

Michael Heyman

Joseph Thomas

Pacific Coast Philology: Send in the Clowns

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On the Theory and Praxis of Nonsense Poetry
as Dialogic Scrum; Or, the Poetical Hermeneutics of a Retro-Teleological,
Post-Diegetic Transom (Notes towards an Investigation)

ORIGINS (PART I): JOSEPH'S STORY

Some years ago, ensconced in a Naugahyde booth at Nunu's Tavern in San Diego, poet Ilya Kaminsky and I chatted about poetry over drinks. Kaminsky was the editor of *Poetry International* at the time, and since he and I were colleagues, he was familiar with both my scholarly work on children's poetry and my dalliances writing the stuff (I had contributed a children's poem—"Love Song"—to *PI* back in 2017). Knowing this, he proposed I put together a selection of cutting-edge children's poetry for *Poetry International*. The idea was simple: the boundary between innovative poetry for adults and innovative poetry for young folks is surprisingly blurry, so why not gather a ragbag of children's poems that suggests the interesting overlaps between the two? I paraphrased a bit of my conversation with Kaminsky in my introduction to that special section (eventually published in the 2018 issue of *PI* under the name "So I Said, 'Yes': A Handful of Children's Poems"), writing:

While in other countries—from Sweden to Russia—these lines aren't murky and it is a well-known fact that some of the most daring experiments in 20th century literature were produced by authors who also wrote popular books for young kids,

to American audiences it still seems to be a surprise that there is a fair amount of overlap between the two. (642)

I had a mandate: cobble together a selection of children’s poetry highlighting its “ludic openness to nonsense and experimentation, to the materiality of language (aural, morphological, orthographical, et cetera)” (642), an assemblage of poems by some of the most interesting and provocative practitioners of the form. I grabbed my rolodex and made some calls, ending up with a pretty compelling passel of poems by Helen Frost and Marilyn Nelson, JonArno Lawson and Derek Beaulieu, Anushka Ravishankar and Nada Gordon; I also included two poems of my own and a brace of nonsense by Michael Heyman, who, in addition to co-authoring the essay you’re now reading, is also a scholar and writer of literary nonsense. And we are old friends.

Craig Svonkin, the Executive Director of the Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association’s annual conference, saw the *Poetry International* mini-anthology and, as the theme for the 2019 PAMLA conference was “Send in the Clowns”—and since it was being held in my stomping grounds of San Diego—asked if I would like to read some of my poems at the conference, focusing on nonsense and humorous children’s poetry. I couldn’t say no. That is, I couldn’t say yes unless Michael, my nonsensical comrade-in-arms, were also involved. Craig agreed.

ORIGINS (PART II): PREPARING FOR PAMLA

When we first slapped together our performance for the 2019 PAMLA conference, we never imagined it would eventually be laminated with such layers of dialogic deviltry. We were just expanding on the mini-anthology and bonding over our apparent fondness for sea chanteys. Even as we banged it together—first over the phone and then in Michael’s vintage, Dr. Seuss-

themed Airbnb amongst bottles of Bulleit rye—we didn’t see the reactivity of many of our poems, as parody, dialogue, or intertextual sandbox, nor that our performance itself would be a head-to-head dialogic scrum with poems that were, themselves, dialogic scrums. Scrums all the way down. It was Lissa Paul, a respected children’s poetry scholar and our friend, who saw something more: after reading a draft of our script, she told us it resembled a song-cycle more than a poetry reading. From that moment, we had a new form to live up to, and her words became a self-fulfilling prophecy as we shaped the performance to fit them.

Our fifty-minute performance was called “A Short Program of Poems for Young People, in Four Chapters.” Each chapter had a thematic or formal center of gravity, and each was approximately the same length. (We made clear the chapter titles, by way of proclamation, over the course of the show.) Within the chapters’ themes, the individual poems often spoke to each other, such as in the aptly named Chapter I, “All Our Base Are Belong to Us,” wherein Joseph’s “The Cat” riffed off of Michael’s “The Hat.” Michael’s poem reads,

There’s something wrong with my new hat
 It’s long and felt and black and flat
 (There’s nothing wrong with all of *that*)
 It’s just that *arms* should seem to fit
 Its seams, to match my dreams of it.

What? My hat needs arms, okay?
 Like *every* hat you see today
 Like *any* hat worth half its spit,
 But lacking arms? Return it!

