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LITERARY LUDICS IN 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN FICTION: PLAYFUL  
FOLLY IN WORKS BY BORGES, CABRERA INFANTE, AND CORTÁZAR.

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Literary Ludics in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Latin American Fiction: Playful Folly in Works by  
Borges, Cabrera Infante, and Cortázar.

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Dr. Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui

The thought that an array of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Latin American narrative could be characterized as playful is not an altogether new proposition. The language of play holds sway not only over discussions of works in which authors expressly invoke games, but also over writers and texts that are more loosely playful in their use of humor and fantasy. However, despite the currency of the play concept, the question of what is at stake in how we understand play relative to the fiction of this era is rarely examined.

One point of concern arises when we consider the extent to which play theories impose a predominantly serious understanding of the ludic enterprise. I argue that in a series of works by Jorge Luis Borges, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and Julio Cortázar we face a range of playful practices that exceeds the theoretical determination of play as seriousness. As such, all three authors at some point come to appeal to another set of experiences of play than that reflected in the concept of serious play.

Taken as a whole, the dissertation offers both a broad critique of the impact of seriousness on play theory, followed by three studies that examine alternatives to that

way of framing play. In this regard, the studies themselves highlight a range of ways for thinking about the use of folly. Considerable contrasts emerge between all three writers' use of play. Ultimately, the dissertation argues that the study of folly advances our understanding of these three writers and the strategies they employ, but that it also facilitates our ability to consider how playfulness draws on a wider horizon of experiences. In studying such follies, we learn something both about the moment of innovation in which they occur, and about how play theory can and should ultimately strive to encompass otherwise marginalized expressions of play.

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## Introduction: The Challenge in Play Criticism

The thought that a wide array of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Latin American narratives could be characterized as playful is not an altogether new proposition. The language of play holds sway not only over discussions of expressly game oriented texts (e.g., Cortázar's *Rayuela*), but also over texts which would seem more loosely playful in their use of humor and fantasy (e.g., García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*). It is not uncommon to find claims about how authors toy with their audience, how readers attempt to find rules by which to play, and in the end, to witness the critic unveil a game at work between the two. Talk of play in criticism appears to have acquired a broader rhetorical scope, transcending the discussion of explicit devices of play in literature to frame the very literary exercise itself as one of play. Given its currency, it is all the more striking to find that attempts to analyze play are consistently characterized by a range of problems.

One of these is startlingly obvious the moment it is observed: analyses of play have largely confined themselves to the study of individual works or to a series of works by a single author. The result for criticism is a portrait of play that often remains in isolation, with a focus on a single author or text. It becomes difficult, then, to say whether or in what way play matters in a wider context.

The lack of a wider context for play complements a second problem in play criticism. In isolation, analysis may easily focus not on play but on extolling a perceived property of an author or text. To speak of play, is to risk becoming entangled with value. In this respect, it is important to differentiate between giving an account of play and using the concept of play account for why a work is significant. The later tendency finds



surprising voice in a series of critics, with the consequence of constraining play to terms that can be readily accepted as holding value. A range of approaches, from the casual to more formalized expressions of the play concept also appear burdened by the very ludic terrain they would attempt to describe. To better understand how this challenge is faced in the analysis of play in works during this period, let us consider a selection of critics.

### *Casual Entanglements*

At one extreme, Saúl Yurkievich exemplifies a casual approach to play criticism in which no definition of what counts as play enters the discussion, even as play looms large in his account. We see this, for example, when Yurkievich focuses on the figure of the author as an agent of play in “El juego imaginativo: Fantasía intermediaria y espacio potencial.” He makes that emphasis apparent from the start with the claim, attributed to Cortázar, that *Historias de cronopios y de famas* was written purely as play (125).<sup>1</sup> Yurkievich continues to draw on the concept of play, as he writes that Cortázar’s “prosas lúdicas” (‘ludic prose’) are constitutive of fantasy (125).<sup>2</sup> Yurkievich frequently returns to the lexicon of play. Since mention of play arises without explanation, this means that when he speaks of the aleatory (126), one is left to wonder whether he has in mind Roger Caillois’ conceptualization or is using the term in passing to designate something else.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘juego’ may refer either to the property of play pertaining to a thing that plays (e.g., the play of the imagination) or to what is played (e.g., the game of the imagination). To the extent that other critics distinguish between play and games in a more qualitative way, Yurkievich here seems to be speaking of play.

<sup>2</sup> The translation here and after is my own.

<sup>3</sup> For Caillois’ discussion of the aleatory see 99-128 and 145-160.

The main reason for turning to the ludic, in Yurkievich's case, seems to be as a way of infusing his representation of Cortázar with play. This is evident in a mention of "*eros ludens*," when he writes: "la fantasía puede [...] dejarse tentar por el *eros ludens*" (126; 'fantasy is able [...] to let itself be tempted by the *eros ludens*'). The term is a reference to the admixture of eroticism and play he has elsewhere discussed in relation to *Rayuela*, but which he now applies to *Historias*.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the two works differ significantly. Most notably, there is no equivalent in *Historias* to the expressly erotic play at work between La Maga and Oliveira. The claim that this concept of erotic play would nonetheless apply beyond *Rayuela* relies on the supposition that the author's sensibility from the novel is present behind the scenes in the other work. Put another way, Yurkievich's invocation of *eros ludens* at this juncture is only possible if he focuses not on the play of the characters of *Historias* but upon the figure of Cortázar. For Yurkievich, writing about play means remaining bound to a discourse that focuses on the figure of the author in a flattering light. As such, elaborating on play in the course of criticism comes to mean finding ways in which a text becomes the expression of an admired personal quality. The kind of play that serves such a purpose is bound, also, to be limited by the rhetoric it serves.

Victor C. Van Hee, in turn, approaches the notion of play via a game of mirrors. In "A Game with Shifting Mirrors: Non-meaning and Meanings as Arbitrary Function of Reader Perspective in Borges' *Ficciones*," Van Hee seeks to designate the way texts by Borges highlight their own contingent meaning. Van Hee examines three stories in this

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<sup>4</sup> See Saúl Yurkievich, *Julio Cortázar: Mundos y modos* (Madrid: Anaya & Mario Muchnik, 1994). Yurkievich dedicates a chapter to the topic of *eros ludens* in *Rayuela* (123-145).

light, but he largely uses the term ‘play’ or the idea of a game in a fairly uncomplicated sense, as an imprecise metaphor.<sup>5</sup> Van Hee, is also drawn into an authorial focus, when discussing the play of mirrors. Borges, is distinguished in this analysis precisely because of the more praiseworthy way in which the author plays (53)

In “Borges y *El informe de Brodie: Juego de Voces*,” Owen L. Kellerman draws on the idea of a play of voices. The idea of different discourses creating an interaction that is characterized as play parallels the idea of a play of mirrors. Kellerman, like Van Hee, re-affirms the authorial play of Borges. For Kellerman, the play of voices leads to an irony that orbits the author (670). That irony tallies with his portrait of Borges as playful and supports a sense that the author is the one willing to upend convention and create a clear indication for the audience that knows him well enough to recognize that Borges is only acting the part of Borges. Irony leads us even further into a notion of play that is tied to extolling authorial skill. Rather than theorizing this play, the term “juego de Borges” (670; ‘the play/game of Borges’) mostly conveys a sense of the ingenuity and possible mischievousness of the author.

In other cases, the discourse of play shifts away from the author or the text as a playful representation and toward the representation of play in the activity of children within a story. We see this focus in relation to a series of short stories by Cortázar. Fausta Antonucci and Celia Zapata, each provides examples in this regard, the former in discussing “La autopista del sur,” the latter in discussing “Los venenos” and “Final del juego.” Antonucci invokes Johan Huizinga’s conceptualization in *Homo Ludens* loosely

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<sup>5</sup> Van Hee derives his use of the metaphor of the text as a “game with shifting mirrors” from the subtitle to “El acercamiento al Almotásim” (“The Approach to Al’Mutasim”) (58).

to describe the rituals that characters create to order their time and experience while waiting in traffic (149). She juxtaposes this ordering of time and experience to the play that children engage in and which she believes is disruptive of that order (151). While the idea itself has appeal, the understanding of the disruptive play of children is not theorized and instead appeals to a rhetoric of puerile play. Zapata takes a different approach and uses the depiction of play to return to the author, treating the concept of children's play as being important to the historical Cortázar and, by extension, to the conception of play in his writings (667, 673-674, and 676).

