mis personajes [If the reader still finds any imperfection in this compensatory passage, I ask him to appreciate in the present explication the tranquility of reading that my efforts have spared him until this page. At the moment, these forces are focused on keeping the Boy with the Long Stick out of the novel, and we wouldn’t want to beg because that would make everything uncomfortable. We can’t let him drop into some quiet passage of this story, brandishing the long stick of catastrophe in this scenic place, making a drag race of the story, his very apparition clearing out all my characters] (*Museo* 163-64; *Museum* 25).



assembled through a kind of artistic metempsychosis: “fijese que su novela no sea con ‘cierre hermético’ sino con salida a otra, porque soy personaje de transmigración” [“look, your novel doesn’t have a ‘hermetic seal,’ but it leads the way to another novel, because I’m a transmigrating character”] (*Museo* 200; *Museum* 55). In this way, Macedonio’s manner of borrowing characters accentuates the *Museo*’s eternal aspect—the idea of its preexistence and possible future.<sup>20</sup> At times, his treatment of the characters seems not authorial at all but rather that of a film or casting director. “Los he adoctrinado en todo lo que la ‘persona de arte’ debe atender, les he hecho leer mis prólogos” [“I have indoctrinated them in everything a ‘character of art’ should know, I’ve made them read my prologues”], he tells us, as if he were preparing them for a performance (*Museo* 176; *Museum* 35).<sup>21</sup> Not all of them reach even “character” status—one, Juan Pasamontes [“John Mountainclimber”], who “había encontrado empleo con nosotros” [“had found a job with us”], “Quería ser empleado, no personaje de la novela; le ponía nervioso que lo estuvieran leyendo” [“wanted to be an employee, not a character in the novel; it makes him nervous to be read”] (*Museo* 225; *Museum* 77).<sup>22</sup> Being a character in Macedonio’s novel is,

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<sup>20</sup> Macedonio, who entrusts the novel’s future to “todo escritor futuro de impulso” [“any future writer who is so inclined”] (*Museo* 421; *Museum* 237), also acknowledges, with respect to its preexistence, “todavía no sé si mi novela vino al impulso de una alta femineidad, si vivía antes [...]” [“I still don’t know if my novel sprang from an impulse to the highest femininity, if it lived before {...}”] (*Museo* 359; *Museum* 187).

<sup>21</sup> Like Don Quijote and Sancho Panza, his characters are aware of the story; however, whereas Cervantes’s personages learn only in the novel’s second part that the first part of their adventures “andaba ya en libros” [“is already in print”] (*Quijote* 578; *Quixote* 484), Macedonio’s characters, as film or play actors, have access to the script beforehand. Furthermore, though they know the author’s plans for them in “la novela,” their existence exceeds the bounds of the text. Quizagenio, for instance, recalls “lo que le expresé en una circunstancia semejante, en otra novela” [“what I expressed in a similar circumstance, in another novel”] (*Museo* 318; *Museum* 153), and in Chapter XI, he and Dulce-Persona read and reflect on another of Macedonio’s books, *Adriana Buenos Aires* (*Museo* 363-65; *Museum* 190-92).

<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, those figures who are not selected to perform a role in the *Museo* still aspire to play a part in another novel, the author relates in Chapter I. “En cuanto a Nicolasa, Federico y Pasamontes, con quienes el lector no cuenta—no figuran, pero solicitaron someterse a la maniobra de personajes para quedar de meritorios de otra novela” [“As for Nicolasa, Federico, and Mountainclimber, upon whom the reader cannot rely—they aren’t in the cast, but they asked to undergo the training maneuvers of the characters so as to be worthy of another novel”]

after all, a formidable occupation. Before “la novela” begins, we find an interesting variation on stage directions: “*Los ‘personajes’ sacados a maniobras: ensáyase la firmeza de su afición al artístico no-ser*” [“*The ‘characters’ are taken out for maneuvers: they train to strengthen their affection for artistic non-being*”] (*Museo* 285; *Museum* 127). Yet in spite of their seeming independence from the author and their need to “train” for “artistic non-being,” the characters are “rigorously fictional,” as Engelbert observes (*Macedonio* 165).<sup>23</sup> Like Quizagenio [Maybegenius], they feel “el desmayo de ser sólo escrito” [“the dizziness of existing only in writing”] (*Museo* 323; *Museum* 157-58). At the same time, they possess the ability both to step back from their roles in “la novela” and also to play with the script. On one occasion, Quizagenio tells Dulce-Persona [Sweetheart], “Esta vez no estamos en personaje, vamos a hablar nosotros y para nosotros” [“This time we’re not in character, we’re going to speak for ourselves”] (*Museo* 307-08; *Museum* 144), as if they had an extra-novelistic existence, an individuality distinct from their identity as characters. On another, Dulce-Persona, as if rehearsing backstage, asserts herself, “Escucha, Quizagenio: lo que me tocaría quizá decir, en una novela tan ordenada, en capítulo de más adelante que aún no ha comenzado, te lo diré ya” [“Listen, Maybegenius: I’ll tell you now what I’m scheduled to say—this novel is so well-organized—later on, in a chapter that has not yet begun”] (*Museo* 358; *Museum* 186).

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(*Museo* 293; *Museum* 133). In this way, the indefinite boundary of Macedonio’s text allows for “characters” to be both in and outside “la novela.”

Apropos of Macedonio’s play with the boundaries of characters, in one early prologue, the reader also comes across “el vigilante que viene a leer el accidente frente a la ventanilla de la pasajera que lee mi novela” [“a security guard who comes to read about the accident in front of the window of the passenger who’s reading my novel”]; soon thereafter, however, the reader receives a caveat from the author: “No se entretenga el lector con el vigilante mencionado; no es el nuestro; el de la novela está parado en otra esquina de ella” [“The reader should not entertain himself with the aforementioned security guard; he isn’t ours; the one that belongs in our novel is standing on the opposite corner”] (*Museo* 166; *Museum* 27). Yet having so been described, the former security guard nonetheless appears to be *in* the “novela.” Along with the passenger, whose literary taste serves to embed the novel within the novel, he further suggests the looseness of the novel’s frame and the indeterminate quality of its ambit.

<sup>23</sup> Or, as Macedonio pronounces, “Ser personaje es soñar ser real” [“To be a character is to dream of being real”] (*Museo* 176; *Museum* 35).

Readers unaccustomed to experimental literature may find ironic Dulce-Persona's comment about the novel being "so well-organized," what with its "loose pages" (*Museo* 325, 369; *Museum* 159, 194) and semblance of an amorphous work-in-progress. Through his play with traditional principles of novelistic form, Macedonio appears to propound a paradigm shift, a redefinition of those very principles. As Stewart points out, "texts become increasingly 'formless' or antiformal as they move away from a given system of order [...] Thus the disorder of nonsense may be seen as a not-yet-incorporated form of order, an order without a context, without a place in the everyday lifeworld" (61). Does Macedonio contrive a guise of disorder? If so, to what end? In Engelbert's view, "what he hoped to achieve was nothing less than an alternative to the typical work of Western art; the 'open book,' the text-in-the-making, could he create it, would be the antithesis of the typical artifact of Western culture" ("Macedonio" 12). If Macedonio's mode of "playing" with order seems to involve "violating," "overturning," or just completely "reversing" it, we might recall that one "intention of play," as Brian Sutton-Smith suggests, "may be to upset the customary balance of things" (Stewart 65). In leaving the novel's boundaries undefined and furnishing it with more than fifty prologues, the author upends, or plays with, traditional conceptions of form. With regard to his characters' extra-novelistic existence, Macedonio, playing with established modes of characterization through the "nonsense operation[s]" of "reversals" and "play with boundaries," upsets readerly expectations regarding the customary limits of characters (Stewart 57; 85). Most interestingly, by alleging detachment from his characters and keeping them indeterminate—in essence, uncreated—, Macedonio leaves space for the reader to dream of them in greater detail and imagine them as his own creations.

Apart from possessing indeterminate boundaries with respect to their purview, the characters also have loose edges in terms of their identity, insofar as at times they are even

confused with one another. Macedonio's play with unstable identities furthermore supports his endeavor to effect "a moment of nothingness of the [reader's] conscious being." In this regard, Macedonio muddles not merely the line between individual characters, but also that which separates character from reader, and reader from author. In a footnote exalting absence, he informs us of the dazzling likeness between "El hombre que fingía vivir" ["The Man who Feigned to Live"] and "Quizagenio" ["Maybegenius"], "pues el hombre que no se sabía si era genio tiene predilección por confundirse respecto del hombre que fingía vivir" ["since the man who may or may not be a genius tends to get confused with the Man who Feigned to Live"] (*Museo* 209-10; *Museum* 64). Quizagenio, being well versed in metaphysics, is on at least one occasion interchangeable with the author;<sup>24</sup> in addition, he too is a creator, inventing "un cuento o drama cada día" ["a story or a plot every day"] and planning a novel (*Museo* 404; *Museum* 224), and his romantic, though imperfect, relationship with Dulce-Persona has a reflection in that of the Presidente and Eterna; moreover, like the Presidente, Quizagenio has difficulty telling stories while his sweetheart is listening. The author, for his part, "a veces es y a veces no es el Presidente" ["sometimes is and sometimes is not the President"] (*Museo* 272; *Museum* 117). Like the author and Quizagenio, the Presidente "prepara una novela" ["is preparing a novel"]

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<sup>24</sup> On the question of suicide and mental deterioration, a nondescript narrative voice volunteers, "Rectificaré (*como autor o como Quizagenio*) que no admito suicidio bajo monoconciencia del dolor en un instante demencial, y la demencia suicida, difieren" ["I will rectify the situation {*as the author or as Maybegenius*} by saying that I don't admit a difference between suicide under conditions of mono-consciousness in the demented instant of pain and suicidal dementia"] (*Museo* 345; *Museum* 176; emphasis mine). Such is Macedonio's alleged commotion of consciousness, a pseudo-editor in a footnote tells us that the author "a veces ha conocido el sudor y suspensión de ser él nada más que personaje" ["sometimes has known the sweat and suspension of feeling himself to be no more than a character"] (*Museo* 337; *Museum* 169). (What's more, apropos of "play with the boundaries of discourse," the inclusion of a spurious editor's footnote represents an additional Nonsense operation, in which, as Stewart elucidates, "The rapid shifting of the voice in power, the voice that is to be trusted, has the effect of a dispersal and scattering of the text and thereby a dispersal and scattering of the real" [108]. In reference to Macedonio and his characters, the fictitious narrator asks, "¿Tiene más realidad que ellos? ¿Qué es tener realidad?" ["Is he really more real than they are? What is it to be real?"] [*Museo* 337; *Museum* 169]. In this way, through a shifting of the textual structure and the voice in power, as well as through direct interrogation, Macedonio further displaces the novel's axis of meaning, and in so doing compels the reader to question the nature of both sense and existence.)

(*Museo* 372; *Museum* 197), which bears a curious resemblance to Macedonio's; the novel he is thinking of writing, "compartaría una concepción original de 'novelismo de la conciencia' o 'novela sin mundo'" ["would entail an original conception of 'novelism of the consciousness' or 'the worldless novel'"], in which, the Presidente writes, "juego con la muerte que ocurre y nunca mata: Donde Todo Vuelve De La Muerte" ["I play with a death that takes place, yet never kills: Where Everything Comes Back From Death"] (*Museo* 372, 374; *Museum* 197-98). Interestingly, according to the notes Quizagenio and Dulce-Persona find in his notebook, the "personajes que el Presidente ha configurado" ["characters that the President has sketched"] include two of the *Museo*'s own personages, "Eterna" and "Deunamor" (*Museo* 374, 376; *Museum* 199-200). The embedding of these themes and characters from the *Museo* in the Presidente's own unwritten novel constitutes a Nonsense "device" Tigges refers to as "imprecision or mixture"—analogous to Stewart's idea of "play with boundaries," Tigges himself notes, which "occurs when separate elements are not so much mirrored, or contrasted as one another's negation, but glide into one another without quite overlapping" (57). Whereas a perfect correspondence of elements might offer the reader a twinkle of sense, such "imprecision" in the *Museo* helps to render both meaning and identity unstable. Thus, lest the reader be certain of seeing the writer's reflection in the Presidente, Macedonio every so often ripples the waters; "En cuanto a mí, no soy el Presidente," he writes in a "Paréntesis" ["Parenthesis"] of the novel, adding "estoy por saber quién soy ahora" ["I'm about to find out who I am"] (*Museo* 366; *Museum* 192). At any rate, if any of the likenesses are clear, one of the author's selves is surely contained in "Deunamor" ["The Lover"], who awaits the moment "cuando llega de vuelta de la muerte su amada, que él llamaba Bellamuerta" ["for his love to return from the other side of death, the one he named

Bellamuerte”] (*Museo* 156; *Museum* 19).<sup>25</sup> And yet perhaps the ultimate confusion Macedonio aims to effect is that of the reader with the “Reader”...

### Skipping Dimensions (for the Reader)

If feeling ignored, slighted or neglected by more conventional novelists, the reader can take heart from the attention that the author pays him in the *Museo*. Macedonio does not mince his concerns: “Lo que me ocupa es el lector: eres mi asunto, tu ser desvanecible por momentos; lo demás es pretexto para tenerte al alcance de mi procedimiento” [“What bothers me is the reader: you’re my problem, your existence is invincible; the rest is just a pretext to keep you within earshot of these proceedings”] (*Museo* 403; *Museum* 223).<sup>26</sup> A pretext, indeed: Macedonio employs a host of strategies for involving the reader intensely in his proceedings. Both author and characters allude to the reader and address him directly, and the “Reader” himself appears as a character in several chapters. The author calls on the reader’s inventive capacities as well, hinting at different ways he can play creatively with the text, editing, revising, or even rewriting it per the dictates of his fantasy. Such activity transforms traditional literary parameters and often toys with the border between fiction and reality. The “nonsense operation”

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<sup>25</sup> In the time he composed the *Museo*, Macedonio was widower to Elena de Obieta, whom he immortalizes in the elegiac poem “Elena Bellamuerte.” In what may be seen as an attempt to distance himself from the condition of a widower in mourning—and/or tilt any vestige of verisimilitude in the text, Macedonio writes, “El autor conoció a Deunamor durante muchos años, tratándolo continuamente, y notó que a partir del deceso de su esposa, a quien aparecía amando intensamente, algún matiz inaprehensible casi en su conducta y en sus expresiones se había alterado de una manera inquietante aunque indefinida” [“The author knew the Lover for many years, seeing him often, and he noticed that after the death of his wife, whom he seemed to love immensely, there was an almost imperceptible shift in the shading of his conduct and expressions, which was troubling, although hard to define”] (*Museo* 198; *Museum* 53). Notwithstanding Deunamor’s portentous role in the text, his “Inexistencia” [“Inexistence”] (*Museo* 224; *Museum* 76) as well as his lack of sensibility and consciousness cause those moments of correspondence between him and Macedonio to be few and evanescent.

<sup>26</sup> Macedonio’s tone is actually a bit more deferential than Schwartz’s English translation might suggest. The first two clauses of the sentence I would render in this way: “What interests me is the reader: you’re my main concern [...]”

of “play with the boundaries of discourse,” Stewart observes, can involve “play with the boundary between character and author [...], between author and reader [...], and between reader and character” (85, 111); the writer of the *Museo*, peerless in his innovative provocations of the reader, employs all three. In exercising such a degree of artistic latitude, Macedonio moreover seeks to whittle away the edges of the reader’s own identity, carry him past the limen of the real and let him lose himself in the realm of reverie. “—Autor: Tú, lector, [...] podrías ahora entrarte en mis páginas, perderte del ser y librarte de la realidad y de estos problemas” [“Author: You, reader, { ... } you may now enter my pages, lose yourself and liberate yourself from reality and from these problems”] (*Museo* 330; *Museum* 164). Yet while the amenable reader who obeys this directive may attain a moment of nothingness of his conscious being, imagining himself an entity adrift in art’s eternity, such readerly submissiveness cannot be taken for granted. In fashioning ports of entry into the *Museo* and proposing the reader create it anew through the play of daydream, Macedonio tenders an invitation which the reader may be hesitant, unprepared or altogether unwilling to accept.

On account of the text’s various gaps in signification, the reader’s possibilities for playing with the *Museo* are multifold. From the first prologue Macedonio makes clear that he expects readerly participation—“es cuestión de que el lector colabore” [“it’s up to the reader to collaborate”] (*Museo* 137; *Museum* 5). He also indicates a preference for rebellious, antiformalist readers, dedicating his book to the “Lector Salteado” [“Skip-Around Reader”],<sup>27</sup> and placing an “Imprecación” [“Curse”] on the “Lector Seguido” [“Orderly Reader”] (*Museo* 273-74; *Museum* 119-20). “Skipping,” in Lindstrom’s view, “is one of the few creative abilities in use among the

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<sup>27</sup> In a way, the “Skip-Around Reader” could be a progenitor of the hop-around reader of Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch*; 1963], who is asked to jump around his book in order to complete one of its many possible readings. Lindstrom suggests that “one may well suspect Morelli [the literary critic in *Hopscotch*] of being a fictional figure of Macedonio, especially in light of Cortázar’s avowed admiration for the earlier writer” (59).

reading public” (37). She points out that skipping can be “creative” in the sense that “Freedom to restructure and abridge literary work means that each new reader will generate a new version of it” (39). Macedonio, applauding nonconformity, tells the skipping reader, “*eres el lector sabio, pues que practicas el entreleer que es lo que más fuerte impresión labra, conforme a mi teoría de que los personajes y los sucesos sólo insinuados, hábilmente truncos, son los que más quedan en la memoria*” [“you are a wise reader, since you practice inter-reading, which makes the most forceful impression, in keeping with my theory that characters and events that are only insinuated or skillfully truncated are the most memorable”] (*Museo* 273; *Museum* 119). While sympathizing with the skipping reader, Macedonio nonetheless expects him to be a bit more creative. “Rather than merely reorder what already exists,” Lindstrom suggests, “the reader must invent new elements” (41). With respect to the writer’s preference for personages “that are only insinuated,” Lindstrom concurs with Noé Jitrik, who “finds the Macedonian character notable for its vague and incomplete elaboration” (Lindstrom 45). As she explains, the characters’ “lack of recognizable features makes it impossible to situate them in any specific historical, geographical or societal context” (46). Yet whereas Huidobro in *Cagliostro* asks readers of his novel to participate by filling in the blank spaces left by his sparse description,<sup>28</sup> Macedonio leaves readers entire “hojas en blanco” [“blank pages”] (*Museo* 278; *Museum* 122)—to say (almost) nothing of his final prologue, which asserts that his is in fact “el primer ‘libro abierto’ en la historia literaria” [“the first ‘open book’ in literary history”], open to whoever is inclined “para corregirlo y editarlo libremente” [“to liberally edit or correct it”] (*Museo* 421; *Museum* 237).

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<sup>28</sup> In *Cagliostro*, rather than depict the heroine in a conventional third-person narrative, Huidobro switches to the second person and addresses the audience: “Lector, piensa en la mujer más hermosa que has visto en tu vida y aplica a Lorenza su hermosura. Así me evitarás y te evitarás una larga descripción” [“Reader, think of the most beautiful woman you have ever seen, and then apply her beauty to Lorenza. So you and I may both spare ourselves a long description”] (46; *Mirror of a Mage* 47).



Before making such a momentous request, however, Macedonio seeks to draw the reader deeply in the book and in so doing both demonstrate and suggest a playful mode of literary creation. As unconventional readers, such as skippers, are perhaps those best suited to participate creatively in the *Museo*, Macedonio aims to gain their favor specifically. Apart from dedicating his “novela” to the “Skip-Around Reader,” he furthermore includes a prologue “para el lector corto” [“for the abridged reader”] and another “Al Lector de Vidriera” [“To the Window-Shopping Reader”] (*Museo* 228-29, 221-23; *Museum* 79-80, 74-75). In the latter, Macedonio, aware of the modern reader’s limited attention span and “frágil contextura” [“fragile disposition”], contrives to win him over through the innovation of “Títulos-Obra” [“title-texts”], novels whose titles are so lengthy they comprise the entirety of the text (*Museo* 221; *Museum* 74). Perhaps his playful plan for consolidation of the text (a further ludic shifting of the novelistic frame) would feature his consolidated words, perfected in the workshop of Xul Solar; in his “Prólogo a lo nunca visto” [“Prologue to the Never-Seen”], the innovator offers examples of his new concoction, the “adjetivo compuesto” [“amended adjective”],<sup>29</sup> each of which references the reader (*Museo* 183; *Museum* 40). His last listing reads: “A ‘lo – menos - real, el – que – suena – sueños – de – otro, – y más fuerte – en realidad, – pues – no – la – pierde – aunque – no – lo – dejan – soñar – sino – sólo – re – soñar’ Lector” [“The ‘less-real,-he-who-dreams-the-dreams-of-the-other,-and-stronger-in-reality,-since-he-does-not-lose-it-although-they-won’t-let-him-dream-them-but-only-re-dream’ Reader”] (*Museo* 183; *Museum* 40). Of this unequaled adjective, Lindstrom contends, “This tormented form is tantamount to an admission that the entire episode has been a pretext for playing extravagant games with language” (111). While

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<sup>29</sup> “Compuesto” is a Spanish pun, signifying both “compound” and “repaired.” In playing with language, Macedonio suggests he also is renovating it.

sharing her appreciation for the “great ludic element in [Macedonio’s] verbal experimentation,” I also regard this form and the examples preceding it as further attempts to enfold the reader in the text.<sup>30</sup> So integral is the reader’s role in the *Museo*, not only the author but also the characters themselves think of him. Thus Dulce-Persona, changing her clothes in Chapter III, adverts self-consciously to his presence: “Y tampoco mire el lector, ésta y cada vez que me desvisto. Lea, pero por encima del hombro” [“The Reader shouldn’t look, either, now and any time I undress. Read, but only over your shoulder”] (*Museo* 308; *Museum* 144). In this way, Macedonio, through a little absurd humor (or, as he terms it, the “Illogic of Art”), designs to engage the reader, momentarily thwart his reason and draw him into the text. On another occasion, Dulce-Persona, considering Quizagenio’s course of action, opts to seek the reader’s counsel: “¿Qué opinará el lector, de tu plan? Qué descortesía, nunca lo consultamos” [“What will the reader think of your plan? How rude, we never consulted him in this”]. Whereupon responds the “Reader”: ““Soy tan interesado en vuestras vidas como discreto de ellas; estad seguros de que sólo me alejo cuando sospecho la fatalidad de un beso, y vuelvo cuando calculo que un espectador amistoso no es indiscreto. Ahora os atendía, cómo no, y aprobaba vuestro plan”” [“I am as interested in your ideas as I am discreet about them; you can be sure that I’ll only distance myself when I suspect the fatality of a kiss, and I’ll return once I’ve calculated that the friendly spectator would not be an indiscretion. Now, of course, I’m at your service, and I approve of your plan”] (*Museo* 316; *Museum* 151). No longer is the status of the reader’s textual presence open to debate, Macedonio would have us believe; on the contrary, the “Reader” has become so involved he better take care, lest he wind up like “el primer lector que se desterró de sí mismo y cayó al aire delgado de mi

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<sup>30</sup> What is more, some of the words compounded in this ultimate adjective (specifically, “‘he-who-dreams-the-dreams-of-the-other [...] although-they-won’t-let-him-dream-them-but-only-re-dream’ Reader”) appear to raise an intriguing question, one I will address a bit further on: to what extent would the reader’s dream of the *Museo* be shaped or confined by the author’s own vision of the text?

novela [...], leía fumando” [“the first reader who was exiled from himself and fell in the thin air of my novel {...}, smoking as he read”], and worrying the author when “caía a mis páginas la ceniza calentada” [“some hot ash fell into my pages”] (*Museo* 332; *Museum* 164-65). In this fashion, as he conspires with his characters and employs a bit of his “Conceptual Humor,” Macedonio strives to convince the reader of his intra-textual actuality and create for him both “a moment of intellectual nothingness” and “a moment of the nothingness of the conscious being.” Of course, the playful presence of the “Reader,”—or, for that matter, any character who goes by such a name—is disruptive, and causes the boundaries of the *Museo* further to transcend those of a conventional novel. What Stewart writes of jokes and riddles applies equally well to such scenes involving the “Reader”; they entail “a reflexive concern with problems of classifying utterances and situations [...], [as] playing with boundaries is always playing with, and honing, an ability to discriminate between contextual markers” (205). Not only the *Museo*’s absurd humor and breach of convention, but its metafictional nature too brings it close to the work of Nonsense. Regarding metafiction, Stewart writes, “since the context of this type of fiction is impossible, hermetic, a place that cannot happen that is the fiction itself, we may see its intimate connection with nonsense” (21). Already Macedonio has given us “*la Imposibilidad como criterio del Arte*” [“*Impossibility as the criterion for Art*”] (*Museo* 146; *Museum* 12)—and what greater impossibility than that of the reader gliding into the dimensions of art?