Joseph's offering follows the grammatical contours of Michael's piece while halving both the final couplet and the ratio of nonsense to sense:

There's something wrong with my new cat:
 She's short and svelte and gray and fat.
 (There's nothing *wrong* with all of that.)
 It's just her arms and legs are switched!
 Some god has stitched her hands to where her feet should be—

So when her crown has an itch,
 It's with her *feet* she scratches it.

Other poems spoke to pieces by canonical poets, and they were paired with excerpts by said poets. In Chapter II, for instance, sententiously announced as "Chapter II: Chapter Two," Joseph read the first stanza of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade," after which Michael declaimed the more vegetal "The Chard of the Blighted Soufflé," which reads, in part,

"Forward the blighted soufflé!
 Chard on the run!" he said:
 Into the valiant broth
 Flowed the mix sundered.

Chapter III, "Sea Sick Love Songs," had a fair amount of *sea*, including Joseph's "Favoritest Mermaid" phantasmagoria, equiposed against an equal amount of *sick*, including a recording of Michael's chantey, "The Hummerhead Brill." The fourth chapter, "Rinnzekete Bee Bee Nnz Krr Müü" went even further in terms of formal experimentation, with Joseph's "Six are We Now," an Oulipian exercise on A. A. Milne's classic, and Michael's performance of an excerpt from

Kurt Schwitters's iconic Merz piece, "Ursonate." Throughout the show, we pranced and paced and gesticulated around the stage, Joseph molting sheets of paper to the wind, and Michael evoking conspiratorial shrieks from the PAMLA conference's most discriminating five-year-old attendee.¹

Some of the texts stand alone (as much as any poem written in a time, place, and genre can), but most, as the examples above show, are conversations (or we made them to be conversations, trying to live up to Lissa's standards): a poetic colloquy among texts, genres, performers, and audiences. Many fall somewhere on the literary nonsense spectrum, making them even more fittingly scrum-fitting, yet their relationships with their source texts and genres, to each other, and to our performance have now, on this Valentine's Day in 2021, got us thinking about layered, scrumtious intertextuality. And love.

INTERTEXT AND FRAMING: A ROMANCE

We begin with pieces that are not, technically, nonsense, but for this very reason they provide a kind of framework that not only highlights a range of nonsensicality and experimentation, but also, as we'll see, infuses the non-nonsense with the funk of nonsense. Literary nonsense itself might be thought of as the point between perfect sense, on one end, and absolute gibberish, on the other end of a sense spectrum. Nonsense requires the push and pull of these ends, non-sense and sense—the tension created by playfully indeterminate over-abundance, or lack, of meaning, balanced with a sense of order, design, semiotic satisfaction, and clear teleology. Without that sense of sense, balanced neatly with the non-sensical, you have something closer to Dada on one hand, or simple, jokey light verse on the other. This is why so much nonsense thrives on the

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discipline of meter, rhyme, and verse forms; likewise, this is why prose, by its nature less formally strict, proves more resistant to nonsense, why prose nonsense is so comparatively rare.

We'll approach our performance's "sense spectrum" framework first from the sense end of it, with Joseph's "Sugar Shine Glow." The poem was inspired by Joseph's not entirely unerotic affection for novelist David Zimmerman. As a love poem, it consists of a series of seven couplets, each pair sonically signifying lover and beloved:

Sugar Shine Glow [Joseph Thomas]

I know a boy with a sugar shine glow;
He's got a heart that's black and a fire below.
I held a boy without a quid pro quo;
He's got scales on his thighs and fins for toes.

Yeah, I love a lad and he smells like a rose;
He's got blood red petals and them thorns of gold.
So listen up, son, he's the mermen's king,
As hot as the sun, three times as mean.

To know him is to love him and to love him's to ignite.
He'll turn you into ashes, leave you saying, "Alright."

Listen: I love a boy with the sugar shine glow;
He's got crimson on his head, hellfire below.

And there ain't nothing better than the touch of this guy;

He's the white-hot sun who burns clouds from the sky.