In "Edenic Nostalgia and the Play of Mirrors in *Hopscotch* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," Linda L. Williams' comparison draws together two stylistically disparate texts by different authors (Cortázar's *Rayuela* and García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*). That shift toward a comparative perspective prompts questions that take Williams beyond the single author focus, or the narrow reading of a text in artificial isolation from other works. How, then, does Williams understand play, and what is "the play of mirrors"? Williams describes that play with mirrors as "the process of discovering provisional orders within a constantly shifting structure" (60). Yet, Williams does not theorize what sense of play it is important to consider in that shift. Consequently, the concept serves to suggest less a feature of play in certain texts as what makes a work estimable: the ingenuity of the shift itself. As with Antonucci, the thought itself is an interesting one, but play seems to draw Williams away from describing the point of the analysis.

Even as such critics shun a theoretical account of play, this first group manages to raise issues and introduce topics that invite further study, such as the relationship between

eros and play (Yurkievich), readers' games (Van Hee), the play of narrators (Kellerman), children's play (Antonucci), the symbolism of play (Zapata), and the reflexivity of play (Williams). At the same time, play becomes an entanglement in their analysis.

Yurkievich, Van Hee, Kellerman, and Zapata all become drawn into a discourse on the author as the agent of a purposeful manipulation. The result is a restrictive role for play, defined relative to a rhetoric of value.

Nearly all of the critics from this group, with the notable exception of Williams, focus on a single text or a series of texts by a single author and leave out a wider portrait of play. A few also enforce a valuation of serious play to express the terms on which the play they discuss should be valued (e.g., Kellerman 665, 667, 670; Van Hee 66). This last tendency towards seriousness will appear with ever more marked frequency in the second set of critics who attempt to deal with conceptual uncertainty about the nature and significance of play by drawing on a theoretical framework in the course of their analyses. While there may be greater conceptual clarity about what constitutes play for their discussion, that process of refinement comes to reflect a preference for play that seems more easily reconciled with reasons for valuing a given work.

### *Theoretical Entanglement*

Consider how Robert Rawdon Wilson explains his own verve for delineating a working theory of play. Wilson expressly takes issue with the informal use of the play concept. He writes: "Game concepts commonly appear nonchalantly disguised as casual labor. In practical criticism, they show up, loosely arrayed in workaday garb [...]" (1).

He argues that for the term ‘game’ to “become a genuinely fruitful term in critical discourse, it will require a clearer notion of what constitutes a game than most critics apparently have in mind” (3). While his criticism is a useful one, Wilson also restricts play by taking games to be primary, while ‘play’ remains a “subordinate” term (3). This complication is also apparent when he writes that “to the extent that I have a definition of game in mind, I shall mean by ‘game’ only an activity constituted by rules (at least one) and engaged in with a ‘lusory attitude’” (6). Setting aside the question of how, where or to whom one may ascribe an attitude in a literary text, what is this definition if not a re-enactment of the vagueness he deems so problematic? What is a ‘lusory attitude’ if not “the spirit of play”? Wilson isolates the manner of game worthy of his own critical attention: that which is not “voluntarily willed in a spirit of play or in love of fun” (3). In this sense, Wilson’s own definition supports an analysis of serious play (i.e., games with rules) and marks a bend toward theorizing against the frivolous.

Like Wilson, Enrique A. Giordano presents his own analysis as responding to the lack of a theoretical formulation of the play concept. In “Play and Playfulness in García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,” he writes: “[t]hose studies which speak of play, in both poetic and narrative works, part from a prior, tacitly accepted assumption between critic and reader, which provides neither a greater questioning nor an intrinsic analysis of the concept” (217). For Giordano, the problem is not necessarily that play lacks a theoretical conceptualization, but that some persistently unquestioned perspective is not put before the critic’s audience for them to consider more self-consciously. The implication of his criticism is that we need not only to say what play is, but that we should also realize what assumptions our understanding of play presupposes. Whether

speaking from a casual or a more theoretically specialized perspective, Giordano's point is that we need to be more aware of the assumptions that define play in critical discourse. His insight at this moment is worth taking to heart.

How, then, does Giordano address play? After a reference to Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (217), Giordano explains the manner of understanding play in operation for his own analysis of a literary text (218-220). One can appreciate Giordano's attention to play theory and his resistance to using play simply as a rhetorical device to describe interaction, uncertainty, or the cleverness of the author in manipulating a reader. In addition, while he does not look across multiple authors with a closer focus, he does underline the importance of such a project (217 and 224-25).

In the case of other critics, we may find explicit acknowledgements of theory, but affiliated assumptions about the nature of the text enter in the course of identifying the text with play. For example, Michael Hardin begins "Non-cooperative Game Theory and Female-Readers: How to Win the Game of *Hopscotch*" by stating that there is great agreement that *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*) is a game, but that the disagreement is really about how to win at it. What does it mean to win a novel? The disagreement about how to win may indicate the lack of an equivalence between reading and playing. While the sensation of struggle may share something with the agonies of competitive sport, it is hardly exclusive to them. Hardin demonstrates a passing but telling concern with folly when he warns that "[...] *Hopscotch* may be Cortázar's version of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, in which the critic is shown to be the fool" (57). Both as a game and in the ideal outcome, Hardin's concern is with establishing a seriousness that does not have the outcome of devolving into folly.

In “*Cien años de soledad*: Un texto lúdico con implicaciones muy serias,” Nicasio Urbina adopts a similarly grave outlook that attempts to reign in the high spirits of play in García Márquez’s novel. Urbina cites passages from Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and Derrida’s *L’écriture et la différence* to support two points. The first is the claim that play is ontological, that it is constitutive of social reality (140). The second is Urbina’s belief that a specific game played by characters in the novel parallels the way Derrida theorizes play as disruption of presence (140). Later, when he claims that the novel deconstructs the opposition between the ludic and the productive, we see that his central claim is that the novel does not appear to distinguish between the two. Subsuming toys into tools, Urbina writes:

[...] el autor recurre al juego y la broma para confeccionar un artefacto que estudia seriamente las instituciones sociales y la historia latinoamericanas. El lector por tanto se ve obligado a desarrollar un proceso [...] según el cual una lectura deconstructiva del texto es fundamental para discernir las implicaciones serias de los elementos lúdicos, y el factor lúdico en sus proposiciones serias. (140)  
 [...] the author turns to play and jest to fashion an artifact that seriously studies Latin American social institutions and history. The reader, therefore, is forced to develop a process [...] according to which a deconstructive reading of the text is fundamental for discerning the serious implications of the ludic elements and the ludic factor in its serious propositions.

The seriousness of implications and propositions are hardly comparable to ludic elements and factors. While there seems to be an equal exchange between seriousness and play, it is not the same as if he had written that we discern the serious implications of play and the playful proposition of serious elements. Furthermore, there is nothing about the deconstructive approach or outlook on play that requires it to adopt a serious tone. Rather, like other critics, Urbina has woven seriousness into his characterization by



suggesting that the validity of an approach is taken to give it seriousness, in a more rhetorical sense.