For the reader, perhaps the most absorbing and impossible of all the *Museo*’s episodes occurs in Chapter XVII, wherein Macedonio compounds fictive, metafictional and metaphysical layers into a dizzying, sublime, reason-thwarting vortex. The chapter begins as Quizagenio and Dulce-Persona are dialoguing about the Presidente, who as we know “sometimes is and sometimes is not” the author. Soon the conversation turns to Quizagenio’s own literary

“inventos” [“inventions”], whereupon Dulce-Persona entreats him to tell her one of his stories. Scarcely has he begun before the “Autor” [“Author”] interrupts to say, “A mí igualmente ya me pasó lo que está contando Quizagenio” [“What Maybegenius is relating already happened to me”] (*Museo* 405; *Museum* 225). Then, seemingly jealous of Dulce-Persona’s “actitud entusiasta” [“enthusiastic attitude”] when listening to Quizagenio, “en su mente [...] el más fino e inventivo contador de experiencias de vida” [“in her mind {...} the finest and most inventive teller of live experiences”], the “Author” further asserts himself: “Dulce-Persona no recuerda que yo exista como narrador. Mientras la joven dispone una bandeja con los ingredientes para un mate que va a obsequiar a Quizagenio para que no deje de contar cualquier detalle de lo ocurrido a su protagonista, te contaré lo mío, lector” [“Sweetheart has forgotten that I’m the narrator. While she gets a tray with the ingredients for a *mate*, which she’s going to ask Maybegenius to make her so that he doesn’t stop telling her a single detail of what happened with his protagonist, I’ll tell you my story, reader”] (*Museo* 405; *Museum* 225). What follows is an unlikely narrative, told by an unspecified narrator (whether the “Author” or Quizagenio, Macedonio does not make clear), whose thematic essence is not unlike that of the *Museo* itself, in that the story itself deals with storytelling and perpetuating life through abnormal psychology. In turn this tale too is interrupted, this time by “Quizagenio o Suplido” [“Maybegenius or Substitute”], the latter being the protagonist and teller of the interrupted tale, and the interruption itself mirrors one that will shortly be made by a “Lector” [“Reader”] (though not “*the* Reader,” for this reader-character is joined by others), who sharply protests the story’s departure from convention (*Museo* 407-08; *Museum* 226-27).<sup>31</sup> In short, what we are given is a story from a storyteller, who may or may not

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<sup>31</sup> In lieu of a conventional ending, the narrator, whose identity remains ambiguous, proposes instead that he read the first chapter of “‘El hombre con una sola nariz’ (novela increíble)” [“*The man with only one nose* (an incredible novel)”] (*Museo* 407; *Museum* 226), a title which might call to mind Edward Lear’s limerick “There was an Old

be the “Author,” about a storyteller telling a story, which is comparable to and framed within a novel that really isn’t a novel. That such a scene should devolve into a contentious quarrel between “Reader,” “Author,” “Personaje” [“Character”], “Demás lectores” [“The rest of the readers”], and finally, the Presidente (“interpelando al autor” [“questioning the author”]) only serves to quicken the swirl of the novel’s vertiginous vortex (*Museo* 407-08; *Museum* 227-28): caught up in a maelstrom of extra-novelistic characters and intra-novelistic reader- and author-characters, Macedonio’s readers—if indeed any still remain who have yet to slip into the *Museo*’s thin air—may well wonder if they can play the role of “Suplido” [“Substitute”] and so step into the story.

*(Space for the reader to slide into rarefied air of speculation.)*

In the art of the *Museo*, vertigo too plays its role. Macedonio, in so enthralling his audience, causes quite a row—yet whether the whirlwinds confounding sense set free or fetter the reader depends on just who makes the breezes blow. In “Para una teoría de la novela” [“Toward a Theory of the Novel”], Macedonio refers to Chapter III of the second part of the *Quijote* (1615) to expound on the purpose of provoking such dizziness:

Leed nuevamente el pasaje en que el Quijote se lamenta de que Avellaneda publique una inexacta historia de él; pensad esto: un “personaje” con “historia.” Sentiréis un mareo; creeréis que Quijote vive al ver a este “personaje” quejarse de que se hable de él, de su vida. Aun un mareo más profundo: hecho vuestro

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Man with a nose”—(“There was an Old Man with a nose / Who said ‘If you choose to suppose / That my nose is too long, You are certainly wrong!’ / That remarkable Man with a nose” [158]). The similar, Nonsensical names of Lear’s limerick and the imaginary novel of Macedonio’s allusion both defy convention precisely because they are so conventional—i.e., each stands out as extraordinarily absurd by virtue of its incredible ordinariness. Tigges, assaying Lear’s verse, writes, “The first line, which introduces the theme, is nonsensical in that it does not actually present an unusual fact: we would expect any man, young or old, to be provided with a nose, however long or short” (52).

espíritu por mil páginas de lectura a creer lo fantástico, tendréis el escalofrío de si no seréis vosotros, que os creéis al contrario vivientes, un “personaje” sin realidad [Read again the passage where the Quixote complains about Avellaneda publishing an inexact history of his deeds; think about this: a “character” with a “history.” You will feel vertigo; you will believe that the Quixote lives when you see this “character” complain of what is said about him and his life. Then an even deeper vertigo: with your mind so trained by a thousand pages of reading to believe the impossible, you will have the sudden shock of thinking that it is you, who believed yourself to be very much alive, that are the “character” without reality] (257-58; *Macedonio* 34-35).

For Macedonio, this is the novel’s cardinal element—an attempt to bring about in the reader “el mareo de su sentimiento de certidumbre de ser, el mareo de su yo” [“the vertigo of his certainty of self, the vertigo of his ego”] (258; *Macedonio* 35). Such a sensation, the nothingness of the conscious being, is, in his view, accompanied by a feeling of liberation from the confines of rationality and from death.

In his essay “Magías parciales del *Quijote*” [“Partial Magic in the *Quixote*”], Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) discusses the same chapter of Cervantes’s novel, positing however a slightly different idea:

¿Por qué nos inquieta que el mapa esté incluido en el mapa y las mil y una noches en el libro de *Las mil y una noches*? ¿Por qué nos inquieta que Don Quijote sea lector del *Quijote*, y Hamlet, espectador de *Hamlet*? Creo haber dado con la causa: tales inversiones sugieren que si los caracteres de una ficción pueden ser

lectores o espectadores, nosotros, sus lectores o espectadores, podemos ser ficticios”

[“Why does it disturb us that the map be included in the map and the thousand and one nights in the book of the *Thousand and One Nights*? Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious”] (68-69; 196).

While both Borges and Macedonio believe that “interior reduplication”<sup>32</sup> in literary art—that of the story within the story, the play within the play—may cause the reader to regard himself as no more than a fictive entity, they differ in their estimation of the overall effect that such reduplication produces in the reader. Whereas Macedonio deems such a feeling to be dizzying, yet ultimately liberating, Borges finds it disquieting. Are such inversions truly unsettling? In my opinion, they can be on occasion, and the precise effect depends upon the implication of the particular reduplication.<sup>33</sup>

In the *Museo*, the “internal reduplication” involves not merely endowing characters with “histories” and allegedly borrowing them from other works, but also (a playful attempt at) the fictive doubling of both reader and author. By representing himself as a character, Macedonio vivifies the illusory aspect of the text, seemingly proffering a hand to the timid reader as he

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<sup>32</sup> Here I use D. L. Shaw’s term. In his judgment, “The theme of [Borges’s] essay is that of interior reduplication in works of the imagination: the play within a play, the story within a story” (25).

<sup>33</sup> Apropos of authors who playfully fold their readers into their fiction, Italo Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* [*If on a winter’s night a traveler*; 1979] merits a mention here. Macedonio’s *Museo* differs from Calvino’s experimental novel in its metaphysical emphasis and absence of second-person narratives, but both texts do share a ludic, metafictional quality, and both pursue an active role for the reader, often addressing him directly and also featuring reader-characters.

makes a leap of faith through the looking-glass (or hourglass, as he and the author transgress not merely realism but time itself, embracing eternity in their flight from life). Stewart, in regard to such transgressive doubling, explains that “In each fiction where the author becomes a character and the sense of reading and writing become implicated in the text, the boundary between fiction and reality—between text and context—is dissolved and reformed, and the interpreted, the fictive, nature of reality is emphasized” (111).

Play with the boundary between fiction and reality may carry consequences, not only for the reader, but also for the characters and author, inasmuch as the ludic act itself may carry implications. After Dulce-Persona and Quizagenio speak of fleeing to life, they too feel “mareo” [“dizziness”], as well as “una agonía de nacer” [“birth pangs”], while Macedonio, for his part, “parece asustarse y creer tener el ser de personaje, atrapado y vencido por su propio invento” [“has a fright; he thinks he’s a character, trapped by his own invention”] (*Museo* 336-37; *Museum* 169). But is the inversion of art and life always vertiginous? Need it entail entrapment? Borges, in his beguiling story of Herbert Quain, adds an odd twist to writer-character relations when he purports to have been inspired by his own creation. Through his treatment of Quain, a fictitious author whose work is rich in games and inversions, Borges all but erases the border of reality and fiction as he plays with the idea of authorial invention and influence. “De la diversas felicidades que puede ministrar la literatura” [“Of the various pleasures offered by literature”], Quain affirms, “la más alta era la invención. Ya que no todos son capaces de esa felicidad, muchos habrán de contentarse con simulacros” [“the greatest is invention. Since not everyone is capable of this pleasure, many must content themselves with shams”] (“Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain” 102; “An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain” 78). “Para esos imperfectos escritores” [“For these imperfect writers”], Borges relates, Quain wrote his last



stories, one of which “insinúa *dos* argumentos” [“insinuates *two* arguments”] (“Examen” 102-03; “Examination” 78). He goes on, “El lector, distraído por la vanidad, cree haberlos inventado. Del tercero, *The Rose of Yesterday*, yo cometí la ingenuidad de extraer *Las ruinas circulares*” [“The reader, led astray by vanity, thinks he has invented them. I was ingenuous enough to extract from the third, “The Rose of Yesterday,” my story of “The Circular Ruins”] (“Examen” 103; “Examination” 78). Thus Herbert Quain’s ultimate inversion is the one penned by Borges himself, in an ending Shaw describes as a “verbal pirouette” (36). Unraveling the story in her study on Nonsense, Stewart writes, “Borges has invented a character who invents his own readers, who think they have invented the story. And among these duped readers is Borges, who has invented out of this invention his own story, ‘The Circular Ruins’” (111).<sup>34</sup> For Shaw, who considers “Herbert Quain” one of the “less successful” stories in *Ficciones* (1944), “Borges appears to be too identified with Quain” (34). Yet the identification of author with character is precisely what gives the literary paternity its dizzying effect. In the *Museo*, Macedonio claims to experience the same vertigo in his conception of the Presidente: “creí ser personaje sin vida de mi novela, creando al Presidente, creándolo tan parecido a mí” [“I believed I was a lifeless character in my novel, creating the President, creating him so similar to myself”] (*Museo* 367; *Museum* 193).

Whereas the close association of a writer with his character can confuse the border between fiction and reality, conceivably the most singular and vertigo-inducing effect for a reader arises from the suggestion that he himself may be no more than a figure of another’s

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<sup>34</sup> Apropos of paternity and invention, in “Macedonio Fernández: The Man Who Invented Borges,” Marcelo Ballvé intimates that much of Borges’s work (including—but not limited to—the widely studied Nonsense procedures in his stories) bears the influence of his friend and mentor. “The affinity for the paradoxical proposition is one of the many ways in which Borges took after his old friend, but hardly the only one [...] Both writers were incessant explorers of a handful of themes: the inexistence of individual personality, the elastic nature of time, the permeability of waking life to dreams and vice-versa; one might say: the instability of reality in general” (2).

dream. Both the *Museo* and Borges's "Las ruinas circulares" ["The Circular Ruins"] allude to this possibility, disturbing the reader and inciting him to question the nature of his existence. In the opinion of Marcelo Ballvé, what Borges does in "The Circular Ruins" is fuse two essentially Macedonian themes—"the illusive nature of reality, the idea of death as a metaphysical rabbit-hole" (5).<sup>35</sup> As he endeavors to invert reality for the reader, coaxing him through the rabbit-hole into the realm of art, Macedonio nonetheless fails to allay fully his fear of a hoax. After all, becoming a character in the *Museo* is somewhat of a worrisome proposition; already in his "prólogo indicador" ["Warning Prologue"] Macedonio tells us, "mis personajes son todos ligerísimos; en el instante en que dejen de escribir dejan ellos de hacer" ["my characters are all extremely minor; the second I leave off writing they stop doing things"] (*Museo* 212; *Museum* 66). Even Quizagenio confides, "pienso con miedo que quizá en el mismo instante el novelista alza su pluma del papel y cesa" ["it's with fear that I think perhaps now the novelist will raise his pen from the paper and *I will cease*"] (*Museo* 323; *Museum* 158; my italics<sup>36</sup>). In a similar—albeit far more forbidding—manner, the reader of "The Circular Ruins" partakes vicariously of the protagonist's terror at discovering "que otro estaba soñándolo" ["that someone else was dreaming him"] ("ruinas" 78; "Circular" 63). As Shaw observes, Borges in this story links the ideas of invention and an illusory reality "directly with existence itself through the relationship

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<sup>35</sup> In this regard, Ballvé makes reference to a letter Macedonio sent to Borges shortly after his father's death in 1938. In it Macedonio offers, among other ideas, two interesting metaphysical suggestions: "Niego el Mundo como unidad, identidad, continuidad" ["I deny the world as unity, identity, continuity"] (qtd in García 18; qtd in Ballvé 5); and, "Creo que la muerte 'tiene una vueltita'" ["I think death 'has a little twist to it'"] (qtd in García 21; qtd in Ballvé 5). In Ballvé's view, "Simply taking Macedonio's [aforementioned] propositions, and slightly reformulating them, one might come up with a one-sentence summation of many of Borges's famous stories: they portray reality as endlessly mercurial and death as something slightly other than what we might make it out to be" (5).

<sup>36</sup> Schwartz interprets the Spanish verb "ceso" in this sentence to be the third person singular form of the verb *cesar*, which means "to stop" or "to cease." Yet "ceso" is clearly the first person singular form, and I have therefore used my own translation here of this particular word, and italicized my departure from Schwartz's English version. Thus the subject of the verb "ceso" is not "el novelista" ["the novelist"] but rather "Quizagenio" ["Maybegenius"].

between creator and created” (26). The reader is thus left with a rather unsettling implication: “that of life as a dream: reality is an illusion; we exist in the mind of God in the same way merely fictional characters exist in the minds of writers”: “And if he left off dreaming about you. . .” (26; Carroll 165).

The inspiration for this tale, Borges related to Richard Burgin, was in fact none other than that very alarming question posed to Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*, which he featured just beneath the title (Burgin 53).<sup>37</sup> ““Why, you’re only a sort of thing in his dream!”” Tweedledee “contemptuously” tells Alice (Carroll 165). ““If that there King was to wake,’ added Tweedledum, ‘you’d go out—bang!—just like a candle”” (165). “The Tweedles greatly distress Alice,” Chloe Nichols notes. “They are positive that she is not real” (8). Such metafictional, metaphysical play with the boundary of reality and fiction is of course not new, and Macedonio would have been the first to admit it. “Todo se ha escrito, todo se ha dicho, todo se ha hecho” [“it’s all been written, it’s all been said, it’s all been done”] he advances in the “Prólogo a la eternidad” [“Prologue to Eternity”] (*Museo* 139; *Museum* 7). Aside from Cervantes (1547-1616), perhaps the most conspicuous influences on Macedonio’s aesthetic in the *Museo* are Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) and Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936).<sup>38</sup> For Unamuno’s Augusto Pérez (the

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<sup>37</sup> In a 1968 interview with Burgin, Borges moreover recalled having read *Alice* several times and being both enchanted and slightly disturbed by it:

Oh, it’s a wonderful book! But when I read it, I don’t think I was quite as conscious of its being a nightmare book and I wonder if Lewis Carroll was. Maybe the nightmare touch is stronger because he wasn’t aware of it, no? And it came to him from something inner.

I remember as a child I, of course, I greatly enjoyed the book, but I felt that there was—of course, I never put this feeling into words—but I felt something eerie, something uncanny about it. But now when I reread it, I think the nightmare touches are pretty clear (53-54).

<sup>38</sup> In this regard, the familiarity with, and appreciation for Pirandello’s work among Argentina’s literati merits note. Daniel Attala writes that “*Seis personajes en busca de un autor* se vio en Buenos Aires el 8 de agosto 1922, muy poco después de su estreno en Italia, y como allí, bastante ruidosamente” [*Six Characters in Search of an Author* was seen in Buenos Aires on August 8, 1922, just shortly after its premiere in Italy, and, as was the case there, it caused quite a stir”] (104). On the 26<sup>th</sup> of June of that same year, Attala adds, “Borges lo saluda, y Carlos Gardel canta en su honor [...] en el café Tortoni [in Buenos Aires], donde no sería raro, nos gustaría imaginar, que

protagonist of his “nivola,”<sup>39</sup> *Niebla* [*Mist*; 1914]), as for the wizard of Borges’s “Circular Ruins,” “le era más doloroso pensar que todo ello no hubiese sido sino sueño, y no sueño de él [...] ¡Soñar uno que vive..., pase; pero que le sueñe otro!” [“for him it was far more painful to reflect that in the end it had been nothing but a dream, and not his own dream { ... } To dream that one lives, and only to dream it—that perhaps might be endured, but to be only the dream of another!”] (*Niebla* 144; *Mist* 307) In a moment of fury, Augusto, far more brazen than any character of the *Museo* (including “The Boy with the Long Stick”), dares to accost and anathematize his own author—“¡Dios dejará de soñarle! Se morirá usted [...] y se morirán todos que lean mi historia” [“God will cease to dream you! You are to die { ... } and die shall all of those who read my story”] (*Niebla* 143; *Mist* 304).<sup>40</sup> Though powerless to determine his destiny,

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Macedonio se encontrase presente” [“Borges greeted him, and Carlos Gardel sang in his honor { ... } in the Café Tortoni {of Buenos Aires}, where it would not have been unusual, we would like to think, for him to have also made the acquaintance of Macedonio”] (105-06). Attala furthermore cites a 1928 article in the journal *Nosotros*, in which Homero Guglielmini declares Pirandello to be “el escritor italiano—de los que viven—más leído y estudiado en Argentina” [“the most read and studied living Italian writer in Argentina”] (qtd in Attala 106-07).

<sup>39</sup> Unamuno’s departure from convention led him to refer to his works not as “novelas” [“novels”] but “nivolas.” In Chapter XVII of *Niebla* it is his character Victor Goti in fact who creates this Spanish neologism: “[...] *nivola*, eso, ¡*nivola*! Así nadie tendrá derecho a decir que deroga las leyes de su género... Invento el género, e inventar un género no es más que darle un nombre nuevo, y le doy las leyes que me place” [“{...} *nivola*; that’s what it is, a *nivola*! For then none will have the right to say that I am annulling the laws of their *genre*—I am making up the *genre* {and to make up a *genre* is only to give it a new name}, and I am giving to it the laws that please me”] (*Niebla* 78; *Mist* 165-66).

<sup>40</sup> In an intriguing, ludic twist of fiction and reality, Augusto even calls into question the realness of his author, in a manner not unlike that of Macedonio in questioning his reader, as Attala has observed. “Se planta ante su ‘creador’ para echarle en cara una verdad muy similar a la que Macedonio espera dar al lector con su novela: ‘no es usted más que otro ente *nivolesco*,’ le lanza, un ente ‘de ficción’” [“He plants himself before his ‘creator’ to confront him with a truth very similar to the one that Macedonio hopes to give the reader with his novel: ‘you too are only a *nivolistic* entity,’ Augusto says, mocking the author—‘a fictitious entity’”] (102; *Niebla* 144; *Mist* 304). (Attala goes on to clarify the intentions of Augusto and Macedonio in casting doubt upon the existence of author and reader, respectively: “Pero lo cierto es que para Macedonio esta no es *una verdad*; es casi por el contrario, un absurdo, el absurdo que dará acceso al estado místico de desaparición de la muerte del horizonte de la subjetividad. Y se notará que Augusto [...] al echarle en cara aquella ‘verdad’ a su autor, busca por completo otra cosa: ‘Pues bien, mi señor creador don Miguel, ¡también usted se morirá’” [“But what’s certain is that for Macedonio this is not a truth; on the contrary, it is a near absurdity, an absurdity that eclipses one’s awareness of death. And it is clear that Augusto [...] in hurling this ‘truth’ at his author, has an entirely different objective: ‘Very well, then, my lord creator Don Miguel, you too are to die’”] [102; *Niebla* 143; *Mist* 304].) Similarly, the six characters of Pirandello’s celebrated play

being but Unamuno's creation, Augusto knows he will outlast his author, as all great characters do, and that in this sense he possesses a reality more potent than that of his creator. With this knowledge he taunts the author: “¿no ha sido usted el que no una, sino varias veces, ha dicho que don Quijote y Sancho son no ya tan reales, sino más reales que Cervantes?” [“Are you not the person who has said, not once but several times, that Don Quixote and Sancho are not only real persons but more real than Cervantes himself?”] (*Niebla* 139; *Mist* 295) At last apprehending his essence in art's eternity, Augusto cries, “¡Yo no puedo morirme; sólo se muere el que está vivo, el que existe [...] soy inmortal! [...] Un ente de ficción es una idea, y una idea es siempre inmortal” [“It can't be that I am to die. Only he can die who is alive, who exists {...} I am immortal {...} A character of fiction is an idea, and an idea is always immortal”] (*Niebla* 146; *Mist* 309-10). In a like manner, in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* [*Six Characters in Search of an Author*; 1921], Pirandello's personages possess the power of great art: “perché chi ha la ventura di nascere personaggio vivo, può ridersi anche della morte. Non muore più! Morrà l'uomo, lo scrittore, strumento della creazione; la creatura non muore più!” [“if you're lucky enough to be born alive as a character, well, you've nothing to fear from death! You can't ever die. The man will die, the author, the instrument of creation, yes, but the creation itself never dies!”] (*Sei* 37; *Six* 15) Daniel Attala detects a “paradigma común entre *Niebla* y *Seis personajes*” [“common paradigm in *Mist* and *Six Characters*”] (101), and discerns that “Unamuno revela muy otra intención que Macedonio: potenciar más que disminuir la realidad del personaje [...], mientras que lo que a Macedonio le interesa potenciar es la realidad del

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impugn the existence of the actors: “se noi [...] oltre la illusione, non abbiamo altra realtà, è bene che anche lei diffidi della realtà sua” [“if we {...} have no reality beyond illusion, then you too would do well not to trust in your own reality”] (*Sei* 108-09; *Six* 75). Of course, their purpose in calling reality into question differs from that of both Augusto and Macedonio; in doing so, they aim to explain themselves and their actuality to a disbelieving, uncomprehending audience.

lector” [“Unamuno reveals an intention very different from that of Macedonio: to strengthen rather than lessen the character’s reality {...}, while what Macedonio wishes to strengthen is the reader’s reality”] (102). To his astute observation I would add that if at times Macedonio causes his vaguely drawn characters to appear real by providing them with an extra-novelistic existence, it may be for the purpose of making his reader, like the reader of the *Quijote*, feel the dizziness of inexistence.<sup>41</sup> In regard to the relationship between creator and created, so portentous in “The Circular Ruins,” Engelbert perceives that “whereas for Unamuno and Pirandello the creation of the individual by the author is a paradigm, a reenactment of the creation of the individual by his Maker, Macedonio’s purpose is precisely to negate this paradigm” (*Macedonio* 164).