"It's a kind of nonsense," Joseph suggested on the phone. "No," Michael replied. And he was right. It does, however, thrum with squamous intertextuality, a siren call to the rich tradition of merperson poems, an intertext that gives the poem its slight nonsensical musk. When writing the thing, Joseph had just finished Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007), whose titular creature (in Paul Muldoon's translation) "hates nothing so much / as being reminded of the underwater life she led / before she turned over a new leaf on dry land," a beautiful beast who, like most mer-things, has "a real difficulty with boundaries" (77). This tricky relationship with boundaries arises also in Matthea Harvey's *Modern Life* (2007), which Joseph regularly teaches. Harvey's book is obsessed with divided selves and hybrid bodies: mermaids, the mastheads of ships, robot boys. But one poem in particular inflected the poetical ruminations on lusty, boy/boy love that inspired "Sugar Shine," a prose poem by Harvey about a centaur, a mythological creature who like the mermaid springs from our all-too-human desire to combine and remix. The poem ("You Know This Too") begins:

The bird on the gate and the goat nosing the grass below make a funny little
fraction, thinks the centaur. He wonders if this thought is more human than horse,
more poetry than prose. (7)

Or more nonsense than sense. The poem speaks of a river so choked with merfolk that "there's no room for fish," describes a centaur's drawing of "a girl in sequins getting sawed in half" (7). Harvey's poem isn't nonsense, but has the whiff of it, joining the work of Shel Silverstein, Edward Lear, and a thousand other nonsense poets who have taken on merpeople as a subject. And like nonsense, like "Sugar Shine," like Ni Dhomhnaill's mermaid, it evinces a "difficulty

with boundaries,” a difficulty evident throughout our performance, for our performance is a single piece made of disparate parts stitched together, rubbing against one another. In the performance, “Sugar Shine” arrives several minutes after Joseph’s “Nonsense Rhyme,” the former’s “mermen’s king” resonating with the latter’s

You bought her a bucket, a bed full of rest;

A bindle of thorns, a ladle of broth;

A trio of Norns, a mermaid who’s wroth.

Likewise, the deep-dwelling merman of “Sugar Shine”—with “scales on his thighs and fins for toes”—chimes with Michael Heyman’s Pishposh Bosht (from the unambiguously nonsensical “Bisht-Bosht Mud Pies!”), who

had expertise

Co-mudifying pies with ease

So dredged them from the deepest seas

And packed them with his knees—

as well as Joseph’s “Love Song,” which sings,

By the way, the mermaid shays, all brittle and bray bray boo

By all the fishermen weighted and gray, she riddles and brays ah-choo

And with that, we segue to the gibberish end of our sense spectrum, where a kind of formless madness reigns. In toto, our performance has the sense of nonsense, and poems like “Sugar Shine Glow” work, like a non-diatonic chord in an otherwise tonal piece of music, because it rests within a nonsensical intertext. This is also why our choice to end our reading with Kurt Schwitters’ “Ursonate” works (we humbly suggest). Alone, it would be what it is: a Dada-esque piece of Merz. However, perform an excerpt of Schwitters’ magnum opus during the

conclusion to a four-part performance, and a gleefully irrational sound poem is transmogrified into something new: a children's poem thrumming with sense through a cloud of phonological play. In that final chapter, Joseph's twenty-one sentence "First Lines" anticipates Schwitters' masterpiece. We perform "First Lines" as duet, Joseph reading the first sentence, Michael reading the next, and so on. It begins with the opening to Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* ("I write this sitting in the kitchen sink"), concluding, fourteen sentences later, with:

I right this sinking kitchen set. I right this kitchen sink set. I right this stinking
kitchen set. I sight this ranking kitchen set. I sigh this kitchen set rank. I buy this
kinky rank sight. I try this kitsch stitching, and like this kvetching rich set, while I
sink this retching kitchen site down the written sink.

That final sentence—the longest of the piece—is (like the first) performed by Joseph, giving our performance of the queer prose poem a sense of structure (Michael improvises, after the applause, "I think he won"). Likewise, the next poem (Michael's "To Mumph") ensorcells as well as prepares; Michael's performance of the piece (with Joseph contributing various percussive *humphs* and *glumphs* and *flumphs* throughout) functions as much as a nonsense sound poem as it does experimental performance poetry, equally at home among the work of the Four Horseman or Jaap Blonk as it is Edward Lear:

Humph and a humph
Under gloom under glumph
At a desk in a room
With a floom and a flumph

Scritch and a flitch
In a flask on a nich

At a chair in a nesk
 With a blesk and a blitch

Grudge and a smudge
 On a smare in a trudge
 With a pen and a spare
 And a glare on a grudge

Humph and a humph
 Under glen under glumph
 At a desk in a den
 With a blen and a blumph,
 Humph and a humph.