In “Acercamiento lúdico a lo fantástico en la narrativa breve de Arenas, García Márquez y Cortázar,” Hedy Habra explores a convergence of play and fantasy akin to that which concerned Yurkievich. However, Habra also sets up a comparison of three short stories by three different authors. Her focus is on these three texts and looking at how a notion of play stretches across multiple texts. In this way, Habra breaks from an authorial focus and the tendency to use play as a means of praising ingenuity.<sup>6</sup> In the process, Habra focuses not on a practice of the author but on a represented manner of play, the play of protagonists in each of these stories and how it relates to child characters in development,ilinx (vertiginous play), and fantasy. Along with Giordano, who also demonstrated an interest in looking across authors, Habra is able to avoid some of the rhetorical trappings of serious play.

In “*Tres tristes tigres*, or the Treacherous Play on Carnival,” M.-Pierrette Maluczynski also avoids the tendency of praising authorial play, but this is because she sees in play a negative attribute. While she maintains a focus on the author’s biography as a determinative agent of the properties of their work, her discussion provides a rare glimpse of what it looks like for play to be part of a negative assessment of a text. For

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<sup>6</sup> It is uncommon to find a contemplation of how play may complicate or otherwise impact negatively on the text. M.-Pierrette Maluczynski’s “*Tres tristes tigres*, or the Treacherous Play on Carnival” provides an exception. While I take considerable issue with Maluczynski’s analysis, in this one regard it does present a reminder of the skepticism with which we may wish to evaluate the outcome of literary playfulness. Among many critics there is a tendency to emphasize one side of the picture, the success or positive results from play. The resulting portrait hardly captures the nuance of what may be involved with play if it seems never to lead toward more ambiguous assessments of its effect.

Malcuzyński, Cabrera Infante's personal politics and aestheticism are presumed to taint his narrative art and disqualify him from carnival (47, 48, 51). Malcuzyński proceeds to adapt the concept of carnival to exclude Cabrera Infante's novel and determine that "*Tres tristes tigres* is in fact a hermetically closed work with the *illusion* of 'ouverture' [...]" and has "only an appearance of freedom" (43 and 49 respectively).

### *The Promise of Comparative Frivolity*

Even as play surfaces in an array of discussions of 20<sup>th</sup> Century authors, the more fundamental question of the significance of play across a series of texts and authors from Latin America during this period has yet to come to the foreground of critical analysis. We were able to observe some of the benefits of such a wider frame when it entered into the discussion. Comparison allowed for a shift away from the kind of devotion entailed in focusing on a single author. While this outcome is hardly guaranteed, a comparative analysis across a series of works by multiple authors, allows for a brand of play found in a novel by Cabrera Infante to be considered in relation to the ludism of other works. The critic, then, is able to examine a range of strategies in relation to one another.

Comparisons remain infrequent in criticism that addresses play. By contrast, the tendency to emphasize a serious view of play is far more abundant. Already apparent among critics that referred to play more casually (e.g., Van Hee and Kellerman), we observed how theory, too, could be pressed into the service of depicting the seriousness of the ludic enterprise. This was evident in Wilson's choice to study rule governed play rather than that which is "voluntarily willed in a spirit of play or in love of fun" (3),

Hardin's emphasis on finding a way of reading that would avoid looking foolish before Cortázar's novel (57), and throughout Urbina's attempt to seal off delight and play by privileging the serious consequences of any momentary merriment in the text (140).

These explicit disengagements from play's folly may be but one manner of manifesting a preference for serious play. Considered more amply, one may even take Malcuzyński's distrust of Cabrera Infante's politics and aestheticism as borne of a certain unease with the playfulness in *Tres tristes tigres* that Malcuzyński believes does not fit within a more serious program.

While the theoretical approach remedies some of the problems in the more casual discussion of play, it also reproduces something that may be more plainly in evidence among the casual critics of play: that to speak of play may also mean deploying a rhetorical strategy entangled with the way we value the author or text under examination. That is, both the loose and the theoretical approach can become tied to ways of expressing value in relation to an author or text. With the notable exception of Malcuzyński, who argues that *Tres tristes tigres* plays on carnival in a worrisome way, to speak of play is to find language through which to esteem a work. Here, then, we find the beginning of an answer to the riddle of seriousness and why it should matter for so many that there should be so few authors that play frivolously: seriousness can become a proxy for significance.

### *Overview of the Project*

In what follows, I consider more closely the under-examined aspect of the frivolous side of playfulness initiated by three of the authors that factored into the above discussion: Jorge Luis Borges, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and Julio Cortázar. I argue that in focusing on the seriousness of these authors' use of play, criticism has tended to reflect a preference for literary action that can be easily reconciled with a longstanding aesthetic tradition that devalues that frivolity. As such, it has tended to miss the full richness of playful folly.

In response, I examine a series of theoretical perspectives on folly as well as three close studies of works in which Borges, Cabrera Infante, and Cortázar pursue startlingly divergent follies, ranging from the preference for superficiality as an aesthetic technique in Borges' short stories to the bodily misadventures that Cabrera Infante introduces in writing of pre-revolutionary Cuba, and finally in the cultivation of alternately constructed rationalities that Cortázar generates in texts that sometimes veer into the folly of madness (*folie*). Allowing the practice of Borges, Cabrera Infante, and Cortázar to inform our sense of the at times difficult to esteem capacities of play, I argue that we can arrive at a fuller understanding of folly while expanding upon a theoretical account of a marginalized form of literary playfulness.

The first chapter begins by untangling the play concept from a longstanding tradition of seriousness. Starting with Jacques Ehrmann's declaration that the time has come to treat play seriously, and working my way through antecedent iterations of serious play (e.g., within discussions by Kant and Schiller), I consider the legacy of a

tradition that affords serious play its privilege. While that preference for grandeur in sober play largely prevails in the axiology of play, I propose that alongside the legacy of seriousness there are also attempts to provide a positive account of non-serious play. These efforts focus on giving an account of the value of folly. In the concept of folly, then, we find an alternative to serious play. We may observe a practice in which Borges, for example, explores a view of reality as an emptied and newly fluid semblance. The latter half of the first chapter provides a preliminary review of three theoretical framings of folly that take shape in accounts by Nietzsche ('follies of appearance'), Bakhtin ('corporeal follies'), and Foucault ('mad folly'). In subsequent chapters, I use each account as a starting point from which to embark upon a critical re-assessment of the role of the too easily ignored frivolous aspect of play in Borges, Cabrera Infante, and Cortázar.

I undertake the first of these studies in the second chapter, examining Borges' practice of folly by putting into question the orthodox understanding of him as the progenitor of a kind of serious game that is too swiftly accepted as holding value for a tradition that emphasizes solemnity or candor. Drawing on my discussion of Nietzsche's understanding of a folly that emerges from giving precedence to appearances rather than essences, and examining Borges' own comments on his literary endeavors, I pursue a close reading of how these follies of appearance gain traction in a series of short stories. To illustrate this dynamic, my analysis focuses on three objects of appearance in his stories: masks, mirrors, and photographs. With each, I examine the different tactics that Borges deploys with each emptied out appearance.

The third chapter turns to the Cuban writer Cabrera Infante and his novel *Tres tristes tigres* (*Three Trapped Tigers*). I argue for the relevance of Bakhtin's account of bodily follies and the laughter they elicit. In particular, I consider how Bakhtin's argument for a laughter that affirms a communal experience located in the material realm of the body pertains to Cabrera Infante's attempts to generate a sense of unity in the face of the experience of loss that ensues after the end of a pre-revolutionary historical moment. Along with the importance of re-constituting a particular sense of the communal when one is set apart from the people and texture of another era, Bakhtin's accounts of scatological humor proves particularly useful for understanding how Cabrera Infante establishes certain unities in the experience of the novel's lower material realm. While this perspective is important for understanding the novel's project as it relates to memory and the attempt to breach the distances that separate an individual from the past, I argue that we also need to remain aware of how the text does not lead us to tidy conclusions. In this respect, one of the strengths of Cabrera Infante's text when compared to the functions of folly described by Bakhtin consists in precisely how it presents a more nuanced and at times even conflicted experience of laughter around the body. We witness this in a series of episodes in the novel. These include, for example, when humor and the body provide a culturally specific response to ideals as these are portrayed in North American tourism and popular culture. As a result, Cabrera Infante's text not only particularizes the theory of folly advanced by Bakhtin, but should be read as exploring the entanglement of bodily laughter with politico-cultural struggle and memory.