Indeed—yet the paradigm is not so easily negated, in part due to the reader’s instinctive resistance and circumspection and in part because in the *Museo* Macedonio at times evinces mutually exclusive objectives. What’s more, many in his audience may be taken aback by the novelty of his proposal. Readers traditionally tend to think of characters as created by an author. Macedonio’s unprecedented invitation to participate in his “open book” thus may leave readers disconcerted. As Lindstrom points out, “None of us, no matter how able he may be in real-world comportment, has developed skills as a character in a fictional work” (56). And, notwithstanding our respective proficiencies—or probable lack thereof—in operating in a fictional capacity, some of us may be understandably wary of submitting to such a proposition. For his part, Macedonio anticipates such readerly resistance. Chapter V in fact features author and reader in active combat: “Tirones entre autor y lector para arrastrar a éste al desvanecimiento de sí en personaje. El lector lo desea, pero no se atreve a renunciar por siempre a la vida, teme quedar encantado por

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<sup>41</sup> Unamuno likely would esteem Macedonio for holding such a purpose. As Victor avers to Augusto, “lo más libertador del arte es que le hace a uno dudar de que exista” [“the most liberating effect of art is that it makes one doubt whether one does exist”] (*Niebla* 136; *Mist* 289).

la novela. No sabe que el que entra a la Novela no torna” [“Struggle between the reader and author; the author wants to pull the reader towards the fading away of his being in character. The reader wants it, but he doesn’t dare to renounce life forever, he’s afraid to be spellbound by the novel. He doesn’t know that he who enters the novel never returns”] (*Museo* 331; *Museum* 164). Yet the reader does know, for Macedonio has just told him. Even if we overlook the slightly ominous prospect of forever renouncing life, and attribute to Macedonio’s “Illogic of Art” or “Conceptual Humor” the aforementioned passage, his aims do sometimes seem contradictory. On the one hand Macedonio wishes to raise the reader’s awareness of the act of reading—(“Yo quiero que el lector sepa siempre que está leyendo [...]” [“I want the reader to always know he is reading” {...}]), yet on the other, he wants the reader unaware, “cuando no está en guardia y en conciencia de hallarse ante un plan literario” [“when he isn’t on guard and conscious that he is dealing with a literary campaign”]—so that he effectually loses himself in the text (*Museo* 173-74; *Museum* 32). “No espera, ni advierte luego, haber sido conquistado” [“He won’t expect, nor later realize, that he has been conquered”], the author adds, foiling his own artifice by so adverting to it (*Museo* 174; *Museum* 32).

Thus, if the reader is to accede to Macedonio’s proposal, he must do so of his own volition. Doing so, however, need not entail relinquishing his power to invent, or assuming the precise form of the character that Macedonio might dream him to be, for there is no such form. Engelbert opines that the *Museo* “will strive not to provide an author-created core of meaning for the reader to unearth” (“Macedonio” 12). Indeed—as I have argued, through the use of Nonsense operations, Macedonio avoids establishing any central “author-created core of meaning,” and instead calls for new, more interactive ways of reading and “the examination of new modes of meaning in literature” (13). “La verdadera ejecución de mi teoría novelística” [“The true

execution of my novelistic theory”], he suggests in the final prologue, “sólo podría cumplirse escribiendo la novela de varias personas que se juntan para leer otra, de manera que ellas, lectores-personajes, lectores de la otra novela personajes de ésta, se perfilaran incesantemente” [“can only be achieved by various people, who have gotten together to read another novel, to write it—so that they are reader-characters, readers of the other novel and characters in this one, will incessantly create themselves”] (*Museo* 422; *Museum* 237). In this way, the *Museo*’s design proffers a path for further ludic metafiction, as if Macedonio were saying to the proximate reader-character-author of the text, “Act so that there is no use in a center” (Stein 188). Were his plan successfully executed, the ideal, perpetually loose axis of the *Museo* would ever preclude the use of a central core of meaning, thereby always placing emphasis not on the author, but on the next reader-character-writer, thus collapsing the creator-created opposition. The loose structure does not entrap the reader-character within the dimensions of the author’s creation, but empowers and encourages him to skip, i.e. to transcend those dimensions and devise new ones through sense-inverting, self-perpetuating play, propelling an infinite cycle of invention,<sup>42</sup> wherein each new reader-author represents one revolution of the cycle, and each new version of the open book is essentially the dream of the reader.

Nichols suggests that in her travels through Wonderland, Alice “is actually examining the contents of her own mind” (6). The last chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass*, “Which Dreamed It?,” depicts Alice wondering “who it was that dreamed it all” (239). “It must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too!” (240) In the *Museo*, while the changeable nature of reality offers much to the imagination, it is

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<sup>42</sup> Hurrah for Herbert Quain’s clairvoyance! Not everyone, of course, is capable of invention. In the *Museo*’s posterity, those imperfect writers without power to create will have to content themselves with shams.



clear withal who dreamed it all... “Por último, reconócame este mérito” [“Finally, grant me this merit”], Macedonio beseeches the reader, “reconócame que esta novela por la multitud de sus inconclusiones es la que ha creído más en tu fantasía” [“grant me that this novel, because of the multitude of its inconclusions, has been created<sup>43</sup> largely in your fantasy”]... (*Museo* 416-17; *Museum* 234)

...in “a boat beneath a sunny sky,  
lingering onward dreamily” (*Carroll* 241),  
the reader floats upon the sea of his fantasy,  
whilst its waters toss,  
churn,  
overturn  
his illusory reality...

“La que tiene voz cercana nos zozobra y ancho rumor igual en los ébanos vastos que jaspean la hondura y la altura”  
[“We are capsized by both nearby voices and broad murmurs, vast ebonies that marble the heights and the depths  
alike”]  
(*Museo* 390; *Museum* 212)

“Till human voices wake us, and we drown”  
T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

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<sup>43</sup> In Macedonio’s sentence, “creído” is the present participle of the verb “creer,” which means “to think” or “to believe.” Schwartz’s translation of this word as “created” might lead some to surmise she has mistaken the participle of “creer” for that of “crear” [“to create”], which is not “creído” but “creado.” However, given the context, I consider Schwartz’s rendering to be in fact quite felicitous, for, as the *Museo*’s “metafísico” [“Metaphysician”] asseverates—and the wizard of “The Circular Ruins” attempts to demonstrate, “aparecernos en una mente es nacer” [“to appear in a mind is to be born”] (*Museo* 361; *Museum* 188).

## CHAPTER IV

Oysters and Rocks, Sawdust and Socks, *or*

The Curious Case of F. Scott Fitzgerald

Playful reader, in this ultimate chapter of my study, you likely are expecting the very quintessence of play and Nonsense, a examination of aforesaid elements in the work of such writers as Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Christian Morgenstern, Tristan Tzara, Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, Samuel Beckett, E.E. Cummings, (email your alternative to alexfobes@yahoo.com)—indeed, any one of this panoply of modernists might serve as a fitting subject in a common-sensical culmination of all the terrain we have been traversing, would you not deem it so?

Nonsense! F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940), author, cook, kook, manipulator, and manufacturer of much literary Nonsense, laments the lack of gastronomic connoisseurs at his table. In *The Crack-Up* (1945),<sup>1</sup> he proffers a few favorite dishes:

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<sup>1</sup> Published posthumously, *The Crack-Up* was edited by Edmund Wilson, who encountered the indubitably succulent dishes listed above in Fitzgerald's "Note-Books." Wilson writes that the author had carefully sorted out

1. *Turkey Cocktail*: To one large turkey add one gallon of vermouth and a demijohn of angostura bitters.
2. *Turkey à la Française*: Take a large ripe turkey, prepare for basting and stuff with old watches and chains and monkey meat. Proceed as with cottage pudding.
3. *Turkey and Water*: Take one turkey and one pan of water. Heat the latter to the boiling point and then put it in the refrigerator. When it has jelled, drown the turkey in it. Eat. In preparing this recipe it is best to have a few ham sandwiches around in case things go wrong (193).

If Fitzgerald's humor here is self-evident, his meaning is less so. Offered as such, without the potentially orienting context of a story or novel, his recipes do not lend themselves to facile understanding. Turkey dishes? Cocktail recipes? Artistic ways to dispatch unwanted guests? Or merely playful Nonsense? Stewart posits that Nonsense and play both "involve a transgression of common-sense interpretive procedures," often by "juxtaposing two or more universes of discourse and thereby erasing a common-sense context" (39).

Whether Gilles Deleuze took umbrage at *Turkey à la Française*, we know not; we do know, however, that he perused this particular cookbook; the focus of one chapter, or "series of paradoxes," in his *Logic of Sense*, is none other than Fitzgerald's 1936 essay "The Crack-Up" from the eponymous collection. Deleuze takes the piece as his point of departure to address the breakdown of sense in relation to alcoholism:

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his sundry jottings and "grouped them under alphabetical headings, almost as if he were preparing a book to be read as well as a storehouse for his own convenience" (qtd in Fitzgerald *Crack-Up* 91). The selection above appears in the section Fitzgerald titled "*Nonsense and Stray Phrases*" under the subheading "TURKEY REMAINS AND HOW TO INTER THEM WITH NUMEROUS SCARCE RECIPES" (193). Not so scarce, in fact: Fitzgerald tenders ten further recipes ("*Turkey Mongole*," "*Turkey Mousse*," "*Feathered Turkey*," "*Stolen Turkey*," etc.), assuring us "Not one but has been tried and proven—there are headstones all over America to testify to the fact" (193-94).

When Fitzgerald or [Malcolm] Lowry speak of this incorporeal metaphysical crack and find in it the locus as well as the obstacle of their thought, its source as well as its drying up, sense and nonsense, they speak with all the gallons of alcohol they have drunk which have actualized the crack in the body (157).

Interestingly, in spite of the praise Deleuze lavishes on Lewis Carroll and the *Alice* books in *The Logic of Sense*, he for the most part limits his analysis of Fitzgerald to the author's personal life (namely, his alcoholism), and includes only cursory remarks about his fiction, wholly neglecting the Nonsense elements therein.

As this study focuses on the play of Nonsense in modernist fiction and poetry, we will steer clear of such biographical and philosophical speculation; in preference, we will examine the heretofore overlooked ludic mode and Nonsensical strain of Fitzgerald's early writing, which explains much of his style and provides perhaps the principal key to understanding *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Whereas the writers most widely thought to have been an influence on his novels and stories are Compton Mackenzie (1883-1972), H. G. Wells (1866-1946), and Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), Fitzgerald frequently made reference to *Alice*, lauded Stephen Leacock's (1869-1944) *Nonsense Novels*, and applauded the near-nonsensical wit and style of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). While his best fiction fuses romanticism with realism, to be sure, we can better comprehend the nature of its romantic elements by observing the predilection for Nonsense Fitzgerald exhibited in his youth, the Nonsense techniques he employed in his early writing, and how his ludic approach to creation coincided with the carefree defiance of the Jazz Age and led to the refinement of the unmistakable, lyric style that distinguishes him as an exceptional artist. In his anthology of criticism on Fitzgerald, Kenneth E. Eble reminds us that "style, as has been said over and over, is his great strength" ("Introduction" 5). Eble in fact deems it necessary to

apologize for not including so much as one article focusing on Fitzgerald's style in his 1973 collection, for of the few he found that addressed this facet of his work, none "seemed sufficiently perceptive to warrant inclusion" (5). He closes with a caveat: "Anyone daring to write about Fitzgerald's style probably ends up quoting so often that the critic's own intentions get put aside in embarrassment over what little he is contributing" (5). In this chapter, I shall keep his counsel in mind as I dare to demonstrate how Fitzgerald's felicity of expression evolved from a penchant for Nonsense and a playful way of composing.

In Fitzgerald's honest portrayal of 1920s America in *The Great Gatsby*, we nonetheless find a strange preponderance of elements germane to Nonsense. There are portmanteaus and neologisms ("gonnegtion" [75, 88, 180], "Oggsford" [76, 179]<sup>2</sup>, "Eckhaust" [66], "Catlips" [66], "Katspaugh" [74], "Gatsby"<sup>3</sup>); ironic incongruities (e.g. the peddler who "bore an absurd resemblance to John D. Rockefeller" [31]); inversions (e.g. that of Gatsby's "career as Trimalchio" [119]); ambiguities (e.g. "the secret of Castle Rackrent" [90], and of course the very mystery of Gatsby himself); there is serializing (e.g. Myrtle's odd list of incongruous items—"A massage and a wave and a collar for the dog and one of those cute little ash trays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother's grave" [41], Nick's celebrated compendium of all "those who came to Gatsby's house" [65-68], Jimmy Gatz' "GENERAL RESOLVES" [181-82] ); the upending of sense in dialogue (as in the confused conversation that takes place at the end of Gatsby's party [58-60]); discourse that denies itself (e.g. the contradictory rumors surrounding Gatsby [36-37, 48-51, 53-54, 65, 69-71, 103, 114, 128-29,

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<sup>2</sup> More than mere mispronunciations of "connection" and "Oxford," these utterances of Meyer Wolfsheim's utterances fit cleverly into the novel's pattern of correspondences and echoes, as I later will explicate.

<sup>3</sup> Though "Eckhaust," "Catlips," "Katspaugh," and "Gatsby" appear in the novel as surnames, they are all without question Fitzgerald's invention. (I.e. Good luck trying to find real people with these names!)

135-36, 141-42], or “That unfamiliar yet recognizable look in [Gatsby’s] face” [141] ); play with scale and dimension (e.g. the gigantic eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, with “retinas” “one yard high” [27]); the denial of time (““Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’” [116]); and the altogether preposterous (e.g. Gatsby’s car: “swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns” [68]). The presence of so many elements typically found in literary Nonsense does not of course make *Gatsby* itself a work of Nonsense; but it is astounding that in spite of their preponderance, Fitzgerald’s representation of American life is still considered realistic. Interestingly, most of the aforementioned Nonsense, which we will examine later in this chapter, relates in some way to Gatsby himself. All of it is created through play—i.e. in short, through a sharp departure from the normal, conventional, or comprehensible; and all of it can be traced to Fitzgerald’s early fiction and occasional drama.

#### Appreciating the Farce in the Apprentice Fiction

Fitzgerald evinced a preference for Nonsense in his formative years, which were extraordinarily prolific.<sup>4</sup> We know that by age sixteen Fitzgerald must have been familiar with *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, for his story “The Trail of the Duke” (1913)<sup>5</sup> refers directly to it, and in a context curiously felicitous. The main character, a young man named Dodson Garland, is dispatched by a capricious femme fatale, Mirabel Walmsley, to find “The Duke” who

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Yates notes that “The individual pieces which [Fitzgerald] composed [between 1909, the date of his first published story, and 1920]—stories, plays, poetry, satire, and even song lyrics—run close to one hundred in number” (19). For this reason, Yates writes, “the sudden success” of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920)—completed when he was just twenty-three—“was only to a small degree ascribable to chance” (19).

<sup>5</sup> “The Trail of the Duke” was originally published in June 1913 in the *Newman News*, a publication of the Newman School in Hackensack, New Jersey, where Fitzgerald was a student prior to his arrival at Princeton University in the fall of that same year (West *Spires* xix).

has wandered out of their Manhattan house. Dodson knows only that “The Duke of Dunsinlane or Artrellane or some lane or other was to arrive today to see Mirabel’s papa” (*Spires and Gargoyles* 40).

On his weary trail, he visited more restaurants and more hotels, ever searching, sometimes thinking he saw an oasis and finding it only a mirage. He had consumed so much ginger ale that he felt a swaying sea-sickness as he walked; yet he plodded on, hotter and hotter, uncomfortable, and, as Alice in Wonderland would have said, *uncomfortabler* (41-42; emphasis added).

Fitzgerald is likely alluding to the fourth chapter of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*,<sup>6</sup> where Alice finds herself in a condition similarly disagreeable: “It was much *pleasanter* at home,” thought poor Alice, “when one wasn’t always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits” (32; emphasis added). Not only does Dodson’s thought (i.e. as it is made known to us by the third-person omniscient narrator) match Alice’s with its solecism, but the predicament that engendered his thought corresponds to the one Alice finds herself in: like Dodson (read: Dodgson),<sup>7</sup> she too has been sent out on a wild-goose chase. On her errand, she must locate “the fan and the pair of white-kid gloves” for the White Rabbit (31). And whereas Dodson on his mission incurs a thirst that leads him to drink inebriant ginger ale, feel a “swaying sea-sickness,” and see a mirage, Alice on her journey encounters a bottle labeled with the words “DRINK ME”—a directive she naturally follows—and the potent potion causes her to change size (32). Oddly, both quests are occasioned by noblesse, and both are portrayed by their

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<sup>6</sup> Although the second chapter of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* opens with an utterance that is also similar to Dodson’s in its ungrammatical aspect (“‘Curiouser and curiouser!’” [16]), the analogousness of Alice’s situation in the fourth chapter to that of Dodson’s, in addition to other parallels between the fourth chapter and “The Trail of the Duke” (which I assay in the balance of this paragraph), lead me to believe that Fitzgerald’s reference was not haphazard but calculated and deliberate.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis Carroll was the pseudonym of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson.

instigators as matters of life or death: whereas Dodson's hunt began because of the calamitous disappearance of "The Duke" ("Oh, I shall die if he's lost," Mirabel grieves [40]), Alice sets off on her search because the White Rabbit fears mortal reprehension from "The Duchess" ("The Duchess! The Duchess! Oh my dear paws! Oh my fur and whiskers! She'll get me executed, as sure as ferrets are ferrets!" [31]). Whether or not Fitzgerald's decision to introduce a "small white poodle" near the end of his story was inspired by the appearance of a "dear little puppy" near the end of Carroll's chapter (38), his allusion to *Alice* is nonetheless apt and suggests that he had not just read Carroll's book but had probably been enchanted by it.

Though "The Trail of the Duke" does not fall strictly in the genre of Nonsense, it playfully employs two common features of Nonsense literature—ironic inversions and uncertain identities. While the latter is also certainly an element often found in detective fiction, Fitzgerald's use of it here is both comic and evocative of carnival; from the story's very start he creates a picture of ebullient life: "It was a hot July night. Inside, through screen, window and door, fled the bugs and gathered around the lights like so many humans at a carnival, buzzing, thugging, whirring" (39).

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin writes of the importance of the mask in carnival and its connection to the "merry negation of uniformity and similarity [for] it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life" [...] (40). In her chapter on making Nonsense by way of "reversals and inversions" (57-84), Stewart posits that "Similar states of disequilibrium appear in carnival and rites of inversion proper. Here the mayor is a tramp and the tramp is a mayor, the servant is the master and the master becomes a



servant” (65).<sup>8</sup> Such is the case in “The Trail of the Duke,” where the object of Dodson’s search, a “French Duke” (41), turns out to be a “small white poodle” called “Dukey” (43). Fitzgerald’s farcical tale of mistaken identity adds yet another ironic twist when Dodson confuses a local vagrant and ex-convict for the distinguished French “Duke of Matterlane” because of his “side whiskers” (41-42). “In Nonsense,” opines Tigges, “identity is highly insecure and erratic” (79).

While Ralph Curry and Janet Lewis suggest that the story “parodies the idle rich, ‘grumbling at polo’ and consuming ‘oceans of mint juleps’” (6), “The Trail of the Duke” minces but a mild reproof: we can tell Fitzgerald envies Dodson his luxury of leisure to pander to the whimsy of Miss Walmsley:

‘Now,’ thought the young man, ‘what shall I do? I can go to the theatre and melt. I can go to a roof garden and be sung to by a would-be prima donna, or—or go calling’ [...] The lucky youth yawned, rolled over, yawned again and rose to a sitting position where he yawned a third time and then got to his feet (40).

The playful Nonsense Fitzgerald employs thus overshadows any earnest criticism of Manhattan’s aristocracy and its ethics, or lack thereof; Dodson is not immoral—he is “lucky.”

The use of Nonsense elements befits Fitzgerald’s playful portrayal of the relaxed rich, removed as they are from the struggles of the working class. “Once the world of everyday life and realism is cut off from the fiction,” Stewart writes, “there is a concurrent movement toward play time” (118). Though such a play-work opposition does not always hold true, it nevertheless

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<sup>8</sup> If, as Kristeva has suggested, “carnavalesque discourse is an insult to official discourse—the discourse of law—and that carnivalesque discourse is distinguished by a law that is a transgression, and thereby an antilaw” (Stewart 65), then the relation between carnivalesque discourse and official discourse is comparable to the relation of Nonsense to sense; carnivals can thus be seen as functioning in a manner akin to Nonsense, as both essentially upend conventional order. (See Julia Kristeva, *Le Texte du roman*. The Hague: Mouton, 1970, p. 162).

may help shed light on Fitzgerald's representation of leisurely, wealthy figures in his early fiction; Stewart expounds that

The idea of play as a directionless activity is pervasive, lying at the heart of the establishment of play's inverse—the activities of work. One of work's most prevalent characteristics is its productiveness, its closure-made-manifest. Conversely, the production of nothingness, a quality mirrored in the very status of play, comes to be characteristic of all play activities. Nonsense makes nonsense and is thus in this sense a closed and self-generating field. While the work of the discourse of everyday life is a set of purposes at hand, the work of nonsense is reflection and self-perpetuation. Nonsense is 'good for nothing' (119).

Even Dodson's attempt at completing his one task, finding "The Duke," is ineffectual and awkward. "He strode aimlessly, hot and muddled. He wished he had asked Mirabel the Duke's name and personal appearance, but it was now too late. He would not convict himself of such a blunder" (41). Whereas returning to his fiancée to find out such details would probably be critical to his success in locating an unknown "Duke" in a large metropolis, the dandyish Dodson deems that in his case the real "blunder" is not to be—but rather to *appear*—foolish. He likely knows that failure in his search will not harm his relationship with Mirabel; of greater concern is the maintenance of his image. As Dodson's condition of idleness is conducive to play, Fitzgerald's lighthearted use of Nonsense elements to represent Dodson's carefree disposition and nonsensical search is thus suggestive and appropriate.

"The Trail of the Duke" is not an anomaly among Fitzgerald's early stories. Like "A Luckless Santa Claus" (1912), it portrays the pointless peripatetic wanderings of a young beau trying to please a capricious lady. These and many such tales, as Curry and Lewis have observed,

are written in the style of Stephen Leacock's *Nonsense Novels* (1911), which Fitzgerald had acknowledged a fondness for. Leacock, in addition to his numerous other occupations,<sup>9</sup> was also a caricaturist of the idle rich and "powerfully influenced by Lewis Carroll" in his writing ("Obituary" 218).<sup>10</sup> In his volume on humor, he explains his frequent use of a form in which "words and phrases are rushed forward into a significance which they won't bear on closer inspection" (*Humour* 39). As an example, consider his famous line of Nonsense from "Gertrude the Governess: or, Simple Seventeen": "Lord Ronald said nothing; he flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions" (*Nonsense* 73).<sup>11</sup> In similar Nonsense maneuvers, Fitzgerald's fiction likewise effects a breach of the laws of quantum physics. In "The Old Frontiersman" (1916), the "b'ar hunter," "Davy Underbush," is "completely invisible and inaudible," and runs "with his feet completely off the ground to leave no clue for the watchful redmen" (*Spires* 142-43). In "The Usual Thing" (1916), an unusual

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<sup>9</sup> The English-born Canadian Leacock, a social scientist, lecturer on political economy, professor, university administrator, and political journalist, is perhaps best known as a humorist and the author of more than fifty books.

<sup>10</sup> From Leacock's obituary in *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*: "The lives of Stephen Leacock and Lewis Carroll have many parallels. Both were engaged in academic work, one in political science and the other in mathematics, and both made important contributions in the field of nonsense and humour. Their best work involves an adaptation of their chief academic work to the field of nonsense. Lewis Carroll achieved his effects by applying the abstraction of mathematics to biological material. Political science was used to much the same effect" (218).

In his preface to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Leacock manifests his admiration for Carroll's brilliance, and perhaps helps to collapse the play-work opposition: "Many of my friends are under the impression that I write these humorous nothings in idle moments when the wearied brain is unable to perform the serious labours of the economist. My own experience is exactly the other way. The writing of solid, instructive stuff is easy enough. There is no trouble in writing a scientific treatise on the folk-lore of Central China, or a statistical enquiry into the declining population of Prince Edward Island. But to write something out of one's own mind, worth reading for its own sake, is an arduous contrivance only to be achieved in fortunate moments, few and far between. Personally, I would sooner have written *Alice in Wonderland* than the whole *Encyclopædia Britannica*" (x).