“Context, then, is all,” as David Rudd puts it, continuing:

Isolate a word and its meaning falls away: is it “important – unimportant – important – unimportant,” as the King of Hearts tries to decide in *Alice*. Without context it doesn’t much matter, for the latter, “unimportant,” will always win.

(118)

Replace *word* with *poem*, and Rudd could be describing our performance, for framing is context, or a kind of context. Again, nonsense needs the sense of sense to exist, and Dadaist irrationality can attract nonsense when set among the more rigorously nonsensical, when it “is contained within a looking-glass and bound by the rules of chess,” as Rudd observes (119). Our PAMLA reading, then, is a kind of meta-context, a setting or framing device within which we place a

variety of pieces more or less nonsensical to create a rigorously nonsensical performance even if every piece *isn't* rigorously nonsense, even if, at times, some offerings appear more Tristan Tzara than Lewis Carroll, more Christian Bök than Edward Gorey. Our performance wasn't a typical poetry reading, a collection of poems shared with an audience, but, instead, a single piece crafted to produce a singular aesthetic effect, one rooted in nonsense and intertextuality, the irrational and hyperrational. We sought, that is, to craft a love letter to nonsense and collaboration, a love letter written by the lover and the beloved and addressed to both the conference attendees and our paramours, the poets and poems that directly or indirectly inspired its parts.

NONSENSE PARODY (PART I)

While the framing texts may highlight nonsense, even absorb some of that which surrounds them, the bulk of our performance fell within a few hertz of the central nonsense frequency. And the bulk of *those* texts, keeping to the spirit of the dialogic scrum, verged on parody, an inherently dialogic form. If we follow Noel Malcolm, who claims that all literary nonsense is “essentially parodic” (53), we might ask whether this “essence” is more like the Existential concept of an immutable core composition, or if Malcolm is alluding to Rare Essence, the Washington D.C. collective whose fourth work, *Body Snatchers* (its title implying that a parodic text inhabits the body of its source), appeared only two years before Malcolm's *The Origins of English Nonsense* (1998). In either case, we are still left questioning how the function of parody is “essential” to nonsense—especially the kinds of nonsense we made a part of this performance. To answer this question, we could return to Malcolm or perhaps turn to categories set up by other scholars, such as “oppositional parody” versus “nostalgic parody,” as delineated

by Linda Shires (279). But we shan't. Or we could propose that, rather than reflections, our texts might better be considered "refractions" of the nonsense chronotype, inscribing themselves on other texts, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle (borrowing from Bakhtin) suggests (169). We might also submit—drawing on Lyn Hejinian—that we are simply writing a kind of "open" as opposed to "closed" poetry (270), that we have created what Roland Barthes calls a "writerly" text (the contrariety of "readerly") (7). Still yet, perhaps our performative dialogues lie rooted in something akin to the cross-cortical speech acts of the Klümperling-Meibaur-Yöürbaur cognitive theory paradox (56,2b). Or perhaps not.

The fundamental issue is how an intertextual relationship functions as a source of nonsense tension, a "fight," if you will, between meaning, non-meaning, and excess of meaning. In other words, if Robert Frost ran into Berfort Rots (whose poem Michael performed) in a disreputable back alley, the former reciting a well-worn road of a poem and the latter reciting the following, who would win the inevitable fight?

The Toad Not Shaken

By Berfort Rots

Two toads, fly-urged, in a yellow wood:

One starry-eyed, with burnished snaggle tooth,

A bewarted reveler: Longus Toad.

With hooked gown the other stood,

Shoewear rent in the sundergrowth.

They looked at each other, trussed and fair,

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And shaving fur hats, the fettered swain,
 Because he was gassy and wanted hair,
 Stole his fur hat, and, passing air,
 He churned him freely, a bootless aim.

Both toads sat mourning, squalidly splayed,
 Each nose-stoppered toad in black
 Oh! They wept that furs should wither away,
 That lowing cows stray in pleats today,
 And shouted, "Fie! We should never come back!"