The fourth chapter examines a mixture of frivolity and sudden mad disruptions in Cortázar's writing. Drawing on my reading of Foucault's argument for a mixture of folly and madness in his account of such folly, I propose that in Cortázar's writing frivolity often emerges in tandem with moments in which coherence unravels in the crisis of a textual disordering. While present in many of his short stories and in instances within his longer works, I argue that such 'mad folly' is most readily evident in a relentless fashion within Cortázar's *Historias de cronopios y de famas* (*Cronopios and Famas*). In a close reading of a series of moments, I examine how follies of frivolity and madness prove integral to that experimental endeavor that the critic Sara Castro-Klarén attributes to Cortázar: an attempt to challenge and refashion notions of rationality, in line with some of the efforts of surrealism and 'pataphysics.<sup>7</sup> I take it that Cortázar's use of a mad folly likewise suggests a point that Foucault touches upon but does not elaborate. Mainly, that madness or folly can represent not only a restricted status imposed from outside, but as Cortázar's work suggests, it may also provide a strategic position from which to confront that very restriction with art. For Cortázar, then, that literary art advances alternatives to restrictions on order by pursuing a writing that embarks upon a series of follies that intermingle the comic and the alarming.

Taken as a whole, the dissertation offers first a broad critique of the impact of seriousness on play theory, followed by three studies that examine alternatives to that way of framing play. In this regard, the studies themselves highlight a range of ways for

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<sup>7</sup> In typographical terms, it should be noted that 'pataphysics includes an apostrophe on the first letter only. In his definition of 'pataphysics, Jarry explains that this is "to avoid a simple pun" (*Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, 21). In a footnote to the passage, Watson Taylor notes that the simple pun is with "patte à physique," or "the leg of physics" (119).

thinking about and employing folly. The aim of that comparison is in part to respond to the tendency to look at play in isolation. Along these lines, I note how considerable contrasts emerge between all three writers' sense of play in folly. While Borges' play leads to a spectral folly in which appearance replaces essence as the place of meaning, Cabrera Infante's corporeal follies posit something that seems precisely left out from the follies of appearance: the misadventures of the lower material realm in a grotesque body. Likewise, Cortázar's dissolution of reason in comic and mad disjunctures takes the encounter with seriousness into a different space than either Borges or Cabrera Infante. In making the ordering of rationality itself the cause against which his follies unfold, Cortázar highlights how a playful use of frivolous and mad avenues of expression can force re-arrangements and the contemplation of alternatives to an extant order. The study of folly advances our understanding of these three writers and the strategies they employ, but it also facilitates our ability to consider how playfulness may draw on a wider horizon of experiences. In studying such follies, the dissertation concludes that we learn something both about the moment of innovation in which they occur, and about how play theory can and should ultimately strive to encompass otherwise marginalized expressions of play.



## Chapter 1: Serious Play and the Response of Folly

The time has come to treat play seriously. (Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature* 5)

Taking Seriously—For most people, the intellect is an awkward, gloomy, creaking machine that is hard to start: when they want to work with this machine and think well, they call it ‘taking the matter seriously’ – oh how taxing good thinking must be for them! The lovely human beast seems to lose its good mood when it thinks well; it becomes ‘serious’! And ‘where laughter and gaiety are found, thinking is good for nothing’ that is the prejudice of this serious beast against all ‘gay science’. (Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 182-3)

What does it mean to treat play seriously? Does it mean nothing more than giving play attention that is long overdue, or does it entail a second less innocuous critical labor? Taken together, Ehrmann’s introductory announcement and the criticism of seriousness that Nietzsche makes in the midst of *Gay Science* dramatize two ways of approaching the issue of serious play. The first, represented in Ehrmann’s declaration, aims to redefine play in light of its sometime antonyms of seriousness and work. In the second, Nietzsche provides a response to this maneuver and offers a second option: the pursuit of thought through “laughter and gaiety.” The position Nietzsche advances raises a basic question, then, about Ehrmann’s treatment of play: does it entail yielding to a common impulse to cast away frivolous things? By testing Ehrmann’s position in greater detail, *vis á vis* Nietzsche’s assessment of seriousness, I argue that we may arrive at a view of how serious play relies on an exclusion of defiantly frivolous characteristics of play.

The pre-occupation with claiming a value for play in terms of seriousness is characteristic of an analysis of play that treats non-serious play as something to be cast away. For the purposes of my discussion, I propose using the term ‘folly’ to designate a

part of play that seriousness fails to integrate and to which it assigns a negative value. The paradoxical significance folly acquires suggests some of the difficulty with which seriousness attempts to make sense of it. Folly comes to designate the seemingly irreconcilable idea of something that is both an imminent peril and an inconsequential act unworthy of study.

Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that the term 'folly' can be quite amorphous in the pejorative understandings it elicits. Given this fluidity, a positive recasting of folly presents certain challenges along with a distinct usefulness for adapting that reversal to a variety of settings. Interesting as that drift is, I wish to halt its progression and isolate a particular aspect for the present inquiry. In what follows, then, I take as my focus not folly in general, but folly as it emerges in relation to that seriousness that exercises itself upon play. In the folly of frivolous or superficial play, I argue that one finds a range of playful practices that run against that part of reason that seriousness supports. In this regard, folly casts light on what a seriously structured discourse is unable to comprehend or render productive.

This view is in keeping with the sensibility of *folie*, that Foucault elaborates and which I discuss later. In that sense of folly, frivolous play alternates between being treated as a trifle of fools or a peril akin to madness. However, I am proposing that the inconsequential and the dangerous merge when play actions do not fulfill the purposes that a discourse defines as tantamount (i.e., they are not productive by an accepted measure). Inconsequence relative to that system is capable of producing a menacing incomprehensibility.

Once I take a closer look at how folly is excluded from Ehrmann's re-assessment of play, I consider several examples from aesthetics and theoretical accounts of serious play to highlight some of the tradition to an exclusion of non-serious play. After considering what is cast aside, I observe how a variety of theoretical accounts of folly provide insight into that literary playfulness that challenges the norms of seriousness. These accounts of frivolity will include instances of play in the text that invoke 'follies of appearance' (Nietzsche), 'corporeal follies' (Bakhtin), and 'mad folly' (Foucault).

### 1.1 Ehrmann's Re-working of Play

What, then, may we make of what Ehrmann does with play? The fuller consequences of his approach are not immediately apparent and require further scrutiny. His preliminary declaration quite clearly favors seriousness and work, since he does not say that the time has also come to treat work foolishly or lightheartedly. Other statements, though, suggest that Ehrmann may be more open to a fundamental unbalancing of the dichotomies that he takes to relate to play. This is the case, for example, when he writes that we should see "[c]hance as a supplement of necessity and necessity as the determinant of chance" (5).

The discussion that follows Ehrmann's introductory declaration ("Homo Ludens Revisited") provides a more detailed sense of how he re-assesses play. Ehrmann begins by observing how both Huizinga's landmark treatment of play and Caillois' response share a world-view that makes play secondary and in opposition to a series of concepts that include among them work and seriousness (32-3). In this reframing, Ehrmann

unlocks basic assumptions about play. He argues, for example, that reality should be viewed as the product of play and not the reverse (34, 55-7). That reversal is appealing because it aims not only to provide a more complete account of play but also to rectify its perceived secondary status as non-serious.

Indeed, it is the perception of play as secondary that is the problem that lurks at the heart of Ehrmann's essay. He argues that play is too often understood as a privation of those things it opposes (41). Counteracting that status and redefining play in terms of a positive affiliation with seriousness, becomes something of a priority for Ehrmann. The problem arises not in his assessment of what ails play, then, but in the course of treatment he prescribes. While he argues that we should understand play as co-extensive with culture more broadly (44), he takes that to entail singling out the opposition to work and seriousness as the specific terrain on which to build that co-extension.