<sup>11</sup> Stewart's discussion on "the use of simultaneity in making nonsense out of common sense" (146 [146-70]), may further help to illuminate Leacock's application of Nonsense methods in this story, which—like Fitzgerald's "The Usual Thing" by "Robert W. Shameless"—parodies Robert W. Chambers' historical novels, as Curry and Lewis have pointed out (6). By riding "madly off in all directions," Lord Ronald demonstrates how "simultaneity flaunts a problem in both rule and practice—the impossibility of time being in more than one place at once" (Stewart 146). Posits Stewart: "Simultaneity takes place in an impossible context, it splits perception into two or more disjunctive axes, yet it presents itself with an integrity that is well-defined" (168). In Fitzgerald, we will examine such simultaneity in his puns, wordplay, and sundry musical allusions.

thing happens: “An orange rolled from the table down to the grass, then up again onto a chair where it lay orange and yellow in the sun” (132).

Both Leacock and Fitzgerald occasionally toy with Nonsense solely for the sake of creating entertainment. If an ancillary objective of their sport is to poke fun at the conventions and melodrama in popular fiction, their parodies are nonetheless more humorous than they are satirical. In both Fitzgerald’s “The Usual Thing” and Leacock’s “Gertrude,” everyday objects appear comically endowed with magical power. In the latter, “a dipper full of gin and bitters” has the capacity to transform its drinker instantly into “a high-bred English gentleman” (*Nonsense* 74). And yet irrespective of the characters’ gin consumption, or lack thereof, each witnesses “the moon sweeping in great circles around the horizon” (83). In Fitzgerald’s tale, not only the fruit but also man-made objects seem exempt from the laws of external reality. Lefleur’s car, on a par with Gatsby’s with regard to its peculiarity, is the subject of fantastic hyperbole:

Up to this time he had been running on two cylinders. He now threw on two more, and the car, careening for a second on its front wheels, righted itself and continued with its speed redoubled [...] They were late, and realizing it, he threw on the last two cylinders [...] [The car] stopped, turned around three times, and then bounded off at twice its former speed (*Spires* 134-35).

Leacock employs a like hyperbole in his description of Gertrude, whose parents “had both died years before she was born” (*Nonsense* 76):

On her breast the girl wore a locket in which was enshrined a miniature of her mother, while down her neck inside at the back hung a daguerreotype of her father. She carried a portrait of her grandmother up her sleeve and had pictures of

her cousins tucked inside her boot, while beneath her—but enough, quite enough (76).<sup>12</sup>

Of both writers' use of exaggeration, our interpretation depends on the context in which the information is presented. Stewart reasons that

in nonsense, size becomes determined by those things inside the boundary of the text [...] This is the tendency of the “whopper”-telling session to pile hyperbole upon hyperbole, for measurement becomes a matter of alignment internal to the mode of discourse once an absolute break to the “real world” is effected” (102).

Presented as they are in the context of these playful parodies, the hyperboles do still possess a speck of sense; we can decipher that Lefleur sought acceleration by all means available, and that Gertrude truly treasured the memory of her family. As Leacock himself admits in *Humour: Its Theory & Technique*, “Sometimes the exaggeration goes beyond the bounds of what is possible in the physical world, yet retains a ludicrous analogy with common sense” (33). While Tigges, who limits his focus to a “kernel corpus of literary nonsense” and labels it a genre (216), contends that Nonsense “cannot [...] be a satire or a burlesque or a parody (other genre labels), since it is the prime characteristic of nonsense not to make a ‘point’ or draw a moral, not to satirize, to ridicule or to parody [...]” (49-50), Stewart points out that even *Alice* can be interpreted as a parody,<sup>13</sup> that “the taking over of one text by another is a form of negation, of

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<sup>12</sup> Fitzgerald's “Little Minnie McCloskey” (1916) features a nearly equivalent hyperbole, in which the obtrusive narrator similarly breaks off his description and playfully draws attention to artifice:

She was known affectionately to her companions as ‘Piggy’ McCloskey. (All the girls had nicknames. How they got them no one knew.) Amy Gulps was called ‘Fatty,’ perhaps because she was fat; Mary Munks was called ‘Red,’ conceivably because she had red hair. Phoebe Cohop was called ‘Boils,’ possibly because—(but enough, let us continue) (*Spires* 137-38).

<sup>13</sup> According to Stewart, “Literary parodies play an important part in *Alice in Wonderland*” (186): Lewis Carroll's *Alice* poems use a set of inversions to change didactic poetry into nonsense poetry: Isaac Watts's “busy bee” is turned into “the little crocodile,” Robert Southey's “Father

cancelling out and/or transforming the meaning of the confiscated text” (76), and that one distinguishing characteristic of Nonsense is that it cannot be parodied (186). Indeed, it would be difficult to accomplish a parody of either Leacock’s “Gertrude” or Fitzgerald’s “The Usual Thing.” In Stewart’s view, “Parody can only survive so long as there is common sense, so long as there is discourse that takes itself seriously” (186). If either of these stories holds an ounce of common sense, neither takes itself quite seriously, save for its serious desire to entertain. In my view, when parody itself verges on ludicrousness (whether because of obscurity, or because more emphasis is placed on humor than on satire), Nonsense elements tend to prevail over any parodic discourse, and the work itself might more fittingly be described as Nonsense. In the aforementioned stories, Curry and Lewis observe that “both [Leacock and Fitzgerald] deliberately use language so empty of meaning as to be absurd” (6). Gertrude the Governess wears a hat which “concealed from view a face so face-like in its appearance as to be positively facial” (*Nonsense* 74). In Fitzgerald’s “The Usual Thing,” one of several characters named John Brabant has “six letters of introduction, one of them unsigned, unsealed, and in fact unwritten. He presents all of them, including the sixth, to John Brabant” (*Spires* 131).

With regard to absurdity and Nonsense, it may be wise here to draw a distinction. Tigges points out that although “In everyday speech, ‘absurd’ and ‘nonsensical’ are often used as synonyms” (125-26), there is an important difference between the two: “In nonsense, language *creates* a reality, in the absurd, language *represents* a senseless reality” (128). If the preceding examples from Fitzgerald and Leacock seem to muddle the line between absurdity and

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William” is literally turned on his head. The Duchess counsels “Speak roughly to your little boy” in her lullaby to the pig/baby in an inversion of G. W. Langford’s “Speak Gently.” James M. Sayle’s “beautiful star” is turned into “beautiful soup,” and the Lobster Quadrille takes on the form of Isaac Watts’s moralistic “The Sluggard,” only to have a lobster talk and an owl and a panther share a pie in what was once the sluggard’s garden (76).

Nonsense, consider the Nonsense techniques both authors put into play: Fitzgerald divides “The Usual Thing,” by “Robert W. Shameless” into two parts, “Chapter XXXI” and “Chapter XXXII,” and opens with a befuddling “Synopsis of Preceding Chapters,” which describes the intertwined lives of several characters who go by the same name and have virtually no bearing on chapters “XXXI” and “XXXII” (131); he concludes the story in a similar obfuscatory manner: “*The next installment of Mr. Shameless’ fascinating story will appear in the late July number*” (136). Fitzgerald clearly takes his cue from Leacock (and in fact confessed as much to the Canadian author in an appreciative letter).<sup>14</sup> Leacock’s “Gertrude the Governess” begins with the header, “*Synopsis of Previous Chapters: There are no Previous Chapters,*” followed by two lines, the second of which nullifies the first: “It was a wild and stormy night on the West Coast of Scotland. This, however, is immaterial to the present story, as the scene is not laid in the West of Scotland” (*Nonsense* 71). Thus in both “Gertrude” and “The Usual Thing,” we have what Stewart describes as a Nonsense “operation” whereby the discourse presented to the reader effectually denies itself. The purported author of Fitzgerald’s story is spurious, his alleged “Synopsis of Preceding Chapters” misleads and confuses the audience, and his false conclusion perpetuates the upsetting of their expectations. “Gertrude” operates in the same manner: the narrator’s discourse “systematically proceeds by cancelling itself out” (Stewart 72). Of this

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<sup>14</sup> In March 1917, Fitzgerald sent two of his short stories to Leacock, along with a letter:

My Dear Mr. Leacock:

As imitation is the sincerest flattery I thought you might be interested in something you inspired. The Nassau Literary Magazine here at Princeton of which I’m an editor got out a “Chaopolitan number,” as a burlesque of “America’s greatest magazine.”

The two stories I wrote, “Jemina, a story of the Blue Ridge mountains, by John Phlox Jr” and “The Usual Thing” by Robert W. Shamless [sic]” are of the “Leacock school” of humour—in fact Jemina is rather a steal in places from “Hannah of the Highlands.”

I’m taking the liberty of sending you a copy—needless to say it increased our circulation & standing in undergraduate eyes.

Hope you’ll get one smile out of it for every dozen laughs I got from the Snoopopaths.

Very appreciatively yours,

F. Scott Fitzgerald (qtd in Curry and Lewis 5)

Nonsense procedure, Stewart explains, “these denials emphasize not only the reversibility of fictive status, but also the position of the fictive narrator as a person who does not have the responsibilities of the narrator of common-sense discourse” (73). Referring directing to Leacock’s story, Stewart writes that although “We assume that the details of the opening scene are appropriate to the narrative of ‘Gertrude the Governess’ [...] the passage demonstrates the point that the author is free to play on our assumptions as to what ‘the point’ of the text will be” (93-94). Thus, if we apply Tigges’ distinction between Nonsense and absurdity, we can see how both texts put into play Nonsense procedures through the reversals of unreliable narrators, who through language create a reality, only to deny its existence forthwith.

For his second volume of short fiction, *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), Fitzgerald applied a like technique, adding his own humorous, irrelevant, and often misleading annotations to the table of contents, thus shifting the frame and subtly ambiguating the meaning of a few stories. One such tale, which Fitzgerald had published twice before, and for which he also acknowledged a debt to Leacock, is the jocular, diverting “Jemina, The Mountain Girl” (Fitzgerald *Jazz* 407).<sup>15</sup> For his comments on it he might also have acknowledged a debt to Mark Twain (1835-1910):

This don’t pretend to be “Literature.” This is just a tale for red-blooded folks who want a *story* and not just a lot of “psychological” stuff or “analysis.” Boy, you’ll love it! Read it here, see it in the movies, play it on the phonograph, run it through the sewing-machine (*Jazz* 407).

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<sup>15</sup> Written at Princeton in October 1916 (Kuehl *Study* 27), “Jemina” was first published in the *Nassau Literary Magazine*, and then subsequently in both *Vanity Fair* (January 1921) and *Tales of the Jazz Age* (New York: Scribner’s, 1922).



While Fitzgerald does not threaten his readers who might choose to approach “Jemina” as literature, his disingenuous remarks, like Twain’s at the opening of *Huckleberry Finn*,<sup>16</sup> serve to mislead his audience, creating expectations that soon will be overturned when it becomes clear the author is not writing for, but rather poking fun at “red-blooded folks.” An earlier version of the story that appeared in *The Nassau Literary Magazine* in December 1916 purports to be the work of “John Phlox, Jr.” (*Spires* 125).<sup>17</sup>

Curry and Lewis observe that the later versions of “Jemina” “contain revisions of phrasing which add to the nonsense of the story and bring it even closer to Leacock’s kind of absurdity” (8). In the 1916 original, a stranger emerges from the wood “in hunting costume” (125); in the later versions, he is “clad in hunting boots reaching to his neck” (*Jazz* 407). Several other changes that Fitzgerald employs serve to add humor by heightening incongruity. Of the feuding families central to the story, who “had learned to dread civilization,” he wrote “The Doldrums and the Tantrums *never spoke*” (*Spires* 126), later amending the predicate to “never exchanged calls” (*Jazz* 408). In the revised versions, savage Old Heck Doldrum no longer spits, he “expectorates” (410). And whereas in the original, after the feudists threw whiskey at each other, “Jemina would come home smelling like a Bowery saloon on election night,” in the later versions her odor resembles that of “a French table d’hôte” (409). By deliberately mismatching the elements of the metaphor, Fitzgerald thus inflates both the waggishness and Nonsense of the

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<sup>16</sup> Twain’s “NOTICE” at the opening of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is likewise humorous and sly: “PERSONS attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot” (1265).

<sup>17</sup> Beneath the title of his own personal copy of this version, Fitzgerald added “Being an imitation of Stephen Leacock imitating John Phlox, Jr.” (qtd in Curry and Lewis 8); James L. W. West considers “Jemina” “a parody of the work of the popular writer John Fox, Jr. [1862-1919], who was famous for his romantic novels about the denizens of the Cumberland Mountains” (*Spires* 265).

story.<sup>18</sup> In his *Vanity Fair* review of *Tales of the Jazz Age*, Edmund Wilson expressed an “ever increasing admiration of Fitzgerald’s mastery of the nuances of the ridiculous” (24). From an early age Fitzgerald thus seemed to have adopted Leacock’s idea of comedy, which itself describes a close relation between humor and nonsense: “The basis of the humorous, the amusing, the ludicrous, lies in the incongruity, the unfittingness, the want of harmony among things” (*Essays* 86). In his exhaustive summary of the extant studies on Nonsense, Tigges notes that incongruity is in fact among the most “frequently mentioned devices” (46). In his revised versions of “Jemina,” Fitzgerald employs one other Nonsense device worthy of note, which Stewart terms “the inversion of metaphor” (77), or what Bergson refers to as “the comic effect obtained whenever we pretend to take literally an expression which was used figuratively” (135). In Fitzgerald’s original story, “Gold had been discovered on the Tantrum land, and the stranger, Edgar Edison, was trying to buy the land for a song” (*Spires* 127); in the later versions, Fitzgerald adds: “He was considering what song to offer” (*Jazz* 409). Curry and Lewis note that “to take a figurative statement literally or to move language from one context to another without also moving the meaning is a technique Leacock employed regularly” (8); Stewart furthermore points out that “Lewis Carroll makes extended use of this kind of nonsense,” and that “The exchange between the White King and Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass* is halted by a continual movement from the metaphorical to the literal level,” e.g.: “‘I beg your pardon?’ asked Alice. ‘It isn’t respectable to beg,’ said the King” (196). In Carroll’s Nonsense, Jacqueline

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<sup>18</sup> In this way Fitzgerald follows Twain’s principle of aesthetic Nonsense. In “How to Tell a Story,” the great humorist declares: “To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the American art” (1455). Another story in which Fitzgerald strings together “incongruities and absurdities,” though not quite in such a “wandering and purposeless way” is “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,” which, he noted, “was inspired by a remark of Mark Twain’s to the effect that it was a pity that the best part of life came at the beginning and the worst part at the end” (*Jazz* 414). We will look at it later in this chapter.

Flescher writes, meaning “is in a sense self-contained. In spite of the necessity to *mean*, the power of meaning is reduced to a minimum” (137).

Yet can we assume a “necessity to *mean*”? For Fitzgerald, in “Jemina” as in so many of his early stories, probably the prevailing desire is to *entertain*. While these two functions need not be considered mutually exclusive, what perhaps entertains us most in these tales is the nonsensical humor. In the opinion of Mark Twain, whose influence on Fitzgerald has been duly noted,<sup>19</sup> “The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular” (“How to Tell a Story” 1453). In this way he distinguishes “the humorous story” from “comic and witty stories,” which “must be brief and end with a point” (1453). Both Twain and Fitzgerald display a clear preference for the humorous. As I have suggested, Fitzgerald’s apparent objective in these stories is less to satirize or parody than it is to charm through the use of artistic, entertaining Nonsense. For this reason, style tends to prevail over substance. “The humorous story,” Twain posits, “depends for its effect upon the manner of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the matter” (1453). In emphasizing manner over matter, Fitzgerald’s prose is concordant with the postulates of aestheticism as well as those of literary Nonsense, whereby style precedes substance, and form outweighs content. In Stewart’s view, “Nonsense [...] takes the traditional division between content and form (technique), with its hierarchical weighing of content *over* form, and inverts statuses to present form over content” (76). Fitzgerald’s *Tales of the Jazz Age* proffers several cases in point; yet before examining these stories, all written posterior to “Jemina,” we would be

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Sklar notes: “Henry Dan Piper wrote in the *Fitzgerald Newsletter* 8 (Winter 1960): ‘F, like Hemingway and many another of that generation, was a lifelong admirer of the fiction of Mark Twain... [W]e find him writing Edmund Wilson in 1921 that he has just finished reading Albert Bigelow Paine’s three-volume biography of Mark Twain and thinks it ‘excellent.’ He was a member of the Mark Twain society” (142).

wise to scrutinize how he prized the wit and style of Oscar Wilde, how his flappers evoked dapper dandies, and how he portrayed their break with convention with both play and invention.

### The Play of Nonsense in the Jazz Age

“In those days life was like the race in *Alice in Wonderland*, there was a prize for every one”

--F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz Age” (1931)<sup>20</sup>

For Fitzgerald, the “Roaring Twenties” soared with the blithe exuberance of youth—Gertrude Stein’s “Lost Generation,”<sup>21</sup> that had “grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken” (*This Side of Paradise* 253). Assessing the epoch in 1931, he reflected: “This was the generation whose girls dramatized themselves as flappers, the generation that corrupted its elders [...] A whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure” (*Crack-Up* 15). By “the Jazz Age,” Fitzgerald specifically refers to the ten-year period that “began about the time of the May Day riots in 1919” and “leaped to a spectacular death in October, 1929” (13): “It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was age of satire” (14). Emblematized by the flippant flapper, the Jazz Age was a time of play, lightheartedness and defiance of convention; and, at least for Fitzgerald, it harked back to the days of the dandy.

In his leisure, caprice, gamesomeness, and wardrobe, the nineteenth-century British dandy could be considered a forerunner of the flapper. If, as Thomas Carlyle professes, “A Dandy is a Clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office and existence consists in the

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<sup>20</sup> Reprinted in *The Crack-Up*, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Gertrude Stein’s coinage gained popularity after appearing in one of two epigraphs for Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926): “You are all a lost generation.” In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway relates an anecdote in which Stein tells him: “That is what you are. That's what you all are... All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation” (29).

wearing of Clothes” (188), then the protagonists of the Jazz Age sparkled as his sartorial protégés: “A Stuffed Shirt, squirming to blackmail in a lifelike way, sat upon the throne of the United States; a stylish young man hurried over to represent to us the throne of England,” Fitzgerald recalls in “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” pronouncing that, “[...] something subtle passed to America, the style of man” (*Crack-Up* 14). If the language of the flapper rang coarser than that of the dandy, her dress was no less resplendent, and her levity and nonconformism quite like. Gatsby himself, as an “Oggsford” (Fitzgerald *Gatsby* 179), with his practiced “elocution” (181), “poise” (181), and “gorgeous pink rag of a suit” (162) (not to mention his pseudo-British expression “old sport”), astounds us as a bit of an anachronistic dandy. Only he takes himself rather too seriously: while evincing a conception of life as sport, he scores quite low on nonchalance. Yet the definition of the dandy, according to Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, explains Gatsby equally well: he is in essence “an idea produced through an artistic act of stylization” (286). Amory Blaine and Anthony Patch, the lead characters of Fitzgerald’s first two novels, while lacking Gatsby’s imagination and drive, are comparably dandyish. Idle, whimsical, stylish, Amory Blaine drifts through *This Side of Paradise* with no particular purpose.<sup>22</sup> What Virginia Woolf writes of Beau Brummell pertains as well to Amory: “That was his style, flickering, sneering, hovering on the verge of insolence, skimming the edge of nonsense” (4).<sup>23</sup> As for *The Beautiful and Damned*’s Anthony Patch, Wilde might describe him in just the way he does Dorian Gray: practicing “the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing” (Wilde *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 55). And, as we shall see, the aesthetic ideal embodied in Dorian is

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<sup>22</sup> “Whether [the] hero really ‘gets anywhere,’ Fitzgerald wrote in an unpublished foreword, “is for the reader to decide” (qtd in Curnutt 31).

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the quintessential dandy, George Bryan (Beau) Brummell (1778-1840) was a major influence on men’s fashion in Regency England.

mirrored in Mr. Patch's flapper counterpart, Gloria Gilbert. Gatsby too, like Dorian, sustains a sinister relationship to time, one flavored by Nonsense in its fantastic staleness. For, whereas Wilde and Lewis Carroll "both took recourse in nonsense literature as a form of escape from Victorian 'sense'" (Fussell 132), Fitzgerald and his figures play with Nonsense as a way of evading tired conventions, Prohibition, and postwar havoc.

Bits of Nonsense in Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), sparkle in the character of Amory Blaine, who, like the author, passes several of his formative years under the spell of Oscar Wilde.<sup>24</sup> In 1927, Fitzgerald listed for an interviewer the books that had "been the greatest influence on [his] mind" at different stages of his life: "At 18, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—Oscar Wilde," he noted (qtd in Brucoli and Baughman 83).<sup>25</sup> Amory's education mirrors the author's. In their first year at Princeton, Tom D'Invilliers asks him, "Ever read any Oscar Wilde?" (53). "No. Who wrote it?" Amory inquires (53). Shortly thereafter "he found *Dorian Gray*" and "tried hard to look at Princeton through the satiated eyes of Oscar Wilde and Swinburne" and, for a brief interval, responds to the moniker of Dorian Gray, bestowed on him

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<sup>24</sup> In *The Art of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Sergio Perosa recognizes Wilde's influence on Fitzgerald as well as curious affinities between the Jazz Age and turn-of-the-century Britain:

The presence of Oscar Wilde is clearly recognizable in the general tone of *This Side of Paradise*, although it would be difficult to find a specific coincidence of episodes in Fitzgerald's novel and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But Oscar Wilde's was a suggestive source for Amory's decadent attitude toward the world, and through his influence Fitzgerald found it easier to express in the novel a certain aspect of decadentism, which was both historically and psychologically true. The atmosphere in which Amory's portrait becomes credible is the typical atmosphere of the English *fin-de-siècle*, with its enthusiasms for Verlaine and Rimbaud, for impressionistic writing and symbolistic poetry, for an ideal Renaissance and a decadent form of Hellenism (23).

<sup>25</sup> From an interview with Gilmore Millen of the *Los Angeles Herald* on January 15, 1927. Fitzgerald named one book for each two years of his life between the ages of 14 and 30 (*Conversations* 83).

Begun when Fitzgerald was only twenty, *This Side of Paradise* was accepted for publication by Scribner editor Maxwell Perkins before its author was twenty-three; preceding its table of contents are two epigraphs—the first, by Rupert Brooke, the second, by Wilde: "Experience is the name so many people give to their mistakes." In his estimation of the book, James Gindin writes, "The paradoxes from the nineties, including the epigraph from Oscar Wilde's work, are Fitzgerald's as well as Amory's, the language and structure that give the novel its dated smartness" (111).

by his friend Kerry Holiday, who pretends to “encourage in him wicked fancies and attenuated tendencies to ennui” (54). Amory himself, aimless and protean as the novel’s form, is something of an enigma: with vain attention to vogue and style, and refined speech rife with Wildean epigram,<sup>26</sup> he nonetheless wanders across the canvas of the work with no direction in mind. “Infinite boredom” with “conic sections” leads to his removal from the board of the *Daily Princetonian* (92), and Amory’s subsequent deeds are likewise “purposeless” and “inconsecutive” (94). His preparatory school days are no different: in hindsight, he is “able to picture himself only as the unadjustable boy who had hurried down corridors, jeered at by his rabid contemporaries mad with common sense” (40). To his confidant and mentor, Monsignor Thayer Darcy, he remarks, ““Why do we have to do the next thing? It never seems the sort of thing I should do.”” (99) Amory’s vagary comes to naught, and as Stewart reminds us, the “production of nothingness” is “characteristic of all play activities” (119). With his unconventionality and transgressive, unorthodox nature, Amory embodies the spirit of Nonsense and acts, like Fitzgerald<sup>27</sup> and modernism itself, as a kind of *clinamen*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, just after reading *Dorian Gray*, Amory “tried painfully to make every remark an epigram” (54).

<sup>27</sup> In an interview for Scribner’s with Carleton R. Davis (later printed in the *New York Tribune*), Fitzgerald hints at his originality, and in so doing (ironically?) establishes himself as a modernist:

“Do you expect to be—to be—well, part of the great literary tradition?” I asked, timidly.

He became excited. He smiled radiantly. I saw he had an answer to this.

“There’s no great literary tradition,” he burst out. “There’s only the tradition of the eventual death of every literary tradition. The wise literary son kills his own father” (*Conversations* 4).

<sup>28</sup> In *De rerum natura* [*The Nature of Things*], the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius writes,

Though atoms fall straight downward through the void/ by their own weight, yet at uncertain times/ and at uncertain points, they swerve a bit—/ enough that one may say they changed direction./ And if they did not swerve, they all would fall/ downward like raindrops through the boundless void;/ no clashes would occur, no blows befall/ the atoms; nature would never have made a thing (II, 217-24).