Fly and beetle wings hiss in the sky,
 And like some hare raging in a sage's pants,
 Two toads, fly-urged, in a wood stood by;
 One shook with a toneless strangled sigh,
 And that has stayed all their diffidence.

Then again, perhaps fisticuffs wouldn't be telling.

Rather than literary theory on one hand and violence on the other, we propose a different method to explore how the above form, what Michael calls a "nonsense parody," functions. As will be clear to anyone who knows the Frost original, "The Toad Not Shaken" is an obsessive, near-mimetic reproduction of the *sounds* of Frost, creating an entirely new, nonsensical piece that, in another way, is entirely not-new. It is the most intimate kind of dialogism in our performance, and through it, we see not only how the nature of that dialogism creates a unique

kind of nonsense, but also how it gets to the heart of nonsense itself. To see how it works, however, Michael thought it might be better to tell a story of nonsense parody. A story of his first.

NONSENSE PARODY (PART II): MICHAEL FINDS A FORM

At Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, PA, around 1990, I fancied in a languorous, wispy way, my best friend's girlfriend, Glinda. She had porcelain skin; she could blink one eye without the hint of a flinch in the other; and she was so sensitive that toothpaste was too spicy for her. At the time, I had neither the guts nor the conviction to pursue my desires, but a few years later, when I was in graduate school and fully in the thrall of studying literary nonsense, she sent me a short poem called "Rosy Girl." It had some nice flashes of image and sound as she cast off girlish pinkness in a flourish of female empowerment, but I have to admit I found it a bit mawkish. Of course, I couldn't tell her that, and besides, I still fancied her. How, then, in my poetic response, to satisfy my snobbish urge to mansplain and simultaneously express my secret, wispy devotion to her? The answer came via Edward Lear, who, by the way, with his multiple failures to propose to Gussie Bethel and his probably un-acted-upon queer urges, may not have been the best model for my grand romantic endeavors. In matters (perhaps) unrelated to romance, Lear wrote to Alfred Tennyson what he considered a kind of mnemonic poem, a response to Tennyson's to him, written in admiration of one of Lear's travel books. Tennyson's "To E. L. On His Travels in Greece" begins:

Illyrian woodlands, echoing falls

Of water, sheets of summer glass,

The long divine Peneïan pass,

The vast Akroeraunain walls,

Tomohrit, Athos, all things fair,

With such a pencil, such a pen,

You shadow forth to distant men,

I read and felt that I was there.

In Lear's letter thanking him for this poem, he wrote:

Delirious Bulldogs; —echoing, calls

My daughter, —green as summer grass: —

The long supine Plebeian ass,

The nasty crockery boring falls; —

Tom-Moory Pathos; —all things bare, —

With such a turkey! such a hen!

And scrambling forms of distant men,

O! —ain't you glad you were not there! ! (*Later Letters* 161)

It may come as no surprise that Tennyson, notoriously dour, chose not to respond.

Lear's "parody" of Tennyson is hilariously disjointed. His method involves keeping fairly strictly to the original phonemic sounds while substituting images and words that barely cohere.

Hence, "The long divine Peneian pass" becomes "The long supine Plebeian ass." The result is both a radical departure from the original meaning and a shockingly close mirror image of sound, creating humor from the disparity, but tilting what might be called a parody, or perhaps a travesty, towards the gibberish side of the sense spectrum we wittered on about earlier in this

essay, eschewing the balance between sense and nonsense so prized by nonsense guru Wim Tiggles (255).

There was something in this form that seemed to fit my paradoxical situation: on the one hand, I couldn't help but express my own judgement on Glinda's earnestness (and for this I am not proud); on the other, I still wanted to woo, but not in any earnest, or gods-forbid *effective* way. I needed to masquerade it into unrecognizability. To write in Lear's method, however, would be too absurd; it might imply a kind of cheap mockery that was not my intent. But if I could couch my gentle judginess within something coherent, crafted, even beautiful, then not only would my mockery go undetected, but it would be transformed into a kind of tribute. And so, I decided to up Lear's ante, to use the same sonic technique, but to write more soundly in the genre of literary nonsense by creating a unified nonsense poem, whose subject was completely and clearly different from the original. So close in sound, but so far in meaning, it could fudge the paradox. I thought, in my blinkered way, that I could make it shine by a new light, paying homage to the spirit of her sending it by stepping into it. And so I wrote my first nonsense parody whose text closely mirrored the sonics of her language phoneme by phoneme, but told a coherent (okay, a nonsense-coherent) story. As with "The Toad Not Shaken," the perceptive reader may note a certain precise sonic relationship with some obscure Robert Frost piece, but the story (and there *is* a nonsense story, of sorts, the tale of Longus Toad and his poorly shod companion) is a radical departure from Frost. Likewise, my nonsense parody of Glinda's poem, rather than a tale of spiritual empowerment, chronicles the exploits of a dirty city pony who, without the privileges of rich city pony tack, ends up on skid row, cursing his fetid fetlocks. In other words, I played Lear to Glinda's Tennyson; I never heard back from her.