The first complication of this approach is evident when one realizes that simply re-defining play as work, seriousness or reality, does not deal with the system of oppositions that give these new alignments value over others and which might seem to make them so appealing as non-privative alternatives in the first place. That is, once rid of the network of values that define work or play, it is no longer clear why it should matter that play be serious. Indeed, the enduring desire for an association between play and work could easily be a testament to the lingering effect of the "worldview that makes play secondary" to work and seriousness.

That the redefinition of play amounts to a re-entrenchment of seriousness is apparent in the choice to define play not in relation to a fresh term, but to rely once more on the very term entangled with the original depreciation: work. Consequently, 'play'

becomes a manner of 'work,' while the term 'work' itself changes little. The values of work are carried over to play. This is accomplished by searching the connotations that envelop work for what can be re-cast in the realm of play. Significantly, the very value attached to the seriousness of work requires he avoid an equal exchange. Work will not be deemed frivolous. Since the value of play will rest on its association with work, attaching that very same work to the once privational landscape of play would mean unraveling the very stature toward which serious play aspires.

In some ways, the process that Ehrmann enacts relative to play is similar to that which Theodor Adorno criticizes as occurring relative to "free time" in his eponymous essay. Such time, Adorno argues, is "a continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life" and "a shadowy continuation of labor" (189, 194). Free time is defined and impoverished by the dominance of work, very often leading to unimaginative recreational pursuits and boredom, as "production regulates consumption in the process of mental life" in pseudo activities (195). Pursuits outside of work are defined as hobbies that never aspire to all that much and re-enforce the individual's lack of autonomy from work as "their own need for freedom gets functionalized" (190).

Intriguingly, Adorno is not resigned to this predicament and in the course of his discussion touches on two settings in which spare time does not lead to the dulling self-alienation of work. The first is his own experience, in which he describes being able to pursue other work directed by his own interest and imagination (188). The second occurs in a more hypothetical setting when he considers the meaning of boredom. Adorno begins by noting that "[w]hen behavior in spare time is truly autonomous, determined by free people for themselves, boredom rarely figures [...]" (192).

Surprisingly, given Adorno's self-described seriousness earlier in the essay (188), he allows for folly to have a place in escaping the alienation of work: "Even fooling about need not be crass and can be enjoyed as a blessed release from the throes of self-control" (192).

The moment is an intriguing one, not merely for its mention of folly, but for the contrast that it sets up. Adorno will place that playful "release from the throes of self-control," then, in juxtaposition to another experience that is defined by work and the lack of autonomy. For shortly later he writes that "when people have been refused freedom" and forgotten their abilities to choose creatively what to do, they "need the shallow entertainment, by means of which cultural conservatism patronizes and humiliates them [...]" (193). Between "the shallow entertainment" and "blessed release" of folly we find two ways of defining a relationship to work. The first contemplates play as a recreation that remains within the system of work and only allows for recuperation before more work. In the second, play is an active pursuit that unfolds apart from work determined by distinct interests.<sup>8</sup>

In defining play by an association with work, Ehrmann risks binding play to a system that devalues much about play, precisely because it must do so in supporting its own value. For Ehrmann, then, this will also mean disregarding those values that previously pertained to play. The result is an effort to value play to the extent that it is not folly and does not call one into a moment of delight or charm that risks the label of frivolousness. Instead, this perspective adopts an outlook of either hostility or disregard

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<sup>8</sup> I do not wish to argue in favor of Adorno's sense of folly. For Adorno, folly is only part of a discussion concerned primarily with autonomy and the way work defines other spheres. Nevertheless, the point he makes is useful for challenging the idea that defining play in terms of work will be to the benefit of the former.

toward the significance of folly. Play is work, but work remains work, thereby bringing an end to the substitutive motion and grounding both largely in terms of the sobrieties of productive labor. Instead of undoing the depreciation of the other characteristics, Ehrmann's tactic suggests that work is still to be valued above leisure and seriousness before frivolity. Determining the worth of play, then, is only a question of taking play to be essentially not co-extensive with elements on both sides of the ledger that previously divided it, but as an extension of that side that had greater esteem: seriousness.

Ironically, this means preserving the very "materialist-idealist metaphysics" that Ehrmann takes to be so caustic to play and which "ha[s] been circulating during the last hundred and fifty years of our civilization" (47-8). Its erosion now applies to what is cast out of serious play. While Ehrmann rightly sets out to challenge that metaphysics and more generally "how seriousness is privileged in being granted precedence over play" (45), his way of valuing the seriousness of play nonetheless preserves the primacy of work and seriousness over phenomena deemed not-work or non-serious. Rather than re-cast as primary all that was taken to be secondary along with play itself (e.g., fantasy, vagrancy, frivolity), he opts to address the secondary status of play by casting it as primary by virtue of its sharing qualities with what was once taken to define and precede it (e.g., reality, work, seriousness). The outcome is that those remaining secondary or not quite serious traits of play are presented as irredeemable, purely without value.

It is worth noting that by itself, saying that play and work are more than their traditional opposition allows them to be, is both useful and insightful. It is the interpretation of a necessary disparagement or the loss of a frivolous part of play that presents a problem. Any encounter in which frivolous play could undermine or baffle

seriousness is no longer possible in Ehrmann's re-alignment of play. By largely preserving the opposition to frivolity and re-assigning play to seriousness, Ehrmann effectively discounts the idea that there may be value or significance in frivolity itself. The legacy of this outlook can be found in the position that Brian Edwards takes in his own postmodern approach to play. Drawing on Ehrmann's insights, he characterizes the task of talking about play as one of demonstrating "the seriousness of play against attempts to divert it the way of easy frivolity and simple self-delight [...]" (xiii). Theory no longer ponders frivolity or self-delight when play is exclusively serious.

While there is no inherent reason that one should argue for value in terms of an ethic of work (i.e., saying that play is good, or deserves our attention, so long as it is like work, the preference for serious play that this choice reflects is longstanding. A review of several prominent representative examples from aesthetics and play theory illustrates the reach of the problem. For we shall see that a similar concern with seriousness that was witnessed in relation to work unfolds in the realm of art.

## 1.2 Play for Art's Sake: Beauty and the Grounding of Play in Aesthetic Seriousness

Consider the background of this exclusion in two notable instances within the field of Aesthetics. In the first instance, Kant redirects attention away from play that delights while distinguishing between beautiful and agreeable art in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In the second, to be found in *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, Schiller aligns play closely with a beautiful ideal at the expense of the frivolous forms of play found in actual life. Both exclude talk of that portion of play that is difficult to



reconcile with a sought after ideal of seriousness attached to beautiful art. In short, both either suppress or exclude play that is folly from matters of aesthetic beauty. As such, their example reminds us that there is a philosophical tradition of linking play to seriousness in the realm of art. The legacy of that seriousness is felt in discussions that take frivolous play to detract from a work of art's aesthetic value. The frivolous, then, is excluded not only from labor's virtues, but also from beauty's ideal.

Let us turn to the first of these philosophical marginalizations of folly. In section 51 of the *Critique*, entitled "On the division of the beautiful arts," Kant can be seen dividing play while distinguishing the beautiful from the merely agreeable. In the course of discussing the difficulty of determining whether a given visual or auditory experience provokes sensation or reflection (e.g., whether our experience is one of seeing or judging) he invokes the following contrast: "[...] one cannot say with certainty whether a color or a tone (sound) is merely agreeable sensations or is in itself already a beautiful play of sensations, which as such involves a satisfaction in the form in aesthetic judging" (202). That brief uncertainty is interesting, for it would suggest a willingness to accept the ambiguity between seeing and judging.