Warren Motte explains that “To denote this phenomenon, Lucretius coined a term, “*clinamen atomorum*,’ or ‘swerve of the atoms’” (264). Motte furthermore observes that Lucretius’s poem reflects the reaction of Epicurean philosophy “against the determinism of Democritus,” and that “it is precisely this swerve that becomes the locus and guarantor of free will” (263). In the passage that follows from *This Side of Paradise*, Amory himself appears to identify with this *clinamen*.

“Well,” said Amory, “I simply state that I’m a product of a versatile mind in a restless generation—with every reason to throw my mind and pen in with the radicals. Even if, deep in my heart, I thought we were all blind atoms in a world as limited as a stroke of a pendulum, I and my sort would struggle against tradition; try, at least, to displace old cants with new ones. I’ve thought I was right about life at various times, but faith is difficult. One thing I know. If living isn’t a seeking for the grail it may be a damned amusing game” (250).

For Amory, as for the dandy, “the game” and the style with which one plays it take precedence over practicality, reason and duty. In consequence, “his seeking for the grail”—namely, his endeavor to wed Rosalind Connage—is doomed to fail. Announcing her intention to break their engagement and marry instead Dawson Ryder (“*a bore perhaps, but steady and sure of success*” [165]), she tells Amory, “The very qualities I love you for are the ones that will always make you a failure” (175). Perhaps, as a flapper, she recognizes herself in Amory, and sees a need for someone different who will complement her attributes.<sup>29</sup> For Amory, style trumps both politics and responsibility. “It was characteristic of the Jazz Age,” Fitzgerald explains, “that it had no interest in politics at all” (*Crack-Up* 14). Like the dandy who “does not claim anything,” Amory lives an “anarchist’s way of life without ever being an anarchist” (Botz-Bornstein 286). He “plays the conventional game of aristocratic society; however, he does so by

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<sup>29</sup> On the same occasion, Rosalind makes clear to Amory that his quixotic nature cannot satisfy her insouciance: “Amory, you’re young. I’m young. People excuse us now for our poses and vanities, for treating people like Sancho and yet getting away with it. They excuse us now. But you’ve got a lot of knocks coming to you—” (177). Like Isabelle Borgé, Rosalind faults him for being “impractical” (167): “You know I’m old in some ways—in others—well, I’m just a little girl. I like sunshine and pretty things and cheerfulness—and I dread responsibility. I don’t want to think about pots and kitchens and brooms. I want to worry whether my legs will get slick and brown when I swim in the summer” (178). To Amory’s reply “And you love me,” she rejoins, “That’s just why it has to end. Drifting hurts too much” (178).



imposing on the game his personal style, which is the style of the *révolté*” (286). Beneath the heading “Code of the Young Egotist,” Fitzgerald delineates Amory at fifteen:

Before he was summoned back to Lake Geneva, he had appeared, shy but inwardly glowing, in his first long trousers, set off by a purple accordion tie and a ‘Belmont’ collar with the edges unassailably meeting, purple socks, and a handkerchief with a purple border peeping from his breast pocket. But more than that, he had formulated his first philosophy, a code to live by, which, as near as it can be named, was a sort of aristocratic egotism (24).

In a way, Amory’s narcissism matches Dorian Gray’s, and from his Platonic conception of himself and capacity to consummate his aesthetic ideal he derives a sense of superiority. In the opinion of Perosa, we are given a “portrait of the hero, Amory Blaine, who [...] is contemplated in the ideal perfection of his egotism, more or less as Oscar Wilde had done in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” (19). Such narcissism leads him to leave Isabelle Borgé just as Dorian discards Sibyl Vane. Sy Kahn points out how, during a weekend with her, “Amory discovers that it is not the girl but his egotistic image of himself as conquering lover that has enchanted him” (36). By the time regal Amory reaches Princeton, he has refined his style and defined himself by his hair—slicked back:

‘The Slicker’

1. Clever sense of social values.
2. Dresses well. Pretends that dress is superficial—but knows that it isn’t.

‘The Big Man’

1. Inclined to stupidity and unconscious of social values.
2. Thinks dress is superficial, and is inclined to be careless about it.

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| <p>3. Goes into such activities as he can shine in.</p> <p>4. Gets to college and is, in a worldly way, successful.</p> <p>5. Hair slicked.</p> | <p>3. Goes out for everything from a sense of duty.</p> <p>4. Gets to college and has a problematical future. Feels lost without his circle, and says that school days were happiest, after all. Goes back to school and makes speeches about what St Regis's boys are doing.</p> <p>5. Hair not slicked (40).<sup>30</sup></p> |
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To the priest Monsignor Darcy, Amory talks of “life respectively as a game or a mystery” (100), and asks “Why do I make lists?”—wondering if he does so out of “a desire to get something definite” (100). In his endeavor to penetrate the mystery and grasp the game’s essence, Amory stands apart from the novel’s other, less perspicacious players. With regard to Amory, Gatsby, and Dick Diver, Kahn writes: “There is no doubt that Fitzgerald intended these heroes to be nobler and more humane in their defeat than the people and forces that undo them” (47). As he fashions his style and sharpens his wit, Amory’s ambivalence towards the very game he plays—like Nick Carraway’s in *The Great Gatsby*—allows him to transcend the more decadent aspects of the Jazz Age and emerge as a hero of the “Lost Generation.” Rather than proffer a portrait of youth corrupted, Fitzgerald’s bildungsroman thus follows the style of Carroll

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<sup>30</sup> As Stewart suggests, lists such as this one involve a kind of “play with infinity” that transform readers’ expectations—with respect to the idea of narrative progression and a causal relationship between elements of the list (116). The order, if not also the elements on Amory’s list, is fairly arbitrary (why, for example, should “Hair slicked” be fifth, and not third, directly after “Dresses well”); more items could be listed, or their order could be changed. Nonsense is thus “self-perpetuating,” and “nonsense activities,” such as listing, “show the absence and arbitrariness of all beginnings and endings” (143).

and Wilde, who, in Fussell's estimation, "use the device of the child who acts as judge: the innocent eye inverts a presumably fixed system of values simply by looking at it innocently" (132). If Amory's eyes, like those of Wilde's dandies, do shine with greater sophistication, their brilliance casts the decadence of the epoch in the positive light of liberty; consequently, at least for Fitzgerald's generation, *This Side of Paradise* became "a book of protest and revolt in the name of liberty as a generic principle; it seemed to advocate freedom from money, from bourgeois morality, from Victorian hypocrisy, from religion, and above all from conformity" (Perosa 16).

In *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), Fitzgerald addresses the excesses of the Jazz Age, portraying another idle aesthete, Anthony Patch, who indubitably lacks the bounce and luster of Amory Blaine. Whereas Amory possesses "intangibles of talent, ambition, and imagination" (West "Question" 52), Anthony, as Fitzgerald explained in a letter to Charles Scribner II, "is one of those many with the tastes and weaknesses of an artist but with no actual creative inspiration" (*Life* 41). As such, he fails to play, and can only strive vainly to pose. Albeit a practitioner of Nonsense, Anthony himself does not create so much as he recreates; his chief occupation consists in wallowing with prodigality while awaiting what he presumes will be a prodigious inheritance. To the quintessential question "What *do* you do with yourself?" he responds—"I do nothing" (65). His ineffectual existence in effect proves the maxim "Nothing begets nothing"; while he does write six "wretched and pitiable" stories, "Not one of them contained a spark of vitality" and "During their circulation they collected, all told, thirty-one rejection slips" (302-03). Thus his Nonsense evokes no wonder: all of it is sadly comprehensible. In this way, as Perosa points out, Fitzgerald, "Far from being the mouthpiece or the singer of the jazz age," is in this novel "its lucid accuser" (42).

Yet whereas the hero of *The Beautiful and Damned* fails to engage in creative sport, Fitzgerald himself toys with the form of the work and plays with ambiguity to incorporate a bit of Nonsense in Anthony's flapper counterpart, Gloria Gilbert. Experimentation with the manner of storytelling he had of course begun in his first novel. Regarding that text, West observes, "Stylistically *This Side of Paradise* seems daring; it mixes genres in a fashion that even today looks unconventional, shifting from fictional narrative to rhymed or free verse, then moving to drama dialogue and slipping toward the end into interior monologue" ("Question" 48); *The Beautiful and Damned* further explores this technique, most remarkably in the playlet titled "A Flash-Back in Paradise," which introduces Gloria as a rather inscrutable figure who is "*born anew every hundred years*" (27), and in so doing induces us to wonder whether she is quite human, or if she in fact possesses supernatural powers. Not only this dramatic interlude, but Fitzgerald's narrative as well suggests his heroine (or rather, his "ragtime kid," "flapper," "jazz-baby," and "baby vamp" [29]), maintains a mysterious relationship to time.<sup>31</sup> On her twenty-seventh birthday Gloria looks in the glass with "calm self-approval seeing the British freshness of her complexion and her figure boyish and slim as of old" (371). Likewise, some time before her twenty-ninth birthday, Gloria's mirror gives her "much the same account as ever" (397), and Joseph Bloeckman tells her that "she had not changed a bit" in the three years since he had last seen her (398). In distinguishing Nonsense from fantasy, Tigges points out that "In fantasy, a tension created is not left unresolved, the meaning is evident" (109); in *The Beautiful and Damned*, Fitzgerald perpetuates the mystery of Gloria's origin. Whereas the manuscript version

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Gloria seems to have birthdays in each month of the year: "But Gloria—she would be twenty-four in August" (192); "Gloria would be twenty-six in May" (276); "She would be twenty-nine in February" (393). Whether her mysterious birth dates were intended, or an oversight of Fitzgerald's is open to debate; Bruccoli noted in his biography of the author that Zelda had pointed out these inconsistencies in a review of the novel she had written for the *New York Tribune* (165).

of the novel ends with a reprise of the playlet and the jazz-baby's return to "Paradise,"<sup>32</sup>

Fitzgerald's published novel even more ambiguously describes the flapper's demise.

Gloria's playful twisting of time prefigures Gatsby's, yet hers is discernibly Faustian, as is Wilde's influence in its portrayal.<sup>33</sup> Steeped in myth, Gloria—or "Beauty" incarnate as she is called in the playlet—does not gradually lose her physical grace; it is only after she attempts to preserve her beauty through artistic means that her beauty fades, and fades fast. Supposing that she too will one day be susceptible to the ravages of time, Gloria decides to enter the movies. "It cheered her that in some manner the illusion of beauty could be sustained or preserved perhaps in celluloid after the reality had vanished" (393). Yet just as the moving-picture industry gobbles up her father (40), Gloria's one test at acting consumes her. Returning to her mirror, she carefully inspects her reflection—in much the same way that Dorian Gray scrutinizes his own portrait—only to find "tiny wrinkles" (404).

Does Gloria barter her magical beauty—like Dorian does his soul—out of a desire for worldly fame, knowing, as Dorian did, that beauty "has its divine right of sovereignty" and "makes princes of those who have it"? (Wilde *Picture* 45) Is Gloria's wish for immortality—to

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<sup>32</sup> The stars greeted her intimately as they went by and the winds made a soft welcoming flurry in the air. Sighing, she began a conversation with a voice that was in the white wind.

"Back again," the voice whispered.

"Yes."

"After fifteen years."

"Yes."

The voice hesitated.

"How remote you are," it said, "Unstirred.... You seem to have no heart. How about the little girl? The glory of her eyes is gone—"

But Beauty had forgotten long ago (qtd in Perosa 44).

<sup>33</sup> Apart from the thematic parallels between Wilde's novel and *The Beautiful and Damned*, in "A Matter of Aesthetics," the same chapter that describes her screen test, Gloria also recalls Oscar Wilde as she reads Anthony's correspondence: "[...] the dilutions of his letters with affectionate diminutives began to be mechanical and unspontaneous—almost as though, having completed the letter, he had looked it over and literally stuck them in, like epigrams in an Oscar Wilde play" (370). While Wilde's wit was ever relevant in the Roaring Twenties, Gloria through it may have intuited Anthony's infidelity, or found unaesthetic his constrained technique, which contrasted with the Jazz Age penchant for free, lyrical expression.

preserve her beauty in celluloid—akin to Dorian’s wish for a face like a work of art, flushed with eternal spring? For perpetual youth, Dorian cries, “there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!” (49) Shortly before her acting debut, Gloria, in bed with fever, voices a similar Faustian wish:

“Millions of people,” she said, “swarming like rats, chattering like apes, smelling like all hell. . . monkeys! Or lice, I suppose. For one really exquisite palace... on Long Island, say—or even in Greenwich... for one palace full of pictures from the Old World and exquisite things—with avenues of trees and green lawns and a view of the blue sea, and lovely people about in slick dresses... I’d sacrifice a hundred thousand of them, a million of them. [...] I care nothing for them—understand me?” (394)

Though Gloria may be sick with “double pneumonia,” her desire for material beauty is clear. Like Gatsby, she seems to believe that money can suspend time. Would an “exquisite palace” buy her time to linger in the golden moment? Would it delay the coming of old age—and the arrival of “tiny wrinkles?” Milton Stern argues that “less money [for the Patches] means an increased hysteria in the face of palpably increasing speed with which the golden glow fades. [...] In order to cling to identity, beauty’s personality needs more money” (148). Yet, as Ronald J. Gervais points out, her husband “seeks refuge from ‘all the business of life’” (75; Fitzgerald *Beautiful* 150). For idle Anthony Patch, “to work for money is to enter the world of next things, and that entrance blunts both the beauty and the sensitivity to beauty” (Stern 148). In this way, the aesthete’s avoidance of the “business of life” leaves his glorious Beauty “bent by her environment into a grotesque similitude of a housewife” (Fitzgerald *Beautiful* 424). Essentially, the Patches need money to “idly glide,” as Richard Astro suggests (402). An idle glide may be

just the pace that the perfect pose demands, for as Oscar Wilde affirms, “the condition of perfection is idleness: the aim of perfection is youth” (*Works* 1114).

Perhaps the Jazz Age equation of beauty with youth and its evocation of the British dandy’s style can best be explained by the younger generation’s general antipathy toward its elders. In both its social and artistic taste, the “younger set” showed an opposition to Victorian values, conventions, and constraints. Senescence in its external manifestations evoked the outgoing generation and a manifold repugnance for all it stood for, insofar as in literature, at least, it engendered playful, even nonsensical attempts to perpetuate youth and arrest the passing of time. In Wilde’s novel, Dorian displays an aversion to the image of his grandfather, “the emblem of puritan society” (Kofman 47), and dreads the “hideousness” of age that awaits the figure on the canvas:

The cheeks would become hollow or flaccid. Yellow crow’s feet would creep round the fading eyes and make them horrible. The hair would lose its brightness, the mouth would gape or droop, would be foolish or gross, as the mouths of old men are. There would be the wrinkled throat, the cold, blue-veined hands, the twisted body, that he remembered in the grandfather who had been so stern with him in his boyhood (Wilde *Picture* 153).

Sarah Kofman asks whether Dorian’s “horror of aging” is “not due to his refusal to become like this hated grandfather, a real counterexample, someday” (44) and proposes that “the excessive [...] puritanism that society imposes can only lead anyone who refuses to submit to it to [...] regress to the narcissistic stage of magic and animism” (47). In *The Beautiful and Damned*, perhaps the most grotesque of all the older characters is Anthony’s grandfather, Adam J. (“Cross”) Patch, who, after serving in a cavalry regiment in the Civil War, charges into a career

on Wall Street, where he gathers to himself “some seventy-five million dollars,” and then determines to consecrate his old age “to the moral regeneration of the world”: “he directed against the enormous hypothetical enemy, unrighteousness a campaign which went on through fifteen years, during which he displayed himself as a rabid monomaniac, an unqualified nuisance, and an intolerable bore” (4). As Leonard A. Podis observes, Adam Patch’s “laughable sententiousness and over-zealous chauvinism tend to encourage Anthony’s *carpe diem* life style, not temper it” (144).

In certain of his works, such as *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde achieves a “unique kind of irony” (133), by means of what A. E. Dyson describes as “his confrontation of moral humbug parading as righteousness with moral good-heartedness parading as flippancy” (qtd in Fussell 133). Interestingly, we bear witness to the former but not the latter in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Beautiful and Damned*: Dorian, Gloria, and Anthony, in their narcissism and hedonism, all act flippantly but beneath the veil hides no “moral good-heartedness.” All in effect are tragic figures who bring ruin upon themselves. In Fitzgerald’s case, the result is a strange kind of ambiguity which arises not from Nonsense but from the narrator’s lack of objectivity. Perosa notes that “in many passages Fitzgerald reveals a tendency to bestow on Anthony, if not on Gloria, a kind of moral greatness that contradicts the *objective* development of his adventure” (44). While wishing to “detach himself from” Anthony and Gloria, Fitzgerald nonetheless “sympathized with his characters and shared some of their illusions and not a few of their attitudes” (46). “In other words,” Perosa writes, he wanted “to expose and denounce two characters who appealed to him, or to justify their beauty in spite of their damnation” (46). Perhaps the aesthetic appeal of Wilde’s dandy had inspired part of Fitzgerald’s ambivalence toward his subject. In his later works, he breaks free of the idler’s



excesses and changes his sport,<sup>34</sup> attaining, particularly in *Gatsby*, a far higher degree of objectivity and detachment, and demonstrating the playful capacity of the imagination to create Nonsense and wonder.

#### Presenting the Preposterous: Tall Tales (and a Play) of the Jazz Age

Although *The Great Gatsby* (1925) follows *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) chronologically in the order of the author's novels, any detailed study of Fitzgerald's Nonsense would be woefully incomplete without due consideration of a few short stories and the full-length play he published in the three years between these novels. Of *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), Edmund Wilson writes, the artist "lets his fancy, his humor and his taste for nonsense run wild; it is the Fitzgerald harlequinade with a minimum of magazine hokum" (24).<sup>35</sup> Assaying Fitzgerald's play *The Vegetable* (1923), A. Donald Douglas judges, "It is Alice in Wonderland (D. C.)<sup>36</sup>; it is Gulliver's Travels written by Edward Lear" (26). In these works Fitzgerald experiments with further ways of fusing romanticism and realism, incorporating such Nonsense elements as discontinuity, inversions, and uncertain identity, all of which will later figure in

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<sup>34</sup> In his later years, Fitzgerald evidently came to see that the condition of perfection was not idleness: "I think that idlers seem to be a special class [...] their only contribution to the human family is to warm a seat at the common table" (*Life* 363). In corresponding fashion, his fiction comes to focus less on the aimless play of decadent dandies and more on the imaginative, aesthetic play that engenders creation.

<sup>35</sup> In his book *Hemingway vs. Fitzgerald: the Rise and Fall of a Literary Friendship*, Scott Donaldson refers to Wilson's appraisal of this collection, and deems Wilson to be using "nonsense" in the traditional literary sense of the term. Although Wilson himself does not explicitly name Carroll or Lear in his November 1922 *Vanity Fair* review, Donaldson writes that "he compared the author to humorists Lewis Carroll, W.S. Gilbert, and Edward Lear" (281).

A host of critics have lavishly praised Wilson's insight into Fitzgerald's work, which merits our attention here. In his introduction to the Cambridge edition of *Tales of the Jazz Age*, West asserts that "the most discerning review came from Fitzgerald's Princeton friend Edmund Wilson" 9 (xix). In the Penguin edition, Patrick O'Donnell calls Wilson "astute," and judges that "if he was Fitzgerald's friend from Princeton days [he] was also unfailingly honest in his assessment of Fitzgerald's work" (*Jazz* xviii). Professor and critic Arthur Mizener, author of the acclaimed first biography of Fitzgerald, likewise esteemed Wilson's "penetrating understanding" of Fitzgerald's art (148).

<sup>36</sup> *The Vegetable* is set in Washington, D. C.

*Gatsby*. We will begin with the stories, in which, as Patrick O'Donnell suggests, "It is important to discern Fitzgerald's nerve as a writer [...] particularly in his willingness to combine imitation with exploration in his portrait of the age that his stories articulated and identified" (xxii).

In all, Fitzgerald composed over 160 stories. Of the eleven in *Tales of the Jazz Age*, I shall now limit my analysis to three rather dissimilar tales, which, in my estimation, best demonstrate Fitzgerald's innovative application of varied Nonsense elements and procedures in his style of storytelling.<sup>37</sup> I shall begin with a carnivalesque farce called "The Camel's Back." First published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, this "hopelessly silly thing" (qtd in Bryer 157)<sup>38</sup> was nonetheless included in the *O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1920*, a collection issued by Doubleday the following year (West *Tales* xxii). In it we see the artist playing with Nonsense to create wonder and mystery. Using a technique he favored and returned to, Fitzgerald through a kind of histrionic play conceals a character's identity and thereby concocts an illusory reality. As we witnessed in "The Trail of the Duke," Fitzgerald revels in the charms of carnival; this is the story of a masquerade. Perry Parkhurst, lovelorn but imaginative, contrives to recapture a young woman's affections while disguised as a camel. In what transpires the writer plays with and contorts the stock story of mistaken identity: not only does the disguise obscure the identity of the wearer, the shoddiness of the costume itself in fact renders the disguise ambiguous. Various interpretations as a "shroud" (*Jazz* 203), a "huge cat-camel" (204), "a big dog" (206), a "mean old

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<sup>37</sup> While I have chosen to exclude from this study "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," as in my opinion it features more of an excursion into the genre of the fantastic than a genuine play with Nonsense, Marius Bewley's observation on this tale of the Jazz Age nevertheless warrants inclusion, as it touches on an aesthetic likeness between Fitzgerald and Carroll: "The form of the story just a little resembles *Through The Looking Glass*. We don't quite know when the dream begins, but we are there for the awakening on the last page" (qtd in Kuehl *Study* 167-68).

<sup>38</sup> According to an anonymous reviewer for the *Minneapolis Journal*. (Nobody takes comedy seriously.)

shadow” (206), or merely “some kind of thing” (206),<sup>39</sup> the perplexing camel costume moreover presents a problem for Perry: it requires two people, as points out the shop proprietor, whose own identity is a mite uncertain.<sup>40</sup> What’s more, Perry’s effort to circumvent the two-person requirement only accentuates the costume’s protean quality:

Perry tentatively gathered up the body and legs and wrapped them about him, tying the hind legs as a girdle round his waist. The effect on the whole was bad. It was even irreverent—like one of those mediæval pictures of a monk changed into a beast by the ministrations of Satan. At the very best the ensemble resembled a humpbacked cow sitting on her haunches among blankets (201).

Tigges has posited that “A crucial element in nonsense is that of identity. In establishing an identity, one by definition avoids both nothingness and everythingness” (78). By playing the part of a camel-ish creature, Perry however effectively destabilizes his identity: beneath the mask might be anyone, and this mask itself suggests not one but many things. With his improvised costume Perry springs to life as an ebullient Jazz Age player, and, as Mitchell Breitwieser observes, “Fitzgerald anticipates [André] Hodeir’s understanding that jazz by design offers no reunion with the already known, but rather, by way of improvisation, disconnects the familiar from its familiarity, making it do startling things” (367). After Perry finally hires a mysterious

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<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Sewell observes that “it is one of the characteristics of Nonsense that people tend to be turned into things [...] not in the sense of magic, where a frog becomes a Prince, but in the sense of being turned into playthings. People are not excluded from the Nonsense game—(though it has a tendency to whittle down their humanity [...])” (137). “To children and the mind in play,” she writes, “the people have become things; no contact of feeling or sympathy with them is permissible” (138). This assertion helps to explain the reaction of little Millicent Tate upon spotting the camel. Aged eleven, she ought to be able to discern that the beast is really two men in disguise; however, she identifies it to her mother only as “this dog or something,” and hopes that her parents will quickly dispense with the unwanted plaything (*Jazz* 206).

<sup>40</sup> Mrs. Nolak, the shop manager, wears a “tabby-cat face,” which, after she dons the costume, reemerges “somewhat smudgy” (201); her national identity is less clear: “Mrs. Nolak was short and ineffectual looking, and on the cessation of the world war had belonged for a while to one of the new nationalities. Owing to unsettled European conditions she had never since been quite sure what she was” (200). When Perry last sees her she is but “a little black smudge” far down the snowy street (204).

man (“his cap [...] pulled down low on his head” [*Jazz* 203]) in the capacity of back part of said camel, the two do make the unfamiliar animal do startling things: “The beast walked with a peculiar gait which varied between an uncertain lockstep and a stampede—[...] and as he walked he alternately elongated and contracted like a gigantic concertina” (205).