If my romance was a failure, I had found a new form, and I decided to take on poems by deeply canonical poets, indeed, poets whom I loved but had a mixed relationship with: Donne, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats, Dickinson, Thoreau, Roethke, and yes, Joseph Thomas. I could step into their poems' sonic skin as a twisted act of love, give them new nonsense life that would honor them and mock their canonic status without actually mocking them (or, perhaps, honoring them, either). I never heard back from any of them, aside from Joseph of course, who somehow still talks to me.

NONSENSE THEORY AND PRAXIS: A RETRO-TELEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

Nonsense parody not only shows a new kind of dialogic relationship, but it can also lead us deeper into nonsense theory, to see with near-preternatural perspicacity the starry dynamo in the machinery of nonsense. Because the poems referred to in Michael's story had to be redacted to protect the innocent, we will, instead, discuss the theoretical nonsense implications of parody using two of the most intimate pieces from our performance, Joseph's "Nonsense Rhyme" and Michael's "Uponsense Poem; or, A Boater's Abyss" (technically, authored by "Joss Homephat"), a nonsense parody of the former. Rather than going to our heroes of theory, say, Malcolm, Tigges, or Lecerle on nonsense definition, as we are wont in the typical academic essays we write, it might be more illuminating to view these texts through the lens of what one might call the retro-teleological hermeneutic method. This method will show how the relationship of parody to original goes beyond the aforementioned dialogic scrums, enabling a post-diegetic theoretical transom model that contributes pineal (borrowing a term from Karen Coats's cognitive theory) sense implication. Both poems are presented here in full:

Nonsense Rhyme [Joseph Thomas]

—for Michael Heyman

One way or two, this way or that:

She'll turn like a sonnet and later come back.

A handful of silver, a pot full of gold,

A terrible secret that will never be told.

So give her a go and off you'll be sent.

Try her again; she'll leave you for Lent.

Do it once more (but never a fourth):

The heart's not a stone that points to the north.

Your head on a pillow and hers on your chest,

You bought her a bucket, a bed full of rest;

A bundle of thorns, a ladle of broth;

A trio of Norns, a mermaid who's wroth.

It will never be told, this terrible secret:

A pot full of gold worth ten silver beaches.

One way or two, that way or this,

There's only one road. Only one way to kiss.

Uponsense Poem; or, A Boater's Abyss [Michael Heyman]

—by Joss Homephat

“Unweigh her snood! Dissuade her hat!

We’ll burn down his bonnet and light his headstack!”

A vandalous Pilferer taught all around

This terrible secret: “Battle ever the crowned!”

“Bequiver your ego and doff your intent;

Conspire to rain in their cranial vent.

Dude, who wants morbid fedora remorse?

Then parse not their dome, disanoint their hairhorse!

Their head in a milliner’s hearse, honor-dressed,

Brought in their brain bucket (a dreadful request),”

The Pilferer warns us, “Abate at all cost

All emo-tricorn : (on a cockaded goth),

And twill beaver hat hold,” his parable preaches—

The Pilferer bold (with his tonsure) beseeches,

One toupee too few, one hat’s length from bliss

That’s only won rowed in a boater’s abyss.