For Kant, however, the distinction between seeing and judging is the basis for separating the agreeable from the beautiful. Perhaps uneasy with the implication of the earlier uncertainty, he rapidly re-establishes a divide between "agreeable sensations" and "a beautiful play of sensations," situating his talk of play within the privileged category of judgment and the beautiful. What he calls sensations, "the rapidity of the vibrations of the light, or in the second case, of the air [...]" are to be "associated only [with] agreeableness, not beauty of their composition." While in principle there is a play of

sensations in any kind of art, be it beautiful or otherwise, its discussion is held in check when play pertains to the lesser phenomenon of agreeable art. Here, rather than even remark upon an agreeable play of sensation, Kant's discussion of play appears only amid beauty and the act of judgment.

Play comes to the foreground in Kant's discourse at the point where sensations are made deep and does not squander itself on the immediacy of merely agreeable stimulations. In this hierarchy one may already observe how two senses of play are parted from one another. Play is a part of beautiful art only if it is more than agreeable and its appeal is mediated by cognitive judgments rather than immediate sensations. The ensuing sense of play focuses on acts that do not entail immediately gratifying delights.

The import of this decision to favor beautiful play is apparent already in section 44, entitled "On beautiful art," when Kant makes it clear what is to be left out of his ideal of play in the midst of beauty. Unlike beautiful arts,

agreeable arts are those which are aimed merely at enjoyment; of this kind are all those charms that can gratify the company at the table, such as telling entertaining stories, getting the company talking in an open and lively manner, creating by means of jokes and laughter a certain tone of merriment, in which, as is said, much can be chattered about and nobody will be held responsible for what he says, because it is only intended as momentary entertainment, not as some enduring material for later reflection or discussion. (184)

This conception of agreeable art entails the very things that are left out of seriousness and Kant's sense of beautiful art, but which may nonetheless seem highly playful in their own way. One consequence of this way of speaking about play is to select in favor of play that manifests in the realm of beauty rather than in merriment. The ideal of play in this instance is already one that does not engage with popular entertainments or the setting of

bawdy jokes.<sup>9</sup> Play is most valued for its link to the nobility of beauty, a serious affair beyond the trifle of mere momentary agreeableness.

While play forms a part of Kant's account of the judgment of beauty, and he exhibits a wish to place it in a serious realm, he does not entirely exclude the scene of agreeable folly from aesthetic consideration. In this respect, Schiller's *Aesthetic Education* eventually provides a more definite exclusion of the aesthetic worth of foolish play. This is perhaps surprising given Schiller's desire to place play at the heart of human existence, most famously in his view that "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays" (107).

Indeed, the tactical shift away from frivolous manners of play is not immediately apparent in Schiller's discussion. It emerges in the midst of a motif whereby the multiplicity of the actual is subordinated to the unity of ideals. When Schiller discusses forms of play that do not register with an ideal of beauty, a depreciation of frivolous play emerges. Eventually this means that those everyday follies that do not aspire to the greater spiritual ends of the beautiful are set aside.

This disparagement of frivolous play, however, seems momentarily at bay when Schiller turns to the topic of the play-drive in the Fifteenth letter. Schiller even seems to envision a fair meeting place for the actual and the ideal in the play-drive, which he describes as "living form: a concept serving to designate all the aesthetic qualities of phenomena and, in a word, what in the widest sense of the term we call beauty" (101).

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<sup>9</sup> The scene of agreeable arts will be useful to recall when looking at Bakhtin's discussion of Rabelais and the decline of aesthetic insight into laughter and merriment in literature, since it provides a way of understanding Bakhtin's theory beyond Rabelais scholarship.

The play-drive, then, joins both the sensory world of nature and the formal world of abstraction and reason. Or to think of this differently, we could say that the play-drive satisfies both the sensual pursuits that divide and the conceptual pursuits that unify. That drive would seem to balance the desire to recast everyday multiplicity in a material realm with the archetypal unity of an ideal that Schiller describes reason as demanding. Any frivolity in the actual, then, is not automatically set aside.

Schiller even seems on the verge of valuing play as folly when he confronts the accusation that frivolous play should not be linked to the beautiful by anticipating an objection to the prominence he gives to play in aesthetic matters: “But you may have long been tempted to object, is beauty not degraded by being made to consist of mere play and reduced to the level of those frivolous things which have always borne this name” (105)? Schiller’s response to the objection is telling. Instead of saying that the beauty at issue extends to all manner of things and is not degraded by its association with “mere play” and “frivolous things,” he challenges the very premise of the question:

But how can we speak of *mere* play, when we know that it is precisely play and play alone, which of all man’s states and conditions is the one which makes him whole and unfolds both sides of his nature at once? [...] [...] I therefore would prefer to put it the opposite way around and say: the agreeable, the good, the perfect, with these [*sic*] man is *merely* in earnest; but with beauty he plays. (105-7)

The moment provides a crucial reversal of the seriousness attached to earnestness and by extension to beauty. By itself, the passage might even offer succor to the effort to value folly relative to beauty.

Yet, while he answers the criticism of play by redefining the imagined critic’s seriousness as a trifle, Schiller also prepares the ground for another kind of serious play that avoids the folly of play in the actual world. This is evident later when he explicitly

makes allowances for an exclusion: “True, we must not think here of the various forms of play which are in vogue in actual life, and are usually directed to very material objects” (107). He explains that this is because “[...] with the ideal of Beauty that is set up by Reason, an ideal of the play-drive, too, is enjoined upon man, which he must keep before his eyes in all his forms of play” (107). With that ideal, a new earnestness shows itself.

Seriousness itself haunts the actual-ideal motif in Schiller’s discussion and is part of the repertory with which he portrays the cultivation of reason over nature, or the unity and the totality of ideals over the menacing multiplicity or diversity of actual experience. While he allows for the importance of actual experience, stating that the actual should not be suppressed by imposing an abstraction upon it (37), ever so gently he nudges nature toward reason. Rather than say that the actual must yield to the ideal, he claims that the former must remain open to reason and allow consciousness to draw the variety of the actual into harmony with a single ideal (43).

Ultimately, for Schiller, reason enjoins that we keep ideal play before our eyes, looking away and remaining unsullied by the vogue of actual material forms of play. He redefines play and gives it a value in aesthetic matters, but he does so by giving it metaphysical seriousness: the play of beauty that really counts is that which transcends the material realm. His vision, then, is not so incompatible with that of his imagined critic. After all, both effectively reject frivolity and some form of “mere” play. Their only disagreement may be on just what constitutes each of these things. Schiller’s critic simply has a more expansive notion of what should be omitted from the beautiful. For both, ideals cause one to abandon what does not lead to the privileged category of the

beautiful. The frivolity or superficiality that sometimes surrounds play is seen to intermingle too closely with the baseness of a materially present life.

Such instances allow us to observe a general pattern at work in other theorizations that establish an exclusion when it comes to play. Whether what is affirmed is work or the ideal of art, seriousness repeatedly serves to justify or ennoble play by setting it apart. So while Ehrmann's praise for Huizinga's appreciation of the serious side of play is scant (Ehrmann 31), *Homo Ludens* itself rests on several basic exclusions of frivolity too. From the start, Huizinga carves out an ideal realm for play, distancing it from apparently inconveniently frivolous everyday forms. The reader is told that play is "more than a mere" reflex, and goes "beyond [...] purely physical or biological activity," it "transcends the immediate needs of life" and it "imparts meaning" (Huizinga, 1). That play may be opposed to and based on *a priori* reality (one of Ehrmann's objections), hardly means that it cannot also be deadly serious in Huizinga's hands.

As it was with Kant and Schiller, a set of exclusions places play in a metaphysical beyond. All that is not "more than a mere" reflex, "purely physical," and which does not transcend "the immediate needs of life," is also not quite what Huizinga wishes to examine under the heading of 'play.' Huizinga's emphasis on exceeding the physical or material level of existence by turning to grand meanings that are beyond the moment has affinities with both Kant's aversion to the scene of agreeable art, which took place in the suddenness of an immediately affective response rather than unfolding in reflection. It is also reminiscent of Schiller's disregard for everyday play at the material level.<sup>10</sup> In both

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<sup>10</sup> The presence of the physical body as a place of disparaged play represents a troublesome twist to which both the theorizations of Nietzsche and Bakhtin respond.

cases, we are reminded that Huizinga makes it clear from the start that play is not to be played with lightly.