Without disclosing a word of the tale’s absurdly entertaining denouement, I would like to point out one further Nonsense technique that propels and animates Fitzgerald’s farce. As the camel, or concertina, wanders unsteadily across the curtains of the evening, Fitzgerald fabricates a situation equivalent to a Surrealist metaphor, apposing “two things which common sense would never bring together” (Stewart 160). Perry and the camel’s back, neither quite sober, accidentally show up at the wrong party—one hosted by the Howard Tates, “the most formidable people in town,” for their “perfectly exquisite child Millicent” (Fitzgerald *Jazz* 205). Needless to say, the presence of a “melancholy, hungry-looking camel, emitting clouds of smoke from his mouth and from the tip of his noble hump” in an aristocratic high-society ballroom is positively incongruous, and Fitzgerald, much to the reader’s pleasure, plays up the Nonsense effect of discontinuity. “Discontinuity,” Stewart expounds,

takes its defining otherness from the categories and hierarchies of everyday life, and as discourse comes to hold within the simultaneity of its textual boundaries a “set” of elements that are increasingly marked by their difference from one another, the gestalt moves to the impossible realm of nonsense, the realm of the immaculate fiction (157).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Perhaps not so immaculate, after all—Fitzgerald relates that “the camel part of the story [including the camel’s chance landing at the wrong party] is literally true” (*Jazz* 413).

Even after Mr. Tate disabuses the camel of the error, and the beast reaches the correct party, a “circus ball” (*Jazz* 207), Fitzgerald continues to toy with the effect of farcical incongruity, or what we might call ‘situational Nonsense.’ After Perry’s sweetheart, in an alluring and somewhat revealing snake charmer costume, deigns to flirt with the hideous camel, whom she falsely believes to be a distinguished architect, “some one made the obvious remark about beauty and the beast” (210).<sup>42</sup> When they dance, the incongruity of the pair is second only to the incongruity of a threesome in the cotillion, for the camel after all comprises two parts, and “His hind legs danced in a manner all their own, chiefly by hopping first on one foot and then on the other” (212). In a sense, the camel is a self-contained incongruity all in itself—“the spectacle was frequently presented of the front part of the camel standing at ease and the rear keeping up a constant energetic motion” (212). In any case, the costume fulfills Perry’s wish for “somep’n ’stinctive” (200); and, like several of Fitzgerald’s heroes, he wins a lady’s affection through a feat of the imagination. The story itself was successful; after Fitzgerald sold the rights, “The Camel’s Back” “loosely became the Warner Brothers’ 1924 film *Conductor: 1492*” (Margolies 190). While clearly a “*divertissement*,” as Perosa points out (31), it was nonetheless hailed “the cleverest tale of the collection” by the *Springfield Sunday Republican* (qtd in Bryer 150). In the *New York Times Book Review*, Hildegard Hawthorne deemed “The Camel’s Back” “tremendously amusing, arrant fooling that it is” (qtd in Bryer 150), and A. A. White called it “pure farce” that leaves the reader “with a satisfied feeling” (qtd in Bryer 165).

For the same reason he enjoyed “The Camel’s Back,” A. A. White objected to “The Lees of Happiness.” Whereas the former “carries the reader along in an uninterrupted mood of levity,” the latter, he contended, “shows a total disregard of Poe’s sound dictum that the short story

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<sup>42</sup> When the ringmaster refers to their union as “the marriage of Mirth to Folly” (213), he could likewise be describing Fitzgerald’s technique in the story, combining comedy with the farcemeat of Nonsense.

should contain but a single ‘effect’” (qtd in Bryer 165). Fitzgerald’s disregard, I would argue, is deliberate: here we see the artist at his most experimental, writing in what O’Donnell terms “the tragicomic mode,” which, he suggests, “is later reflected in the mature work of *Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*” (xiv). In this story, Fitzgerald’s peculiar combination—or, to be more precise—alternation of tragic and comic modes suggests the vicissitudes and absurdities of everyday life, in which Nonsense, inexplicable and unprecedented, often plays a role.<sup>43</sup> By alternating modes, the author plays upon, and playfully eludes the reader’s expectations, leading Wilson, who was very much impressed, to declare: “What was my astonishment when I had finished the story to discover that it was intended to be serious” (24). In part, “The Lees of Happiness” could be construed as a ludicrous defiance of Wilde’s maxim “All art is quite useless” (*Picture* 8). After his young wife produces some beautiful but rather unappetizing biscuits, Jeffrey Curtain, animated and imaginative, seizes a hammer and a handful of nails: “We’ll use them, by golly, Roxanne! We’ll make a frieze out of them” (*Jazz* 382). This he does, impaling the biscuits—“in a perpendicular row, twelve of them, like a collection of primitive spear-heads”—to their library wall (383). Yet just a few pages later befalls an unexpected tragedy: a “blood clot the size of a marble” suddenly breaks in Jeffrey’s brain, causing near-complete paralysis and forever depriving him of his sanity. A few pages later, while a nerve

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<sup>43</sup> If “nonsense is really to be the literature of the future,” as G. K. Chesterton proposes, “it must have its own version of the Cosmos to offer; the world must not only be the tragic, romantic, and religious, it must be nonsensical also” (449). Jay Gatsby, for his part, suggests that it is so.<sup>43n</sup>

<sup>43n</sup> Gatsby nevertheless, being but the child of his own “Platonic conception” (*Gatsby* 104) and that of Scott Fitzgerald, is not of this world. It occurs to this author that to illustrate wholly and definitively Chesterton’s theory of the cosmos he must recur to empiricism, to wit—to a story drawn from his own very real life. Thus he beseeches the reader wary of wry impertinence to pardon his apologue, so that he too might behold! In the wilds of western Maine lives a fabled figure unascertained by most yet known in eccentric circles as “the bearver.” Understood only to be the unholy union of a bear and a beaver, this biological and lexical anomaly exists outside any linguistic (or eco-) system, at irregular intervals changing its identity entirely. Seldom spotted, its general absence has incited great speculation and wonder, but its presence is most disruptive. Reader, *bewarever the bearver!*

specialist is giving Roxanne the grim prognosis upstairs, a friend named Harry Cromwell, beset by extreme hunger, “paused at the wall [of the Curtain’s library], jerked at something round, and, fingering it absently, put it to his mouth and tasted it as a baby tastes a bright toy. His teeth closed on it—Ah! (391). Wilson marveled at the innovative modal discontinuity of the tale, explaining it as “the bitter short story of Mrs. Wharton and of fiction since Maupassant generally made exquisitely absurd yet maintaining always the inexorable technique of grimness” (24). “I read it,” he confessed, “with ever increasing admiration at Fitzgerald’s mastery of the nuances of the ridiculous” (24). Perhaps even more surprising than the preposterous biscuit frieze or the equally preposterous biscuit consumption six months afterward is the bittersweet poignancy of the ending; in this story Fitzgerald’s experiment with Nonsensical discontinuity, or deliberate alternation of modes, helps him to attain an originality of style for which his contemporaries were wholly unprepared. Eight years later, in the wake of Jeffrey Curtain’s lingering tragedy, Harry again visits Roxanne, and an otherwise somber reminiscence is punctuated by merry memories of Jeff’s playful antics: ““Oh, those biscuits,’ she cried. ‘Still, from all I heard about the way you devoured them, they couldn’t have been so bad. I was *so* low that day, yet somehow I laughed when the nurse told me about those biscuits”” (*Jazz* 398). In the Jazz Age, in the wake of the World War, in an otherwise tragic universe, the bits (biscuits) of Nonsense are the lees of happiness.

Of all Fitzgerald’s characters perhaps the one most truly embodying the essence of Nonsense is Benjamin Button, who, after being born with the physical semblance of a septuagenarian, begins to age in reverse. John Farrar’s judgment of “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” as a “high accomplishment in perverse imagination” underscores the author’s contrariness as a nonsense-maker (qtd in Bryer 141), or “trickster”—to apply Stewart’s

designation (61)—in contriving such a preposterous tale. “The systematic violation of categories and norms of behavior that [the] trickster presents,” Stewart propounds, “ appears as a negation, a reversal, an inversion, of those cultural categories and behavioral norms that make up common sense” (63). In executing the history of Benjamin’s physical regression and its corresponding effect on his social life, Fitzgerald violates the laws of evolution and realistic representation. While such a plot might seem to place the story strictly in the category of fantasy, the manner in which Fitzgerald relates it evinces his preference for employing Nonsense elements to heighten impossibilities and incongruities, and harvest what humor he can from Mr. Roger Button’s tragic crop.

In the story it is Benjamin’s father, Roger Button, who is treated as a kind of “trickster” and blamed censoriously by the obstetrician and nurse for having created such an anomaly. In effect, he is treated as the perpetrator of Nonsense:

“What happened?” demanded Mr. Button, as he came up in a gasping rush.

“What was it? How is she? A boy? Who is it? What—”

“Talk sense!” said Doctor Keene sharply. He appeared somewhat irritated.

[...]

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“Here now!” cried Doctor Keene in a perfect passion of irritation. “I’ll ask you to go and see for yourself. Outrageous!” He snapped the last word out in almost one syllable, then he turned away muttering: “Do you imagine a case like this will help my professional reputation? One more would ruin me—ruin anybody” (*Jazz* 319).



Benjamin Button, anomalous baby, poses a threat to all those associated with him, for he is Nonsense incarnate. “The anomalous,” Stewart posits, “stands between the categories of an existing classification system; it threatens the integrity of text and context by being neither one nor the other [...] the disorder of nonsense may be seen as a not-yet-incorporated form of order, an order without a context, without a place in the everyday lifeworld” (61).

In representing the impossible “ungrowth” of such a biological disorder (*Jazz* 327), Fitzgerald thereby toys with the effects of time.<sup>44</sup> In representing this disorder’s search for a context and “a place in the everyday lifeworld,” he finds ample opportunity to exploit ironic incongruities. Perhaps nowhere does Benjamin’s condition of anomalous misfit loom so ludicrous or stark as it does when Mr. Button struggles to dress his oversized newborn “appropriately”:

The notion of dressing his son in men’s clothes was repugnant to him. If, say, he could only find a *very* large boy’s suit, he might cut off that long and awful beard, dye the white hair brown, and thus manage to conceal the worst, and to retain something of his own self-respect—not to mention his position in Baltimore society (323).

Mr. Button’s attempt to rectify the situation results in Nonsensical discontinuity, as he assembles “two things [i.e. a boy’s suit and an old man-child] which common sense would never bring

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<sup>44</sup> Nikolai Firtich suggests that “Carroll’s idea of ‘living backwards,’ in the sense of freely moving back and forth in time, found its reflections in [...] Fitzgerald’s ‘The Strange [sic] Case of Benjamin Button’ (600). It bears noting, however, that Benjamin’s curious temporal predicament is distinct; if he does “live backwards,” Benjamin nonetheless possesses no ability to move “back and forth” in time, and is in fact vexed by the inexorable process of his “ungrowth.” At the age of forty, examining his reflection in the mirror, he expresses a dismay ironically akin to that of Dorian Gray’s at seeing his portrait grow older:

“Good Lord!” he said aloud. The process was continuing. There was no doubt of it—he looked now like a man of thirty. Instead of being delighted, he was uneasy—he was growing younger. He had hitherto hoped that once he reached a bodily age equivalent to his age in years, the grotesque phenomenon which had marked his birth would cease to function. He shuddered. His destiny seemed to him awful, incredible (*Jazz* 334).

together” (Stewart 160); he decides to clothe the child in a costume of “dotted socks, pink pants, and a belted blouse with a wide white collar. Over the latter waved the long whitish beard, drooping almost to the waist” (*Jazz* 324). In effect Benjamin’s father forces him to assume an imposture of normalcy, subscribing him to convention at the same time that his literary father departs from it. In such moments Fitzgerald’s experimental, fantastic farce might be considered a satire of high society’s pretensions; more often, however, Fitzgerald seems keener merely to amuse himself by accentuating the absurdity of Benjamin Button’s predicament. An interesting case in point comes when Benjamin, who in middle age serves in the Spanish-American War, receives a commission later in life as a brigadier-general in the World War. Eager to report, he heads first to a “large tailoring establishment” for the requisite accouterments (338). Yet Benjamin, having now reached the age of fifty-seven, has regressed to the semblance of a thirteen-year-old, and his voice is breaking. After he asks “in his uncertain treble to be measured for a uniform,” the clerk casually inquires ““Want to play soldier, sonny?”” (338). Again, just as with Benjamin’s first boyish costume, the Nonsensical incongruity stems not from the biological anomaly’s play with convention but rather from his rigid adherence to it. The story’s premise of a reverse aging process thus lays the groundwork for irony and further inversions. In the common Nonsense procedure of “Reversals and Inversions,” Tigges writes, “we recognize the aspect of Nonsense as topsyturvydom” (35).

Like “The Lees of Happiness” and “The Camel’s Back,” “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” features Fitzgerald’s innovation of Nonsense elements and procedures in his narrative style; with each he incorporates the preposterous into an otherwise verisimilar story and in so doing succeeds in fusing romanticism and realism. In other words, each tale features an absurdity—one portrayed through the use of Nonsense elements—yet is given the appearance of

truth. And in this way, by “jazzing up” these otherwise realistic stories with a bit of Nonsense—an edible frieze, reverse aging, a camel masquerade—Fitzgerald fashions the marvelous.

In *The Vegetable* (1923), he overdoes this technique. Douglas’s review of the three-act play offers an interesting observation with regard to Fitzgerald’s contrapuntal style:

Ever since the ingenious chronicle wherein Benjamin Button grew younger day by day F. Scott Fitzgerald has displayed a double personality compounded of the social historian and the sprite, Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Ltd) maintain an office in which Tweedledum records the realism of the hour while Tweedledee invents the fourth dimension. [...]

A work of art like “The Vegetable” is a difficult, not to say dangerous operation to adventure. The perfect mating of realism and fantasy has tried the genius of the olympians and the demigods, and more usually than not the lords of high decision have come off the worse for the experiment (26).

In this bold foray into the dramatic genre,<sup>45</sup> the demiurge, endeavoring to mix disparate modes, concocts a comical travesty. In a way, the preponderance of Nonsense elements in the play causes him to slip out of orbit; and in overdoing the farce, he loses touch with reality. *The Vegetable* presents the story of Jerry Frost, a railroad clerk aspiring to be a letter carrier, who is criticized by his wife for lacking ambition. After receiving a visit from a bootlegger and imbibing more than a small amount of grain alcohol, Jerry believes himself to be President of the United States. The second act, set at the White House, dramatizes his drunken vision, or what

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<sup>45</sup> Although *The Vegetable* stands as Fitzgerald’s only published full-length play, he wrote several melodramas in his adolescence (*The Girl from “Lazy J,” The Captured Shadow, The Coward, Assorted Spirits*) and composed lyrics for three musicals produced by the Princeton Triangle Club, *Fie! Fie! Fie!* (for which he also contributed the plot), *The Evil Eye*, and *Safety First* (Scribner “Introduction” v-vii).

could be the storehouse of his subconscious, in a manner tantamount to the ‘Circe’ episode in *Ulysses*.<sup>46</sup> Duncan Aikman, who found the play “startlingly original” and dubbed it “nonsense written under the guise of satire,” nevertheless thought Act II “so utterly absurd, even as satire, that it verges on tiresome” (qtd in Bryer 189). Another reviewer opined, “Satire to be effective must have the essence of reality. *The Vegetable* is the caricature of a caricature” (qtd in Bryer 170). Perhaps Fitzgerald pitched the satire so high that his audience was averse to its farcical aspects and light treatment; in any case, the play, on opening night, flopped pitifully, and many in the audience walked out during the second act; Zelda, writing to a friend, considered it too “irreverent” for the audience’s taste: “The idea was what people didn’t like” (qtd in Tate 265). Nonetheless, most of those who read the play were both amused and impressed;<sup>47</sup> one critic, Anna L. Hopper, called “the stage directions” its “one distinct asset” (qtd in Bryer 187), and Wilson extolled it as “the best American comedy ever written” (qtd in Scribner viii); for our purposes, “*The Vegetable*,” Fitzgerald’s last major work antecedent to *Gatsby*, merits special attention on account of the playwright’s play with a few Nonsense elements that he in his magnum opus manipulates deftly into marvelous legerdemain.

As in *The Beautiful and Damned* and *This Side of Paradise*, the question of vocation reigns paramount in *The Vegetable*, yet unlike the novels Fitzgerald’s play proceeds to develop and underscore what amounts to a motif of unstable identity through a series of ironic and

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<sup>46</sup> On 26 May 1922, Wilson wrote to Fitzgerald with praise and suggestions regarding an early draft of the play, noting the similarity of Act II to Joyce’s dramatization of “Nighttown” in *Ulysses*: “...By the way, the great question is, have you read James Joyce’s *Ulysses*? Because if you haven’t, the resemblances between the drunken visions scene in it and your scene in the White House must take its place as one of the great coincidences of literature” (qtd in Scribner “Introduction” ix). (At the time in fact Fitzgerald had not yet read *Ulysses* and was seeking to obtain a copy, the book having been banned in the US [Scribner “Introduction” ix].)

<sup>47</sup> Curiously, one reviewer, John F. Carter of the *New York Post*, considered *The Vegetable* “a fair imitation of Ring Lardner” (qtd in Fitzgerald *In His Own Time* 343), whose later nonsense plays Fitzgerald himself would herald as “the most uproarious and inspired nonsense since Lewis Carroll” (*Crack-Up* 38).

Nonsensical reversals. Whereas Fitzgerald structures *The Beautiful and Damned* around several ironic reversals, notably foreshadowed in its epigraph—"The victor belongs to the spoils," those he employs in *The Vegetable, or from President to Postman* are, as its full title intimates, not tragic but playful.<sup>48</sup> Some of these are encapsulated in paradoxical discourse that denies (or at least appears to contradict) itself: "*Jerry stares at the carpet [...] and becomes engrossed in his lack of thoughts*" (6); "*He possesses no eyebrows, but nevertheless he constantly tries to knit them*" (6); a reference is made three times to a "Chinese girl [who] isn't a Chinese girl" (10; 10; 34). Even the identity of the pirated spirits is ambiguated: after Snooks, the bootlegger, denies that his potion is "poison," and insists, "This ain't *wood* alcohol. This is *grain* alcohol," the stage directions belie his claim: "*He holds up the gallon can, on which is the following label: WOOD ALCOHOL! POISON!*" [Moreover, directly below the label appears the symbol of the Jolly Roger.] Even such minor inversions hint at the possibility of an illusory reality, and in so doing subvert sense; as Stewart suggests, we are given "the idea of a text that never 'goes anywhere,' that consumes itself with each narrative step" (75).

In Act II, the reversals are more substantive, and serve to destabilize characters' identities. No longer the "small and stuffy" abode of Act I, Jerry's residence is now the White House, and all of Act I's plebian characters have transformed into high-ranking members of the aristocracy. After Jerry, now President, becomes disgruntled by General Pushing's supercilious bearing, he retorts, "Look at here, suppose you be the President for a while, if you know so much about it," and demands they trade outfits (72). Forthwith he "*gets quickly into the General's hat and coat and buckles on the sword,*" much to the General's perturbation: "Nice lot of talk it'd

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<sup>48</sup> The initial stage directions further establish the play's comic tone. Adorning the Frosts' living room walls are photographs "of young men with the hair cuts of '85 and '90 and '02, and neckties that loop, twist, snag, or flare in conformity to some esoteric, antiquated standard of middle-class dandyism" (4).

cause if I went back to the War Department looking like this. ‘Where’s your hat and coat, General?’ ‘Oh, I just thought I’d come down in my suspenders this morning’” (74). Without his coat and hat, the General is no longer recognizable, and the First Lady has to inquire who he is. Tigges observes that “Inwardly and outwardly [...] identity is sustained and modified by respectively food and clothing, two more nonsense motifs” (75). While Jerry is only playing a practical joke, he nevertheless is assuming the role of the trickster, forsaking his own coat, and subtly undermining his own status as Commander in Chief. Of such Nonsense, Stewart writes, “Reversals may be seen to be inherently ironic because they produce both a doubling and a contradiction. They are a ‘doubling back’ and have to do with the impossibility of nonsense to go anywhere, to proceed in a straight line towards a ‘purpose at hand’” (70-71). Later, after “Mr. Stutz-Mozart” arrives with his “Orang-Outang Band,” we find a similar disruption and abatement of sense. The flabbergasted First Lady is forced to ask: “Real orang-outangs?” (101) They aren’t, of course, but her sister replies that they “look kind of like orang-outangs” and “play kind of like orang-outangs” (101): a simple reversal (a denial of discourse, to be precise) but one that leaves readers uncertain as to how exactly the band members might look and sound.<sup>49</sup> However, they look and sound authentic enough for the Senators and Chief Justice to mistake their “jovial jazz rendition of ‘Way Down upon the Suwanee River’” for the national anthem, and stand “at respectful attention” (104).<sup>50</sup> Shortly thereafter occurs the play’s consummate

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<sup>49</sup> Whereas on stage the appearance and sound of the “Orang-Outang Band” would presumably be less nebulous, Fitzgerald nonetheless explained to his editor Maxwell Perkins that *The Vegetable* was “of course [...] written to be read” (qtd in Tate 265).

<sup>50</sup> In one version of the play, the macabre Secretary of the Treasury confuses their jazz for a divine token of the apocalypse, exclaiming “The heavenly music! The heavenly music!”—an ironically incongruous response, not unlike George B. Wilson’s deluded reaction, “God sees everything,” to the staring eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. (Fitzgerald *Vegetable* 18<sup>A1</sup>).

reversal: Jerry is impeached. What next? At the close of Act II, his vocation now uncertain, Jerry's future and even his purpose are a mystery.

For Max Perkins, Fitzgerald's editor, it was far too much. "The second act lacks all logic," he wrote the author in December 1922, recommending various revisions (qtd in Scribner "Introduction" xiv): "Keep one eye always on your chief motive. Throughout the entire wild second act there should still be a kind of *wild logic*" (xii). Whereas over the course of his editing, Fitzgerald did cut from the play an even more fantastic scene, in which Jerry and General Pushing are literally at war with a catapult-launching legion of buzzards, his final version suggests he preferred droll *divertissement* to sweeping satire. Perosa regards the play in this way, as "a light comedy, pleasingly written with the vague intention of staging a political satire, [...] [that] "often descends to pure farce" (52). Unlike the Jazz Age stories that employed Nonsensical quirks to toy with and enliven reality, *The Vegetable* piles Nonsense atop slapstick farce, causing an artistic imbalance and a wish for verisimilitude.

Nonetheless, the exigencies of play-writing forced Fitzgerald to refine his technique, renew his attention to form, and foreshorten. At the same time his attention to imagination, play, and Nonsense remained undiminished. Jerry Frost and Jay Gatsby both create Nonsense through the free play of their imagination, and both are largely unaware of the illusory nature of the resulting irreality. Yet whereas Frost creates Nonsense unwittingly, Gatsby does it on purpose and with uncommon artistry, engendering wonder.

Mad-Hatted Gatz, Ineffable *Gatsby*

Not surprisingly, F. Scott Fitzgerald's first published story, "The Mystery of the Raymond Mortgage" (1909), was a piece of detective fiction: *The Great Gatsby* itself can

essentially be read in this way. While tales of mystery themselves do not generally abound in Nonsense, the playful style in which Fitzgerald portrays Gatsby resounds and sparkles with a plethora of Nonsense elements, since the story plays with—and in effect enigmatizes—meaning. In essence, the author projects a mystery before the reader by the subtlety of his style and the ambiguation of the hero's identity. Our understanding of Gatsby himself is confounded by denials of discourse, absurdities, and puzzling incongruities: in a sense, Mr. Gatsby represents the quintessence of Nonsense; he is “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” (*Gatsby* 137), who invents himself and perpetuates wonder through the play of his imagination. Similarly, our understanding of *Gatsby* the novel is dazzled by “the light of magic suggestiveness”—by wonderful polysemy the artist creates through lyricism and wordplay (Conrad x). In this way, the story itself dodges the sun of meaning, invites rereading, and opens itself to myriad interpretations. Fitzgerald, writing to Wilson in 1925, averred that “of all the reviews [of *The Great Gatsby*], even the most enthusiastic, not one had the slightest idea what the book was about” (*Crack-Up* 270). If so, then he had likely succeeded in heeding Joseph Conrad's call to “speak to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives” (viii). For this capacity, this sense, in the way *Gatsby* evokes it, can perhaps best be understood in the light of Chesterton's observation that the “simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions, is the basis of spirituality as it is the basis of nonsense” (450).