Joseph’s poem is dedicated to Michael, and in the context of the entire performance, its role as a love poem is only emphasized (*love*—in various forms: *love*, *loved*, *lover*, as verb and

noun—appears fourteen times in the sequence: twice in titles [“Love Poem” and “Love Song”] and once in Michael’s telling phrase, “A wattle glove, in steel, my dear”). The whole performance itself exists as a kind of erotic fencing, as ludic, libidinous play which belies the folk wisdom of “all’s fair in love and war.” All is *not* fair, for, again, nonsense requires rules and rather strict rules at that. Yes, lovers cheat—as do poets—but cheating would be impossible were there not rules to break: you can’t break a rhyme scheme if the scheme doesn’t exist; metrical substitutions are meaningless without a dominant foot for which you substitute another. Consider the endings of both poems, stacked, so as to show the phonetic parallels:

(“Nonsense Rhyme”)

One way or two, that way or this, / There’s only one road. Only one way to kiss.

(“Uponsense Poem”)

One toupee too few, one hat’s length from bliss / That’s only won rowed in a
boater’s abyss.

Here, the “terrible secret that will never be told” resonates differently, the pataphysical insistence of “One way or two, that way or this” contradicted by the flat truism (smacking of folk wisdom), “There’s only one road. Only one way to kiss.” *Is* there only one road, only one way to kiss? Surely not, as evidenced by the homophonological “toupee,” which, in the actual performance, can emphasize the *two* in “*two*-pay” [emphasis added], evoking both the cognitive theorists’ transcranial transactionism and Umberto Eco’s *homo ludens*, whose well-known antispastic aphorism, “Two can pay at that game” brings us back to the emotionally costly game of love and poetry.²

The “one way” opens beyond the “toupee” in Michael’s final line, whose twisted grammar actually tracks perfectly should one take the time to unwind it, as Huel Flaxseed

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models in his apocalyptic *The Armazar Dox* (xi-xvii). The final “that” (line 16) refers back to “One toupee too few, one hat’s length from bliss,” and its verb comes in the phrase “is only won.” The line before (working still in parodic retrograde) clarifies: these final lines are a paraphrase of a “Pilferer bold ... beseech[ing],” and he beseeches, as one does, with his “tonsure” (the bald spot on top of a monk’s head). What is our holy thief fervently imploring? Perhaps for something beyond the poem’s many hats to cover that tonsure, to hide a bare spot, a tender place, the naked heart, the text’s aporia—the crux that allows for, that demands deconstruction—a covering (he is only one hat’s length from bliss, after all), a place to stand where utterances can mean “this way or that,” without ambiguity or uncertainty, an impossible place made impossible by the nature of language itself, for this place, characterized by absence (“one toupee too few”), by lack, can be won only *rowed in a boater’s abyss*, the rowing signifying the eddies of linguistic association, deferment of meaning, definition by opposites, rowing that takes place in yet another precarious place: a boater’s abyss, the crack of signification. But what is “a boater’s abyss”? Consider the words that inspire Michael’s Saussurean revision: “won” from “one,” “rowed” from “road.” With his tonsure (again, something defined by lack: a name for an absence) our speaker begs for some “that” that can be won only by rowing in a boater’s abyss. Of course, the boater recalls Roland Barthes’s claim that a text is but “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146), for our millinery of a poem directs the reader to see “boater” in its primary sense of *hat*, specifically, a flat-topped headpiece made of woven straw. And beneath the braided straw? Our tonsurous aporia. However, a “boater” is also the pilot of a small vessel propelled on water by oars, and thus the rowed/road homophonic pair suggests that a boater’s abyss could be a terrestrial path. If *whale road* is an Anglo-Saxon kenning for the sea (and it is), the “boater’s abyss” might very

well be its opposite, the earthen road on which humans, fittingly, humusorate. There may be “only one road,” but you won’t travel very far along it on a sea craft. The road of meaning vexed by the very thing we use to communicate it: language.

The extraordinary thing about the post-diegetic theoretical transom model is that it works in parodic retrograde, as we turn to read the *parodee*, “Nonsense Rhyme” in terms of its *parodum*, “Uponsense Poem.” Lines 1 and 2 appear below, stacked, showing once again the phonetic parallels:

(“Nonsense Rhyme”)

One way or two, this way or that: / She’ll turn like a sonnet and later come back.

(“Uponsense Poem”)

Unweigh her snood! Disuade her hat! / We’ll burn down his bonnet and light his
headstack!