In addition, for Huizinga play often forms a constructive role directed towards civilizing effects. In this sense, play is rule governed in such a way that even at its most destructive, in war, play fulfills a purpose in his view. Indeed, structure is so important to Huizinga's sense of play that he cites this quality of fighting as part of his argument that war can be play: "Fighting, as a cultural function, always presupposes limiting rules, and it requires, to a certain extent anyway, the recognition of its play-quality" (91). Likewise, when fighting commits atrocities and breaks from its rules, it ceases to be play for Huizinga (91). The obvious objection should be whether fighting is play even when there is a structure. Nevertheless structure accompanied by the sense of struggle and the analogy to the agonies of sport seem to be enough to make fighting play for Huizinga.

For Caillois too, this sense of purpose underlies much of the way he understands play, with the notable exception of aleatory play and games that are corrupted. We can see this, for example, when Caillois refers to corruption and begins by describing the four attitudes of play in their as yet unsullied state. He writes that these attitudes are

the desire to win by one's merit in regulated competition (*agôn*), the submission of one's will in favor of anxious and passive anticipation of where the wheel will stop (*alea*), the desire to assume a strange personality (*mimicry*), and, finally, the pursuit of vertigo (*ilinx*). (44)

In Caillois' formulation, desires with clear goals or pursuits form a part of all but aleatory play, in which we do not even find the desire to submit or the pursuit of chance.

Corruption itself entails a break from that sense of purpose in desired outcomes and pursuits: "there is a specific perversion which results from the absence of both restraint and protection" (44). The problematic notion of corruption and perversion aside, there is

another difficulty with the statement since it would seem to apply to only three of the categories (*agôn*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*), those that provide “restraint and protection.” While there may be a degree of restraint and protection in the wheel of chance, truly arbitrary outcomes would seem to make nothing safe or restrained. Without that possibility of peril, it seems difficult to imagine chance arousing much anxiety. This oversight suggests to some extent the influence of rule-governed play in Caillois’ discussion, despite the presence of a category of play (*alea*) that is in a prime position to break out of that very determinism.

Consider by contrast to Huizinga and Caillois the palpable sense of folly that one finds at times in Derrida’s writing when he discusses play. While Derrida never describes play as *folie*, the notions of supplementarity, free-play, the play of *différance*, and the structurality of structure all occupy a position of playful unease relative to the prevailing systems of ordered signification. While one could imagine such unease arising out from *horror vacui*, there are also several clues that the joyous abandon of folly is not only compatible with but also at times essential to his portrait of play. This is the case in “Structure, Sign and Play,” when Derrida discusses first “the saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play” and then “the Nietzschean affirmation” (292). That alternative to a more grim way of thinking about play is now also a “joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation” (292). This play is distinguished as an affirmation that

*determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center. And it plays without security. For there is a sure play: that which is limited to the*



*substitution of given and existing, present, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace. (292)*

Rather than horror with the remaining emptiness or fluidity of meanings there is a “joyous affirmation” and surrender to the “indetermination” of origins and the “adventure of the trace.” The question of joy and its role are explored only as a thematic contrast to the saddened nostalgia identified in the discourse of Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau, where the absence of origins provoked a new search for a fixed state of being (292). As such, the pleasure or tone of that “*sure play*” are not elaborated in theoretical terms within the text. That space in the work, where the importance of a joyous affirmation is unexamined, suggests a certain open structure of its own that invites one to consider another vein in the text’s own structurality, its own surrender “to the *seminal* adventure of the trace.” That is, it leaves open another way for Derrida’s discourse to speak to the issues at stake for the reader of folly.

Derrida goes a bit farther along the path of folly and delight in “*Différance*” when he writes: “There will be no unique names [...] we must think this without *nostalgia*, [...] we must *affirm* this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance” (27). The effect of that ‘certain’ in the phrase “a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance” is to introduce a sense of uncertainty that is particularly susceptible to a reading of folly in the references to laughter, dance, and a Nietzschean affirmation, meant to contrast with an end to *différance* and verbal play, or the grim condition of having lost the “myth of a purely maternal or paternal language” (27).

For the current discussion, one may note that the question at issue need not be only a matter of the order, but of the tone of that order which presences and finality establish as their own ultimate ground. The definition of play as seriousness represents a tactical approach to valuing play relative to an existing structure. However, Adorno's discussion of the detrimental effect of free-time and Derrida's call for an affirmation in free-play and the play of *différance* combine to suggest how a reading of play as folly allows us to begin to see what it would look like to distance ourselves from that effort to reconcile play with the labor of work or the leisure of beauty.

### 1.3 Moving Beyond Pejorative Frivolity: the Cautionary Case of "The Playful"

Some instances of play are undoubtedly gravely earnest, serious affairs and may even unfold in the way that Kant, Schiller, Huizinga, Caillois or Ehrmann provide. Nevertheless it also seems clear that casting for play a theoretical role of seriousness frequently comes at the expense of other aspects of play: the communal table of agreeable art in Kant's case and everyday play that does not aspire to a spiritual significance in the cases of Schiller and Huizinga. The price of seriousness seems to be to push aside forms of play that provide delight or a distracting intrusion on more somberly structured play activities.

Lest one think disregard for the folly of play isolated to the realm of aesthetics, in abeyance and only lingering on in Huizinga's efforts and the generation that directly responds to it, one should also consider its extension up into the present. Already it manifested itself in Edwards when he called upon Ehrmann's rallying cry. However, one

sees this effect even in accounts that take greater pains to theorize folly. Such is the case in a last set of exclusions that appear in Brian Sutton-Smith's treatment of play in *The Ambiguity of Play*. Sutton-Smith's case highlights how the effect of a pejorative understanding of frivolity gains greater subtlety even in the midst of attempts to include a theoretical account of folly. We witness this when Sutton-Smith seems to struggle with frivolity in his account of "the playful."

In the process of defining that part of play that seemed to be missing thus far from the discussion, he proposes

reserving the concept of playful for that which is metaplay, that which plays with normal expectations of play itself, as does nonsense, parody, paradox, and ridiculousness. Playful would be that which plays with the frames of play. Play, by contrast, would be that which plays with the frames of the mundane and sticks to its purpose, [...] expected routines or rules guide and frame the action in a steady way throughout. Always granting, of course, that even in such sober play, some of the players may indulge in playful asides or disruptions, as when they make jokes about what is going on. (Sutton-Smith, 147-8)

The definition of 'the playful' contains a telling paradox. For while the term 'playful' derives from play, Sutton-Smith applies it to something different from play proper. On the face of it, there is nothing to say that 'playful' would refer to any of these things alone nor solely to meta-play rather than play. If it were meta-play only, why call it 'playful' and not more precisely 'meta-playful?' In the idea of playfulness and the playful Sutton-Smith retains that which was expelled in defining play as deadly serious. The playful becomes an outlet for that folly which was set aside from the serious norm of play.

Thus, he attempts to distinguish not only a type of play, but how play itself is different from the playful: "the common fact of play life is that most players are deadly serious about their undertakings and do not typically make light of others who play

around with their play meanings [...]” (148). Here, he momentarily slips into naming folly ‘play’ when he refers to those who “play around.” However, folly (“nonsense, parody, paradox, and ridiculousness”) is removed from the second instance of “play meanings” which are “deadly serious.” The playful now becomes the above-cited meta-play as well as “the genre of comedians and tricksters, of wits and dilettantes” (148). Before this, when he writes that “the key is that the playful is disruptive of settled expectations” (148), it is unclear why the playful is not play. Instead, that part of play that remains in the playful is termed meta-play even though the things he describes may well comprise a wider category of disruptive folly that needn’t in itself be expressly self-referential or reflexive. Thus, he tells us “most players are deadly serious about their undertakings” and engage in “expected routines or rules [that] guide and frame the actions throughout” (148).