Before beginning *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's letters signaled a significant shift in his approach to the novel. “I want to write something *new*—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned,” he told Perkins in July 1922 (qtd in Mizener 170). Remarkable also is Fitzgerald's further assertion: “This book will be a consciously artistic achievement and must



depend on that as the 1st books did not” (qtd in Scribner “Afterword” 195). No longer satisfied with writing entertaining *divertissements*, Fitzgerald endeavored to create a work of art, to reach his own goal of writing for “the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next and the schoolmasters of ever afterward” (*Conversations* 4). James E. Miller, Jr. identifies Willa Cather as an influence in this regard. In her 1922 essay “The Novel D meubl ,” Cather draws a sharp distinction between “the novel as a form of amusement, or as a form of art” (5). With respect to Fitzgerald’s oft-iterated wish for “something extraordinary,”<sup>51</sup> we must look to Conrad. In his 1934 introduction to the Modern Library edition of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald confessed to having “just re-read” Conrad’s preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* prior to beginning work on *Gatsby* (qtd in Fitzgerald *In His Own Time* 156). In that preface Conrad elaborates the requisite qualities of a novel “that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art,” and pointedly differentiates “the artist,” who “speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder,” from “the thinker” and “the scientist” who “speak authoritatively to our common-sense” (vii-viii).

Miller credits Conrad and Cather for also having inspired Fitzgerald’s employment of a partially-involved narrator in the novel. For our purposes, Nick Carraway’s detachment from and ambivalence toward New York, the Jazz Age, and *Gatsby* himself merits particular attention as it helps the author project the Nonsense and wonder of *Gatsby*. Lacking knowledge of *Gatsby*, Nick finds himself intrigued and mystified by the conflicting rumors enveiling his neighbor; at the same time, his detachment ensures that at least a part of *Gatsby*’s story will remain ambiguous. Stewart suggests that ambivalence and ambiguities can be an impediment to common-sense interpretive procedures (60-63); and indeed, viewing *Gatsby* through Carraway’s kaleidoscopic lens of shifting impressions, we too find ourselves bewildered by the mystery.

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<sup>51</sup> Shortly before *Gatsby* went to press, Fitzgerald declared to John Peale Bishop that “[one of the] cheerfulest things in my life [is] [...] the hope that my book has something extraordinary about it” (qtd in Miller 89-90).

Carraway, like Joel Coles, finds himself continually “trying to separate the real from the unreal” (Fitzgerald *Short Stories* 699), for in West Egg, as Dwight Taylor suggested of “Crazy Sunday,” “The truth is turned topsy-turvy, as in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*” (qtd in Kuehl *Study* 88):<sup>52</sup>

“I’ll tell you God’s truth.” [...] “I am the son of some wealthy people in the middle-west—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition.”

He looked at me sideways—and I knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying. [...]

“What part of the middle-west?” I inquired casually.

“San Francisco.”

“I see.”

“My family all died and I came into a good deal of money.”

His voice was solemn as if the memory of that sudden extinction of a clan still haunted him. For a moment I suspected he was pulling my leg but a glance at him convinced me otherwise (69-70).

By trickily disclosing information, Gatsby renders the truth “topsy-turvy,” befuddling Nick through his gestures (looking at him “sideways”), and twisting the sense of his questions (reframing the universe to situate San Francisco in “the middle-west”). Stewart regards tricks as a kind of “misdirection,” a “specific operation by which nonsense plays with the boundaries of discourse” (89): “To play a trick has to do with misdirection, with shifting boundaries, with

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<sup>52</sup> A playwright, Hollywood screenwriter, and the son of actress Laurette Taylor, Dwight Taylor was also a friend of Fitzgerald and part of the inspiration for Joel Coles, the protagonist of “Crazy Sunday” (1932).

reframing a universe while the tricked-upon is not looking” (89). While Nick of course *is* looking, and attempting to make sense of Gatsby’s story, his liminal status as partially-involved narrator nonetheless delays his discovery of Gatsby’s past. And yet in spite of Gatsby’s maneuvers to elude sense, his exchange with Nick seems realistic. Miller posits that

In real life, the story of an acquaintance comes into focus only after apparently unrelated incidents from different periods of time are gradually pieced together; and, unless the individual makes “a strong impression” in the beginning, there is little incentive for one to go to the trouble of discovering the incidents of his life. A story told in this manner gains not only in verisimilitude, however, but also in suspense: pieces of the protagonist’s life can be so arranged and revealed as to create mystery, which is particularly effective if there is a sensitive observer to share the reader’s bewilderment (96).

In this way Fitzgerald’s decision to abandon the third-person omniscient point of view of his first two novels, position Nick as a partially-involved narrator, and play with the story’s chronology helps to create suspense and mystery, effectively perpetuating the Nonsense of Gatsby without compromising the essential realism of the story.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Nick’s inclination to “reserve all judgements” makes him hesitant to judge, or attempt to define Gatsby (5). Nick is, by his own admission, “within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (40). As he oscillates on this threshold, weighing East and West, and evaluating contradictory information about Gatsby, the partially-involved narrator continually tries Fitzgerald’s “test of a first-rate intelligence”—assaying his “ability to hold two opposed ideas in

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<sup>53</sup> It is a fitting testament to the mystery of this sardine-in-the-box that Nick is unaware of Gatsby and unable to identify him (physically) even after they are already acquainted. After conversing for a while with a stranger at the party, Nick remarks that he has yet to meet the host—whereupon the stranger suddenly answers “I’m Gatsby” (52).

the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (*Crack-Up* 69). Victor Turner’s description of the liminal suggests how such a vantage point can provide a portal both of knowledge and of Nonsense: “The coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both” (99). Insofar as he brings “an increasing consciousness of the origin and nature of interpretation” (Stewart 112), Nick offers us a window to mystery and sense-making at the same time. Not until “curiosity about Gatsby [is] at its highest” (119), and he and the reader both have “reached the point of believing everything and nothing about [Gatsby]” (107), does Nick digress to proffer an anachronistic, expository glimpse into Gatsby’s past.

While Fitzgerald’s manner of telling the story inspires our wonder at Gatsby, so too do several other Nonsense techniques he employs to magnify the marvel of “his ecstatic patron of recurrent light” (94). Time and again the reader is offered information about Gatsby, only to have it negated forthwith. Such denials of discourse effectively thwart our attempt to make sense of Gatsby:

“Who is he?” I demanded. “Do you know?”

“He’s just a man named Gatsby.”

“Where is he from, I mean? And what does he do?”

“Now you’re started on the subject,” she answered with a wan smile. “Well,— he told me once he was an Oxford man.”

A dim background started to take shape behind him but at her next remark it faded away.

“However, I don’t believe it” (53).

Anecdotal conundrums, such as this one Jordan presents to Nick, occasionally originate from the horse's mouth but more often appear borne of pure romantic speculation, the play of wild rumor:

“Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once.”

A thrill passed over all of us. The three Mr. Mumbles bent forward and listened eagerly.

“I don't think it's so much *that*,” argued Lucille skeptically; “it's more that he was a German spy during the war.”

One of the men nodded in confirmation.

“I heard that from a man who knew all about him, grew up with him in Germany,” he assured us positively.

“Oh no,” said the first girl, “it couldn't be that, because he was in the American army during the war” (48).

Other information we are given about Gatsby likewise serves less to clarify than to astonish:

““One time he killed a man who had found out that he was nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil”” (65);

Contemporary legends such as the ‘underground pipe-line to Canada’ attached themselves to him, and there was one persistent story that he didn't live in a house at all, but in a boat that looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island shore. Just why these inventions were a source of satisfaction to James Gatz of North Dakota, isn't easy to say (103-04).

Like Wilde's Lord Goring (“a flawless dandy”), Gatsby “plays with life,” and, as we shall see, “is fond of being misunderstood” for “It gives him a post of vantage” (qtd in Fussell 131). For Nick, as for the rest of Gatsby's party-goers (such as the drunk, who, after his coupé is “violently

shorn of one wheel,” deems more gasoline the best remedy [58]), sorting out the real from the unreal constitutes a kind of detective work, which unlike many mystery stories, involves actual Nonsense and not a little alcohol. Owl Eyes supplies a curious case in point. Ludic and ludicrous, his conversation with Jordan and Nick in Gatsby’s gothic library skips dimensions, like stepping through a looking-glass:

“What do you think?” he demanded impetuously.

“About what?”

He waved his hand toward the book-shelves.

“About that. As a matter of fact you needn’t bother to ascertain. I ascertained.

They’re real.”

“The books?”

He nodded.

“Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they’d be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact they’re absolutely real. Pages and—Here! Lemme show you.”

Taking our skepticism for granted he rushed to the bookcases and returned with Volume One of the “Stoddard Lectures.”

“See!” he cried triumphantly. “It’s a bona fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella’s a regular Belasco. It’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn’t cut the pages. [...]

He snatched the book from me and replaced it hastily on its shelf muttering that if one brick was removed the whole library was liable to collapse. [...]

“I’ve been drunk for about a week now, and I thought it might sober me up to sit in a library.”

“Has it?”

“A little bit, I think. I can’t tell yet. I’ve only been here an hour. Did I tell you about the books? They’re real. They’re—” (49-50)

His intemperance notwithstanding, Owl Eyes wisely suspects Gatsby’s inauthenticity. However, unable to explain why he assumed the library to be spurious, he repeats himself dazedly. Like Nick, who is dazzled by the “real brass rail” of Gatsby’s bar (44), Owl Eyes is amazed and disoriented as he teeters between the facts and fiction of Gatsby.

While Owl Eyes’ incredulity may indicate that he in fact understands the dissembling host better than the other party-goers, the circularity of both his logic and the conversation itself epitomizes the evening’s playful atmosphere as well as the Nonsense that Gatsby engenders. In Stewart’s view, “Circularity is implicit in the reversibility and repetition of play” and “is a [...] type of play with infinity” (129): “When one’s goal is precisely to never arrive anywhere, the circle emerges as the form of this activity” (129). If those who come to Gatsby’s house share any goal whatever, it is nothing more than the general hedonism of the Jazz Age. Like the inhabitants of West Egg, as Fitzgerald describes them—“along a short cut from nothing to nothing” (114)—they reside within the sphere of Nonsense. Stewart’s explication of “nonsense activities” and “self-perpetuating” play sheds light on the nature of their purposeless capering at Gatsby’s parties, in the “echolalia of [his] garden” (*Gatsby* 54):

Nonsense, whose proper domain, subject, and form are “nothing,” promises the infinity of nothingness, for nothing is a quality without an extrinsic boundary or measurement. Nothing can always beget more or less nothing. It is self-generating

and self-perpetuating. [...] nonsense activities show the absence and arbitrariness of all beginnings and endings (143).

As Nick notices, the people at the party “conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior associated with amusement parks” (45). In this way the party-goers recognize what Fink describes as “the eminent essentiality of play, which common sense on the other hand does not recognize, because for it play means only frivolity, artificiality, unreality, idleness” (25). And yet their “spectroscopic gayety” (49) and “eternal graceless circles” (51) are only part of the extravagant Nonsense engendered through the play of James Gatz’ imagination.

Like West Egg itself, “this unprecedented ‘place’ that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village” (113-14), Gatsby himself “drift[s] coolly out of nowhere and buy[s] a palace on Long Island Sound” (54). Unexampled, unprecedented, buoyed by new money into an extraordinary existence, the place and the man emerge in defiance to tradition. Yet when Tom Buchanan calls Gatsby “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere,” we do not merely hear the antagonist warning his wife that her paramour lacks an aristocratic past; the appellation evokes Gatsby’s fabulous origin: “His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (104). He is thus the quintessence of the “self-made man”; an outsider, without “distinction or social background” (Perosa 65). As Nick avers, both the name and the man are an invention;<sup>54</sup> Gatsby is a fictive creation (of a fictive creation), borne of not a physical but a Platonic conception: the idea is more real than the

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<sup>54</sup> “Gatsby” of course is a neologism, an element common to the Nonsense repertoire (Tigges 56-76). While various scholars have attempted to determine the origin of the name, many suggesting it to be derived from “gat” (early twentieth-century slang for “pistol” or “revolver”—a shortening of “Gatling gun”) (Belliner 111)—thus serving to foreshadow Gatsby’s death. Nonetheless, Dieter Petzold points out that the neologism (which in his view is “the only type of wordplay or linguistic humour [...] which is typical of nonsense”) after all “must seem to make sense, it must appear to be a ‘normal’ word, keeping to the laws of syntax, morphology and phonetics” (qtd in Tigges 67).



person. Park points out that “the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role [...]” (249). Apropos of his observation, and in fairness to Gatsby, let us consider Erving Goffman’s proposition that “In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be” (19). What, then, is the form, the visage of his mask? What exactly is Gatsby’s Platonic conception of himself? –A gentleman of means, to be sure, but apart from this dim and rather superficial designation the image he projects is not so distinct. In the words of Isabel Paterson, “He was a man from nowhere, without roots or background, absolutely self-made in the image of an obscure and undefined ideal” (qtd in Fitzgerald *In His Own Time* 347). In truth, “the substantiality of [the] man” has been determined by but a “vague contour,” the conception of a seventeen-year-old (*Gatsby* 107).

In drawing Jay Gatsby, Scott Fitzgerald deliberately left out many details. “The result,” writes Kuehl, “is that Gatsby inspires ‘romantic speculation’ in the reader” (“Romantic and Realist” 413). Through what is untold, through absence itself, the artist creates a sense of mystery. Moreover, as Perosa points out, the “‘omissions’ were deliberate: Fitzgerald did not use ‘Absolution’ as a prologue to the novel,<sup>55</sup> and he cut out of the proofs his references to the relation between Gatsby and Daisy” (75). In this way, the author “inspires ‘romantic speculation’” in part through calculated omissions that serve to reduce meaning. Gatsby evokes wonder in part because he eludes categorization and definition. In her discussion of

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<sup>55</sup> On June 18, 1924, Fitzgerald wrote Perkins, “I’m glad you liked Absolution. As you know it was to have been the prologue of the novel but it interfered with the neatness of the plan” (*Life* 76). In an April 1934 letter to John Jamieson, Fitzgerald explained that the story was intended to be “a picture of Gatsby’s early life” but he omitted it “to preserve the sense of mystery” (*Letters* 509). In the opinion of Mary Jo Tate, “It is safest to regard Rudolph Miller [of ‘Absolution’] as an early treatment of the character who became Jay Gatsby” (1). In this way, Eble suggests, “Gatsby is revised, not so much into a real person as into a mythical one” (“Craft” 89).

“Deficiencies of Signification,” Stewart posits that “making a category ambiguous, absent, and taboo endows it with an attraction that those categories that are conscious, that are ‘everyday,’ cannot achieve. It also emphasizes the attractive power of those categories that present a tension between boundaries, a tension between presence and absence” (106). By avoiding direct mention of Gatsby’s occupation, but intimating it to be taboo, Fitzgerald creates fascination. The tension between presence and absence, between what is known and unknown about Gatsby, gives rise to interpretive challenges, puzzling incongruities, the wonder of the enigma. In the face of this “elegant young rough-neck” (53), Nick finds “an indefinable expression, at once definitely unfamiliar and vaguely recognizable” (127).

Intentionally made a shadowy figure, a man of mystery, Gatsby furthermore aids the author by hiding and, to some degree, disavowing his past: the son of “unsuccessful farm people,” he discovers love—“High in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl...” (127)—wherefore “wear the gold hat, if that will move her” (1). Without ties to nobility, or a respectable occupation, Gatsby endeavors to keep his origins and activities secret. What might we infer about an artist whose hero perpetuates mystery and whose antagonist purports to demystify? “I’ve made a little investigation into your affairs,” Tom Buchanan fires at Gatsby.<sup>56</sup> Even if James Gatz has perfectly fashioned a new persona through “an unbroken series of successful gestures” (6), his unexplained fortune and unprecedented rise represent an offense to the staid nobility and supercilious sensibilities of aristocratic East Egg, here incarnate in the “cruel body” of Mr. Buchanan (11). What “preys” on Gatsby is in effect an investigative force,

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<sup>56</sup> Tom reiterates this point on two other occasions. Outside Gatsby’s house he tells Daisy, “I’d like to know who he is and what he does [...] And I think I’ll make a point of finding out” (115). On the way to New York he announces to Jordan and Nick: “I’ve made a small investigation of this fellow [...] I could have gone deeper” (128). After Jordan inquires humorously, “Do you mean you’ve been to a medium?” Tom, confused, informs her, “I said I’d been making a small investigation of his past” (128).

which seeks to construe Gatsby's wonder as unjustified misrepresentation. Goffman, in regard to such a construction, observes that "Sometimes when we ask whether a fostered impression is true or false we really mean to ask whether or not the performer is authorized to give the performance in question, and are not primarily concerned with the performance itself" (59). In this sense, in spite of his practiced "poise" and "elocution" (181), Gatsby fails, not through a particular flaw in his act, but because he has been acted upon. In Nick's mind, he turns out "all right in the end" because his "extraordinary gift for hope" and "romantic readiness" remain undiminished—even if "'Jay Gatsby' had broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice and the long secret extravaganza was played out" (6, 155).

Inasmuch as Fitzgerald projects wonder onto Gatsby by steeping him in mystery, Gatsby himself radiates wonder by virtue of the creative vitality of his chimerical dream. In inventing "just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent" (104), James Gatz in fact does something quite unlikely. That a poor boy should care to wear "the gold hat" is understandable—but that young Gatz should moreover don a "mad hat" makes no sense. We can concede that "a universe of ineffable gaudiness" may provide "an outlet for his imagination," yet only in the realm of Nonsense does a seventeen-year-old believe "that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (105). Perhaps nowhere does Gatsby's mad hat loom as high as it does during the "Mad Tea Party" at Nick's bungalow. At this encounter we bear witness to the wildly transgressive nature of Gatsby's fantastic play. While all manner of subversive play pervades the novel (Jordan's cheating at golf, Meyer Wolfsheimer's "fixing" of the World's Series, widespread bootlegging and illicit love—and of course "old sport," Gatsby's celebrated,

suggestive expression),<sup>57</sup> and while play as such can be considered characteristic of the Jazz Age in its carefree defiance of laws and ethics, only Gatsby contrives to toy with the hands of time:

He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say “I never loved you.” After she had obliterated three years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house—just as if it were five years ago (116).<sup>58</sup>

“The debunking of the traditional perception of time as a linear progression takes a central place in [Carroll’s] ‘Mad Tea Party,’” Firtich observes. “Time becomes an animate being which could be convinced to move faster or go backwards; or it might decide to stop altogether” (600). Such a perception of time prefigures Gatsby’s, and at Nick’s tea party he manifests a conception of it akin to the Mad Hatter’s. When “his head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock” (91), we can guess the author’s metaphor, but what’s more, we know Gatsby’s wild notion of time has carried the characters far afield of the present moment. For this he apologizes:

“I’m sorry about the clock,” he said.

My own face had now assumed a deep tropical burn. I couldn’t muster up a single commonplace out of the thousand in my head.

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<sup>57</sup> In “Games and Play in Modern American Fiction,” Robert Detweiler notes in passing that Fitzgerald “stressed the play and game aspect so forcefully as to make its place in [*The Great Gatsby*] obvious” (47). Interestingly, the incidence of games and particular sports and exercises mentioned in the novel (e.g. football [10], polo [10], golf [23, 55, 62, 80, 113, 162, 185], tennis [64, 177], diving [43], swimming [44, 86], cricket [71], baseball [78, 179, 181], “hide-and-go-seek” [86], “sardines-in-the-box” [86], “liver exercises” [96], pool [96, 179], “Dumbbell exercise” [181], “wall-scaling” [181]) far exceeds that of any other of Fitzgerald’s works.

<sup>58</sup> Apart from Tom Buchanan’s determination to explode his mystery, it is precisely this quixotic play of Gatsby’s imagination that causes him to lose Daisy, who wants her life shaped by a force “of unquestionable practicality” (159).

“It’s an old clock,” I told them idiotically.

I think we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor.

“We haven’t met for many years,” said Daisy, her voice as matter-of-fact as it could be.

“Five years next November.”

The automatic quality of Gatsby’s answer set us all back at least another minute (92).

Whereas Chapter V of *The Great Gatsby*, which features this tea party, is often considered the heart and fulcrum of the novel, Tigges notes that Chapter VII [of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*] “is often considered the central chapter of the book, an epitome of its message. Once again, a conversation is turned into a riddling game, but the riddle has no answer. Another abstract notion, time, is personified, and killed—it has stopped” (157-58). If the conversation in Nick’s bungalow isn’t exactly “a riddling game,” the narrator in response to Daisy’s question “why did I have to come alone?” nonetheless poses a riddle: “That’s the secret of Castle Rackrent” (90)—the answer to which is not given but would perhaps explain the reason for the game. Yet the texts share a more curious likeness in their conversations about time:

“If you knew Time as well as I do,” said the Hatter, “you wouldn’t talk about wasting *it*. It’s *him*.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Alice.

“Of course you don’t!” the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. “I dare say you never even spoke to Time! [...] Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he’d do almost anything you liked with the clock (63).

In answer to Nick's suggestion, "'You can't repeat the past,'" Gatsby replies much like the Mad-Hatter— "'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!' He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just of reach of his hand" (116-17). Gatsby and the Hatter both profess having intimate knowledge of time, and the power to manipulate it. Not surprisingly, Alice and Nick, as emissaries from the realm of reality, both leave their respective tea party exasperated. Both, interestingly, thenceforth direct their steps toward an unusual tree, where things start to change dimension—for Alice, because she is nibbling at a mushroom, and in Nick's case, because "there was nothing to look at from under the tree except Gatsby's enormous house" (93). I am not attempting to suggest that Fitzgerald had intended a direct correspondence between his chapter and Carroll's, but given the parallels—in particular the similar conception of time evinced by Gatsby and the Hatter—and the fact that Fitzgerald had alluded to *Alice* in other writings,<sup>59</sup> the possibility of a subtle reference here merits attention.

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<sup>59</sup> Apart from Fitzgerald's references to *Alice* that I have cited already, a few more may be of interest. In 1925, the year of *Gatsby's* publication, Fitzgerald wrote of Hemingway's *The Torrents of Spring*, "Like *Alice in Wonderland* it sends you back to the sane world above cant and fashion in which most of us flatter ourselves that we live—sometimes" (*Correspondence* 183).

Of his daughter's trip to Hollywood in 1937, Fitzgerald wrote to friends, "I must say that it was an *Alice in Wonderland* experience for her" (*Letters* 556).

On 11 May 1940, the day after Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Fitzgerald wrote his wife:

Funny that he should be Prime Minister at last. Do you remember luncheon at his mother's house in 1920 and Jack Churchill who was so hard to talk to at first and turned out to be so pleasant? And Lady Churchill's call on the Countess of Byng whose butler was just like the butler in *Alice in Wonderland*? (*Letters* 116)

In *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941), which Fitzgerald claimed was "more 'like' *The Great Gatsby* than any other of [his] books" (*Letters* 92), Cecelia Brady, prior to the landing in Nashville, describes how "the plane was unmistakably going down, down, down, like Alice in the rabbit hole" (7).



The Lobster Quadrille, one of six watercolor and gouache paintings F. Scott Fitzgerald's wife Zelda completed that were inspired by scenes in Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Livingston 92-93).<sup>60</sup>

Perosa notes Fitzgerald's "predilection for the indirect allusion" in *Gatsby*, citing as a likely influence Conrad, who in his famous preface posits that the artist's "appeal is made to our less obvious capacities" (viii). In *The Great Gatsby*, the novel Fitzgerald believed no one had understood, no one passage or sentence comes close to encompassing a holistic meaning.<sup>61</sup> The

<sup>60</sup> Although the undated *Alice* series, which was said by critic Jane S. Livingston to "exemplify Zelda Fitzgerald's pictorial gifts at their highest pitch," is presumed to have been done around 1941 (Livingston 85), Zelda directly refers to Carroll's book in a February 1932 letter to their daughter Scottie (Milford 213), and also in her 1932 novel *Save Me the Waltz* (235), which Scott edited and helped persuade Scribner's to publish. Yet Carroll's text evidently played a visible role in their family life well before then. On a visit to the couple in 1927, Scott's cousin Cecilia Taylor noticed that Zelda had painted "a lampshade of Alice-in-Wonderland characters for Scottie" (Milford 137).