“Nonsense Rhyme” begins with a female character who turns “like a sonnet,” whose “terrible secret” (line 4), as we begin to see, is clarified by the poem’s dialogue with “Uponsense Poem.” In the former, the woman’s turning “this way or that” in ways “one” and “two” reflects increased flexibility in what may be a restrictive, binary system, a system that emerges, no doubt, from the implications of a woman wearing a “snood.” But to see further into the “mystery,” we can look to the signature move of the nonsense parody, that is, the close, almost obsessive mirroring of nearly every phonemic sound. In this case, the parallel sounds of *two* and *snood* show the transformation of the paradigmatic pineal multidirectionality of “two ways” being confined now by a type of women’s head covering. From its earlier meaning of a ribbon worn by young, unmarried Scottish lassies (*OED*), to its current use as a kind of hair net worn to contain women’s long hair, a prime signifier of traditional femininity, the snood retains the coquettish

connotation of luring yet restricting, of binding, but only in such a way that makes the bound attractively rule-bound, founded around nouns grounded, so to speak, in the confounded crown sound-boundaries. “Snood” has another meaning, however, as in, the line upon which a mariner ties their hooks or barbed lures (*OED*), contributing a more lurid, Captain Hook-ish allure to our female protagonist, whose likeness catches counterclockwise upon Christina Rossetti’s fishing-hook covered, anti-social boy in *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), or perhaps bell hooks’s young male protagonist from *Be Boy Buzz* (2002), whose double-zee finish may well make us wary.

Diacritically, the homophonic homily between *one way* and *unweigh* betrays the loss of the very sound that empowers the word “woman” over man, namely, the initial “w.” In other words, *one way* has two initial “w” sounds, while the nonsense parody exercises erasure of the first, undoing it even further with the negative “un,” and leaving us with “weigh,” suggesting “un-way,” clear Pig Latin for “one,” leading back to the (w)oman’s broken binary. Additionally, “woman” without the “w” becomes, in the strictest phonological phormula, “oman,” no doubt a reference to the Sultanate of Oman, not known for its cutting-edge feminist ideology, but for this very unreason, indeed, indebted culturally to its lingamistic minimal pair, *Onan*. We also can’t rule out the remainder resembling “O man!” bringing into play the nonsense parody’s subtle and supra-pineal homoeroticism. To continue, *This way* in the original becomes *dissuade*, transforming the patriarchal command into a cold-occluded rebellion, neatly rounded out by an order to “dissuade *her hat*” (my italics), once again, following the post-diegetic theoretical transom model, eschewing the very device used to suppress her. As a matter of fact, her being compared to a *sonnet* in the baptismal original is buttered by the parallel *bonnet*, yet again reimagining a tightly bound patriarchal poetic form, with all its associations in Renaissance bro-culture balderdashery, as the Hegelian headgear that hampers her hogmany.

Whether in the retro-teleological transom model or the post-diegetic transcranial paradox, the rhetorical frame, with its sense holding up one end and pants falling off its other, seems to clump turpulating earthward. That's the spectrum the whethered retches wrench. When the ancient light grey is clean, it is yellow; it is a silver speller. "This is a prism, this is a please, these are the wets," they say, the sets that *can*, when can knots can't can the drive. A line refracts your spiky tea leaves, extends the peaks when the boys run, toddles while throwing up keys. However, earth turps clumpdomphiously seemward, ofter scoffling pantend one-upsmanshole. Poetic Klunspies punt as kayak melons harass bosses in copses of young girls. Prism backs a silver speller, the wax craft, a doo ran ransome Machiavelli. Isle vai chamois, nardoo tack awe. Relps revlis, a ska mirsp. She wolfs, bark gashes, the miter cants: "Into the valiant broth / Flowed the mix sundered," a plundered mensuration that nixes fix. The transom's open: toss it and dox the convexion.

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Commented [A4]: This date for this "fake" source was chosen because, as we all know, according to the Talmud in mainstream Orthodox Judaism, the Messiah will come within 6000 years of the creation of Adam, and the world will likely be destroyed 1000 years later. This would put the beginning of the period of desolation in 2239 and the end of the period of desolation in 3239.

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End Notes

¹ A video of the performance is housed on the National Center for the Study of Children's Literature YouTube page under the title, "Michael Heyman and Joseph Thomas—Poetry Reading at PAMLA 2019." You can find it at the following address:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBQOqxOgWol>

² Or, as Robert Graves reminds in "Two Rhymes about Fate and Money," "In the midst of life we are in debt, / Here to pay and gone to borrow" (509).