<sup>61</sup> Miller concurs: "The meaning of the novel is, presumably, neither obvious nor to be comprehended in a single statement. In one sense, certainly, the theme is the potential tragedy of passionately idealizing an unworthy and even sinister object. But this narrow definition does not suggest the subtlety and complexity of meaning brilliantly achieved by the symbolism, by the imagery, and by the language itself; and it is in these elements that the book is 'sparkling with meaning'" (103). There is, of course, another side to such an observation: an equally defensible argument would be to say the novel is sparkling with "magic suggestiveness"—to borrow Conrad's phrase—or to posit that the book is sparkling with "potentialities of meaning," which itself may imply that the book complicates conventional sense-making strategies, or is "sparkling with Nonsense."

ineffability of *Gatsby*'s colossal illusion matches the ineffability of the text itself, colored by a style as inimitable as it is incommunicable. The novel for this reason occupies a unique position in Fitzgerald's canon—while it meets Conrad's conditions for work of art, it is at the same time a *divertissement*, a pleasure to read. Thus, although already a short novel, *Gatsby* seems even shorter than it is. In contrast, *Gatsby*'s successor, *Tender Is the Night* (1934), is broader in scope and “has practically no romance” (Kuehl “Romantic” 418). Far removed from the play of the Jazz Age, “Its orientation,” Kuehl asserts, “partly to be attributed [...] to the circumstance that it was published during the thirties when almost every American writer was concerning himself with man's relation to the environment, is realistic, psycho-sociological” (418). A work of art, to be sure, realizing Conrad's ideal, *Tender* nonetheless lacks the ludic manner of Fitzgerald's earlier writing. And if in some ways Fitzgerald's final, unfinished novel of Hollywood, *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941) marks a return to the fused romanticism and realism of *Gatsby*, its main character is by contrast a pragmatist who relegates illusion and wonder to the screen. In *Gatsby*, inasmuch as the hero inspires and radiates wonder by virtue of “the colossal vitality of his illusion,” throwing himself “into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way,” the composer himself inspires and radiates wonder through the simultaneity of his polysemous, lyrical prose, dazzling the reader by its dispersion of meaning (*Gatsby* 101). In Conrad's view,

Fiction—if it all aspires to be art—appeals to temperament. [...] Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because temperament, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion. All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also



make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music—which is the art of arts (ix-x).

By intermingling such “magic suggestiveness” with diverting Jazz Age play, F. Scott Fitzgerald for his part effectually “speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder” (Conrad viii); and perhaps in no chapter of *Gatsby* does he so rapturously sing to our senses than number three, where we see the Jazz Age in full swing.

Through the portrayal of *Gatsby*’s party, the resonating lyricism and cadence of Fitzgerald’s prose, capped with a curious interplay of modalities, reflects in places the Nonsense method of simultaneity as it captures the mystery of the moment. From the synesthesia of the orchestra’s “yellow cocktail music” (44) to the “humorous suggestion” that the weeping soprano with inky tears “sing the notes on her face” (56), Fitzgerald indulges the senses as he describes the hedonism of the gala. And “as the earth lurches away from the sun” (44), the play of signification mirrors that of the guests, defying codes and diurnal refrains, so we can appreciate how, as Chesterton avows, “Everything has in fact another side to it, like the moon, the patroness of nonsense” (449). Just like the jazz, like the party’s players with their sundry ““stunts”” all over the garden” (51), the artist’s prose itself seems spontaneous—

Suddenly one of these gypsies in trembling opal seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and moving her hands like Frisco dances out alone on the canvas platform. A momentary hush; the orchestra leader varies his rhythm obligingly for her and there is a burst of chatter as the erroneous news goes

around that she is Gilda Gray's understudy from the "Follies." The party has begun (45).

With the "momentary hush," F. Scott Fitzgerald "varies his rhythm obligingly" for her and the "burst of chatter" is not unlike the "burst of jazz" later heard at the Plaza hotel (135).<sup>62</sup> Thus the synchronicity of prose, dancer, and orchestra appears to whisper the artist's aspiration to "the magic suggestiveness of music" (Conrad x). The aforementioned paragraph, along with the two which precede it, delineate the essence of Gatsby's party, and rather curiously, constitute the only passage in the entire novel—aphorisms excluded—that is written in the present tense. Here we have reached the heart of the matter, the evocation of wonder, the artistry begotten by the "man without a past" (156). There is verisimilitude, of course—the artist, wishing to draw us into the moment, strives to represent pictorially and rhythmically what we can neither see nor hear. At the same time everything is happening all at once; nevertheless our ineluctably sequential reading precludes our direct experiential participation. Of such narrative space, Stewart writes,

Simultaneity in nonsense may be seen first of all as this kind of collapsing of time, as a war on time that achieves what Gertrude Stein called in 'Composition as Explanation' a 'continuous present,' a moving of the temporal dimension of the fiction into a kind of narrative space where things happen 'all at once' (150).

In the aforementioned passage from *Gatsby*—to say nothing of the symbols or the allusions, direct and indirect—the gypsy, orchestra, and audience all are "happening" within the space of the moment, scattering our attention. A terser, yet more disorienting interplay of modalities directly precedes Gatsby's introduction. (In "The Craft of Revision," Eble notes, "The appearances of Gatsby, as might be expected, are among the most worked-over sections in the

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<sup>62</sup> "To unexperienced [sic] listeners," writes Breitwieser, "jazz seems not to be form at all, only outburst" (368).

draft” [88])). Here then is the final image the author gives us before depicting Gatsby: “The moon had risen higher, and floating in the Sound was a triangle of silver scales, trembling a little to the stiff, tinny drip of the banjos on the lawn” (51). Meaning, we might say, has been liquidated by wordplay, or at least besprinkled with ambiguity.<sup>63</sup> Whereas on a literal level the second clause of the sentence describes the moon’s reflection on the water, the synesthetic puns on “Sound,” “triangle,” and “scales” split our attention in two parts, one receptive to a visual image, the other to an aural representation. In Stewart’s view, “the nonsensical simultaneity of the pun” [...] “places two or more distinct meanings within one simultaneous frame,” and thus operates as a kind of discontinuity in that it combines disparate elements. What’s more, perhaps merely to tease us, Fitzgerald, in rounding off the sentence with a mention of the “banjos,” the literal instruments on the lawn, characterizes their sound as a “drip.” If mystifying for the reader, however, then the sensory images successfully convey the condition of the narrator, dazzled by the “jazz” singing (51), the “single girls” (51), the “finger bowls of champagne” (51), and certainly the “moon, produced like the supper, no doubt, out of a caterer’s basket” (47). Puns and ambiguated meaning in this way aid his attempt at an honest portrayal of the fun.

A slightly different simultaneity that underscores the novel’s lively, lyric quality comes in the form of musical interludes. Of the various songs in the writing, perhaps the most noteworthy plays on the occasion of Daisy’s first visit to Gatsby’s house. In the music room Gatsby commands Klipspringer to the piano:

“Don’t talk so much, old sport, [...] Play!”

*In the morning,*

*In the evening,*

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<sup>63</sup> Tigges defines wordplay as “the creating of an ambiguous sentence by using *homonyms*, words that are spelled and sound the same” (60).

*Ain't we got fun—*(100)

Interrupting the song for the reader, Nick describes the wind, thunder, rain, lights, and electric trains outside. “It was the hour of a profound human change and excitement was generating on the air” (101). “*In the meantime, / In between time—*” (101) Stewart regards simultaneity as a “disruption of conventional narrative temporality” (150) that “moves the narrative from linearity into an unfolding space” (149). In the representation of Gatsby’s attempt to halt time, Fitzgerald’s technique of disrupting temporality is felicitous, and the lyrics “*In between time*” evoke the host’s extraordinary machination with the clock. Again, as the story’s emissary from reality’s realm, Nick is simultaneously in and outside Gatsby’s world. In the meantime, Fitzgerald, appealing to our senses, slips one form (song lyrics) inside another (prose narrative), thereby collapsing time, and erasing “the boundary between form and content” (Stewart 174). Save for the interval of Nick’s digression, we hear Klipspringer sing at the same time Daisy and Gatsby do. In Stewart’s view, the simultaneity brought about through “convergence of domains” produces an effect akin to *mise en abyme*: “It is as if we were able to perceive a set of Chinese boxes, one within the other, all at once. It is perhaps the closest thing we have to experiencing infinity” (174).

In *The Great Gatsby*, we experience a grand scale of auditory effects. Fitzgerald’s play on the modality of the audible is in no measure limited to the musicality of his prose; his art and ear for sonorous wordplay adds unheard dimensions to his dialogues. While Fitzgerald does indeed avail himself of the other senses in conveying impressions to the reader, in *Gatsby* he fashions a heroine whose primary appeal is auditory: Daisy’s “low, thrilling voice” has an “excitement” in it “that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered ‘Listen,’ a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while

since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour” (13-14).<sup>64</sup> So extraordinary is her voice, it in fact completely eclipses her physical characteristics—not until the penultimate chapter do we learn even the color of her hair. As such, Daisy’s voice serves as a source of wonder, posing a mystery for the reader (“there’s something in that voice of hers....” [82]), and often “playing murmurous tricks in her throat” (111). Notably, the wonder of a few of its tricks is created by Nonsense devices; oddly, Fitzgerald endows her voice with the capacity to change the sense of words. On Gatsby’s steps, Nick notes: “Daisy began to sing with the music in a husky, rhythmic whisper, bringing out a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again” (114-15). At times, the “tricks in her throat” seem to transcend her own intentions. Vacillating a day before her wedding, Daisy, drunk on sauterne, decides to return her string of pearls, crying, “‘Tell ‘em all Daisy’s *change*’ her *mine*. Say Daisy’s *change* her *mine!*’” (81; my emphasis) Plausible-sounding slurred speech, but also a play on words. Fitzgerald, tweaking the dialogue, toys with sense and shapes the secret of her voice—an enigma not revealed to the reader till the day Gatsby’s own “secret extravaganza” also melts beneath the summer heat (155).<sup>65</sup>

Yet perhaps even more fascinating scraps of tweaked dialogue issue forth from the mouth of Meyer Wolfshiem, whose phonetically spelled comments may serve to amuse and subtly foment wonder. Vouching for Gatsby, Wolfshiem tells Nick,

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<sup>64</sup> Indeed it would have been difficult for Fitzgerald to render a character more beautiful—in the visual sense—than *The Beautiful and Damned*’s Gloria Gilbert, who is actually personified as Beauty.

<sup>65</sup> This mystery, or at least Gatsby and Nick’s interpretation of it, is unveiled on the “hot pebbles” of Tom Buchanan’s “blazing gravel drive” (126):

“She’s got an indiscreet voice,” I remarked. “It’s full of—”

I hesitated.

“Her voice is full of money,” he said suddenly.

That was it. I’d never understood it before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it...” (127).

“He’s an Oggsford man.”

“Oh.”

“He went to Oggsford College in England. You know Oggsford College?”

“I’ve heard of it.”

“It’s one of the most famous colleges in the world” (76).

On the one hand, the phonetic transcription “Oggsford,” in ostensibly conveying the speaker’s accent, adds humor by virtue of ironic incongruity: the mobster Wolfshiem, while professing sophistication and avowing respect for erudition, betrays his own background and conjures another, strikingly dissimilar world by pronouncing “Oxford” in this manner. Yet Fitzgerald’s transformation of “Oxford” into “Oggsford” could also be a pun, the altered spelling subtly suggestive of “eggs,” a prominent symbol in the novel.<sup>66</sup> If such a possibility seems far-fetched, consider that in the novel’s dialogues Meyer Wolfshiem is allotted over three hundred words, of which only two have significantly altered spelling. “Oggsford,” which Wolfshiem repeats four times (75, 179), is one; the other, which appears three times, is “gonnegtion” (75, 88, 180; emphasis mine). In both cases, the curious phonetic spelling of the word thus renders it just one letter shy of containing the word “egg.” Of course, had Fitzgerald transcribed the utterances as “Eggsford” and “gonneggtion,” the semblance of realistic vernacular speech would have been lost, along with the subtlety. The Nonsense device of the pun thus proves felicitous for provoking the audience’s wonder at potentialities of meaning.

“The pun,” explains Stewart, “involves the simultaneity of two or more meanings within one word” (163). Yet can we be certain the author intended “Oggsford” and “gonnegtion” to

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<sup>66</sup> In addition to fictionalizing the two formations of land jutting out into “the great wet barnyard” of Long Island as “East Egg” and “West Egg” (9), Fitzgerald had in fact considered “Trimalchio in West Egg” and “On the Road to West Egg” as alternate titles for the novel (*Letters* 169). Even in this chapter, which introduces Wolfshiem, who has “brooded” over “friends now gone forever” (74), the artist depicts “the yolks of [...] eyeballs” (73).

carry more than one meaning? Postulates Tigges, the “nonsense [of the pun] requires the non-resolution of the tension between the two meanings, or rather, between the possible meanings of the word and the absence created by their incompatibility” (61). Put another way, Nonsense itself predicates a lack of sense, an uncertainty of meaning, a degree of incomprehensibility.

By the subterfuge of wordplay, Fitzgerald thus ambiguates meaning, sustaining wonder: we no more know the implication of “Oggsford” than we know if Gatsby himself went there.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, we can safely surmise Fitzgerald cared much for the sound of his language. By his own admission, he esteemed Conrad’s credo that

it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour; and the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words” (x).

While Miller states confidently that Fitzgerald “was indebted to Conrad [...] for the use of style or language to reflect theme,” he is however hesitant to define the theme. Donald Monk, for his part, observes that “Particularly Conradian is Fitzgerald’s definition of fiction” (79), referring to a letter the latter penned to Hemingway stressing art’s want of subtlety: “the purpose of a work of fiction is to appeal to the lingering after-effects in the reader’s mind as differing from, say the purpose of oratory or philosophy which respectively leave people in a fighting or thoughtful mood” (*Letters* 309). With regard to *Gatsby*, Monk notes Fitzgerald’s reliance on style, whereby “Meaning, as paraphrasable meaning disappeared, became inseparable from its constituent images” (81). In his view, “the perfection of [Fitzgerald’s] method, then, involved only a

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<sup>67</sup> While the validity of Gatsby’s Oxford status is seemingly affirmed by his own disclosure at the Plaza Hotel, it is in question for much of the novel, and Wolfshiem’s avowal here does more to uphold the mystery than to shed light on the matter.

perfunctory need for character, plot and action. Resemblance is so much the technique of [*Gatsby*] it could also virtually be called its material” (85). Explaining his idea, Monk writes, “Echoes and correspondences [...] are the muscle tissue of the novel” (82); “The success of *The Great Gatsby* rests in large measure on the multiple amplifications of the barest of anecdotes” (86). Yet if the novel’s “echoes and correspondences” help the reader to establish a framework of meaning, it is nonetheless an elusive meaning. Were we to amplify one of “the barest of anecdotes”—e.g. “He’s an Oggsford man,” Fitzgerald’s host of Nonsense devices (i.e. denials of discourse, puzzling incongruities, potential puns) would happily thwart our attempts at demystification.

Were we to go a bit further and risk an interpretation of “Oggsford,” speculating on the possibility of a pun—a “gonnegtion,” so to speak, between “Oggs-” and “eggs”—we would be on shakier ground. But apropos of Dutch sailors and Gatsby’s “capacity for wonder,” perchance we can beguile an “enchanted moment” by entertaining our curiosity (*Gatsby* 189). Comparing Gatsby to eggs could connote his fragility (““Jay Gatsby’ had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice” [155]), perhaps his “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” (6), or potentially even his gestation—from his “Platonic conception of himself” (82) to the time he “came alive [...] delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor” (83). Nick’s own gestation thus brings us back to first phases, to the origin of wonder. In his mind, Gatsby wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was [...]—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and



once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder (117).

As he ponders Gatsby's ineffable dream—his unintelligible quest for this indeterminate “idea” or “thing,” Nick nonetheless is “reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words that I had heard somewhere a long time ago” (118). Even his final meditations find him gestating, transfixed by the mystery of what “was uncommunicable forever”: “And I sat there, *brooding* on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock” (189; emphasis mine). As Gatsby plays at recapturing past wonder, “the freshest and the best part,” so Fitzgerald plays at dispersing and enveiling meaning, creating wonder. As for the enigmatic eggs, Miller reasons “It is probably because these and other symbols ‘suggest’ rather than mean that *The Great Gatsby* survives many readings, and that with each reading it continues to ‘sparkle with meaning’ (107). Whether “sparkling with meaning,” or glimmering with “the light of magic suggestiveness,” *Gatsby* bounces high in “a language of pure style, a language that has flown from the restrictions of signification, that no longer feels compelled to *mean*” (Stewart 103). If procedures of Nonsense serve the novel's purpose, if its mystery distills the dream, if the light of its magic flame matches the twinkle of James Gatz, perhaps the creator apprehended indeed what Chesterton put down in words—that a bird is really “a blossom broken loose from its chain of stalk,” that a house truly is “a gigantesque hat to cover a man from the sun,” and that “*a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible*” (449; emphasis mine).

## The Offshore Pirate

Apart from implying that Conrad had been a primary influence on *Gatsby*'s style, Fitzgerald in his 1934 introduction to the Modern Library edition claimed he had composed the novel "without feeling guilty of any discrepancy from the truth, as far as I saw it; truth or rather the equivalent of the truth, the attempt at honesty of the imagination" (*In His Own Time* 156).<sup>68</sup> As I hear it, the emphasis should be laid not on honesty but *imagination*—the sheer inventiveness of his creation. From the apprentice fiction, to the magazine stories, the first novels and drama to *Gatsby*, the key constant in Fitzgerald's work is its imaginative quality. As we have seen, this imagination is animated in part by his partiality for literary Nonsense—and the influence of Nonsense on Fitzgerald's innovative style evolved from his adaptation of farce and unlikely incongruities to a more subtle, though no less entertaining, lyrical prose suggestive of Jazz Age play, in which *Gatsby*, both man and text, are "commensurate to [our] capacity for wonder" (189).

Given Fitzgerald's expressed intention for the book to be both "beautiful" and a "consciously artistic achievement," his conception of artistic beauty and manner of creating it bear further contemplation. In the opinion of his first biographer, Arthur Mizener, "Though [*Gatsby*'s] commitment to the wonder and the enchantment of a dream is qualified by the dream's unreality, by its 'year by year reced[ing] before us,' the dream is still the book's only positive good; the rest is a world of 'foul dust' (178). While Mizener may be more interested in exegesis than aesthetics here, his highlighting of the dream raises the question of Fitzgerald's

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<sup>68</sup> Was Fitzgerald worried his imaginative creation might be judged too fanciful for a work of realism? (If so, perhaps he had wondered—along with Forster's Mr. Failing, if "Nonsense and beauty have close connections—closer connections than Art will allow" [171]. Chesterton presents a dissenting view: "Our claim that nonsense is a new literature [we might almost say a new sense] would be quite indefensible if nonsense were nothing more than a mere aesthetic fancy. Nothing more sublimely artistic has ever arisen out of mere art, any more than anything essentially reasonable has ever arisen out of the pure reason" [448-49].)

idea of the beautiful. If the dream, in spite of its “unreality,” is the book’s “only positive good,” could the book’s beauty be engendered by “the wonder and enchantment” of the dream? If, for Fitzgerald, beauty resides in wonder and enchantment, then his conception of the beautiful bears, strangely, a striking likeness to that of Breton, who in the very year of *Gatsby*’s composition, averred a similar view: “le merveilleux est toujours beau, n’importe quel merveilleux est beau, il n’y a même que le merveilleux qui soit beau” [“the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful”] (*Manifeste* 24; *Manifestoes* 14).

Interestingly, Fitzgerald’s formulation of fiction’s purpose as “appeal[ing] to the lingering after-effects in the reader’s mind” (*Letters* 309) connotes a kind of inversion of Breton’s prescription for automatic writing: “Almost everything I write in novels goes, for better or worse, into the subconscious of the reader” (527). It appears then, by his method, that the artist from his subconscious distills wonder, only to instill it in that of the audience. Yet whereas Breton believed in direct transcription of the dream’s wonder, Fitzgerald, like Huidobro, believed in its distillation through the power of reason. And in insinuating such wonder into the reader’s subconscious, both Fitzgerald and Huidobro appear to follow Conrad’s principle of conveying impressions through the senses. Whereas Conrad’s preface primarily addresses prose fiction, his idea of “magic suggestiveness” applies well to poetry. Monk in fact considers that Fitzgerald’s method of “Fidelity to the original emotion, transmission through an organic form, bypassing the conscious mind to produce ‘lingering after-effects’ make[s] a likelier formula for poetry than prose” (80). In the heart of his preface, Conrad asseverates art’s foremost aim: “by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything” (x). If Huidobro himself was not familiar with Conrad’s artistic manifesto, the poems and indeed the very title of his book *Ver y palpar* (“To

See and Feel”) suggest his aesthetic kinship with Conrad.<sup>69</sup> And yet, the marvel of the “lingering after-effects” in his poetry, like that in Fitzgerald’s prose, is organic, derived from life.

If the wonder of Fitzgerald’s lyricism and wordplay in *Gatsby* is achieved through delicate tweaking of language and assiduous attention to detail, it is nonetheless engendered in the imagination. Reflecting on his composition of the novel, Fitzgerald wrote, “The present writer [...] can think of nothing he could have done as efficiently as to have lived deeply in the world of imagination” (*In His Own Time* 157). In this regard, the author a bit resembles the buccaneer of “The Offshore Pirate,” Toby Moreland, who vanquishes the flapper heroine through a feat of the imagination, burying his treasure of wonder in the waters of her subconscious, and availing himself of the “magic suggestiveness of music”:

*“Oysters and rocks,  
Sawdust and socks,  
Who could make clocks  
Out of cellos?—”* (*Jazz Age Stories* 9)

With this song Moreland, operating under the alias Curtis Carlyle, beguiles the attention of defiant, dashing flapper Ardita Farnham. In this story, a forerunner of *Gatsby* in that it treats “the key Fitzgerald theme of the capacity of imagination to transform reality” (Brucoli 273), the

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<sup>69</sup> Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* was first translated into Spanish in 1925 (*El Negro del “Narciso,”* Buenos Aires, Crítica), at the time that Huidobro was, among other things, composing *Ver y palpar*. I have found no evidence that he had direct knowledge of the novel or its celebrated preface. Nonetheless, Huidobro’s poems from this volume demonstrate an aesthetic affinity with Conrad’s views. Belén Castro Morales observes that en *Ver y palpar* proliferan las alusiones a los cinco sentidos, y sinédoques como manos, ojos y oreja se diseminan y divagan por textos donde el yo poético se refiere a su contacto con el mundo y a la subjetividad de sus percepciones. El mismo título del libro cobra así sentido, y enfatiza la importancia que Huidobro da en esos poemas al “ver” y al “palpar” como formas de apropiación subjetiva de la realidad [Abounding in *To See and Feel* are allusions to the five senses, and synecdoches such as hands, eyes and ear are scattered throughout texts in which the poetic I refers to its contact with the world and the subjectivity of its perceptions. In this way the title itself acquires significance, and underscores the importance that Huidobro gives in these poems to “seeing” and “feeling” as ways of subjectively apprehending reality] (1522).

astonishment Carlyle and his chorus induce in Ardita is directly contrived from Nonsense verse. Note how in the first two lines of the song [which was no allusion, but Fitzgerald's own invention], both the incongruity of the juxtapositions (à la Lautréamont) and the very rhythm is starkly reminiscent of Lear's "Teapots and Quails":

Teapots and Quails,  
 Snuffers and Snails,  
 Set him a sailing  
 And see how he sails! [...] (15)

By inventing and vivifying a new identity, and equipping it with rhythm, Moreland wins the affections of Ardita, who confesses she likes a man with "an imagination and the utter courage of his convictions" (21). After all is at last revealed, Ardita says to him "softly and almost enviously," "What an imagination! [...] I want you to lie to me just as sweetly as you know how for the rest of my life" (33). Perhaps even with this story, published when he was only twenty-three, Fitzgerald knew what Wilde had averred, that "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (*Intentions* 45). In creating *The Great Gatsby*, he did not abandon his playful, ingenious way of rendering verisimilar marvels. In it he snatches—to plunder Conrad's phrase—"in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life"—the mystery of it is how, by telling us lies, he "show[s] its vibration, its form, and its colour, and reveal[s] the substance of its truth" (Conrad xi)—"Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder" (Fitzgerald *Gatsby* 73).

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