An unhappy conscience about play is apparent when Sutton-Smith identifies the frivolity of play with a modern western rhetoric of denigration and devaluation (201-10). That is not to say that he does not address folly outright, but that it emerges in relation to play at a troubled moment—not clearly a part of playfulness or play. Although included in play, frivolity is seen as part of a shifting label of opprobrium that is applied by the practitioners of one manner of play to those of another (205). This remains the case until Sutton-Smith turns to “dilettantist play” which “pursue[s] this greatest folly” (210), “the lowest of all forms” (209), because it is the nadir at which a form of play ceases to label some other play as the truly frivolous kind.

Sutton-Smith’s attempt to account for folly, shows us how the appeal of serious play is difficult to overcome and worth acknowledging candidly as such. Like Sutton-

Smith, Foucault preserves some ambivalence about the frivolity of certain manners of literary folly. However, since Foucault's account ultimately provides the framework for a positive account of folly as a manner of *deraison* that expresses forbidden truths, I will consider it in greater detail among the theories that provide for a more inclusive portrait of folly.

In the following sections, I discuss three theoretical highlights that I take to provide a view of the alternative valuation of play that builds on the sense of folly intimated by Adorno and Derrida. Each of the following theories elaborates a distinct sense of folly that I will return to in the chapters that follow to consider how particular authors draw upon a sense of folly explored initially in the present chapter.

I begin these theorizations by considering the positive value folly acquires in *Gay Science*. After this, I turn to Bakhtin's discussion of bodily follies in *Rabelais and His World*. I conclude with a turn to Foucault's *History of Madness* and "Madness and Society" to explore how reading the texts with a measure of criticism, allows for a view of folly as madness to emerge.

#### 1.4 Nietzsche's 'Follies of Appearance'

For Nietzsche, the turn to folly emerges out of a tension that reaches its apex at a late juncture in the *Gay Science*. However, early on, in a section entitled *The dignity of foolishness* (43), he already begins to re-value folly when he proposes that:

A few millennia further along the course set by the last century – and everything men do will display the highest prudence [*klugheit*]: but just that way prudence will lose all its dignity. Then it will, to be sure, be necessary to be prudent, but it will also be so commonplace and vulgar

that even a moderately aristocratic taste will experience this necessity as a *vulgarity*. And just as a tyranny of truth and science could increase esteem for the lie, a tyranny of prudence could spur a new kind of nobility. To be noble might then come to mean: to entertain follies. (43)

The passage is clever precisely in its use of folly to relativize prudence.<sup>11</sup> A locally prevailing prudence is made remote and part of mere historical habit aimed at earning the esteem at stake in “dignity” and being “noble.” Furthermore, that reward is only doled out so long as prudence is not commonplace, not simply ennobling but practiced by aristocratic exception. If the defining feature of prudence is that exception, then, it becomes easy for Nietzsche to show how a different historical habit, now framed as resisting “tyranny,” might as easily unfold. However, that transformation of prudence in a social custom is at once critical and bound to seem precisely foolish to the prudent person, who may believe the value of prudence is inherent rather than socially distilled.

The passage makes a point at two levels. The first proceeds by telling a story of how folly may come to be valued in an imagined future. Meanwhile, that imagined future is itself an affirmation of folly, for it would not be possible as an insight without some willingness to accept claims that are pushed to the margins by a current order which may someday become a “tyranny of prudence.” The overall effect of the polemic against the wisdom of prudence is not without problem. In saying that folly will become just as necessary by following a prudent “course set by the last century,” Nietzsche deploys a pattern of criticism via anathema (i.e., saying that a thing is too much that thing it takes itself to oppose). As a result, Nietzsche seems to legitimate the judgment of prudence by

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<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche is certainly not the first to pursue a tactic of using folly to redefine dearly held values as inconsequential. In this respect, Schiller’s discussion briefly provides the same shift when he reverses the privilege of being earnest. That re-definition of values is also a constant theme in Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*.

attacking it with itself. He recovers partially when he adds after this that foolishness will be necessary. Inevitably some unease lingers, however, since entertaining follies might itself someday prove as mendacious as prudence. The more immediate effect of the passage is to set a course toward folly. If the text seems foolish in doing so to the exclusion of that second cycle of mendaciousness, then so much the better.

In addition to its stylistic use in the manner of appealing to paradoxical propositions, Nietzsche's appeal to an aesthetic folly is particularly noteworthy. His advocacy of a privilege for appearances has the consequence of upending aesthetic seriousness. By so doing, he proposes a kind of folly of appearance that attempts to keep thought in contact with the vitality of art and the moment of sensation. Rather than sacrifice the immediacy of the surface that is sensed in the body's first response, Nietzsche calls for a re-valuing of the superficial. This is evident in a famous declaration at the end of one of his introductions, when Nietzsche writes: "Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words – in the whole Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial – *out of profundity!*" (8-9).

In another key moment, Nietzsche challenges the ideal beyond appearance that is given primacy in the beautiful play of Kant and Schiller. Reversing the idea that essences produce sensations, he presents the image of himself waking from a dream:

I suddenly awoke in the middle of this dream, but only to the consciousness that I am dreaming and that I *must* go on dreaming lest I perish [...]. What is 'appearance' to me now! Certainly not the opposite of some essence—what could I say about any essence except name the predicates of its appearance! [...] To me, appearance is the active and living itself, which goes so far in its self-mockery that it makes me feel that here there is appearance and a will-o'-the-wisp and a dance of spirits and nothing else [...]. (63)

The passage itself strikes two notes that he will continue elsewhere. The first, that of the value of appearances themselves, which can be linked to what he will say of artists and the vitality of sensation. That point serves as a conceptual motif to which he will return often, saying that in art the vitality of the lie and an affirmation of personal experience are affirmed over traditional truths. The second note he touches on provides a scene for embracing the folly that the first point proposes. Specifically, we see this at the end of the passage, when he refers to a “self-mockery” that makes him feel “there is appearance and a will-o’-the-wisp and a dance of spirits and nothing else” (63).

In this way, the passage as a whole comes to present a folly of appearance that confronts a metaphysics of essence and ideals beyond semblance. It turns the serious ideals of Kant and Schiller inside out. What is present to the body in merriment, i.e., agreeable and material, is the primary area of concern relative to which any reality beyond sensation becomes secondary. The folly of following the lead of the first moments of sensation, what is termed appearance, is now the primary locale for an aesthetics that upends the formerly noble forms of play that derived their value not from their sensory relevance to the individual (e.g., the dreamer, above), but from their eluding such contact by remaining in an ideal world beyond the seat of experience.

The festive delights that Kant referred to as an aside become the primary focus for Nietzsche who will call on philosophers not to isolate themselves and their thought in seriousness, that “desensualization” that entails “growing paler” (237). Instead he calls on philosophers to show health in the lively action of dance: “I wouldn’t know what the spirit of a philosopher might more want to be than a good dancer” (246).



Nietzsche continues to link frivolity to health in the penultimate section (246-7), *The great health*, in which frolicsome acts make it difficult to sustain seriousness. When faced with “modern-day man,” he writes, “it’s inevitable that we look at his worthiest goals and hopes with a seriousness which is difficult to maintain; maybe we don’t even look at all any more” (247). This is, he says, because “[a]nother ideal runs before us [...]” “an ideal of a spirit that plays naively” (247). Whereas earlier prudence led to folly, now seriousness can no longer be maintained, because the pursuit of a “naïve” manner of play makes its case not millennia from now but in the present.

For all this, Nietzsche allows himself briefly to doubt whether such a spirit of naïve play can be sustained, and warns for a moment about “the great seriousness” that emerges alongside such play, seeming to tempt it to embark on a grave task: in shaping “the destiny of the soul” (247). However, the epilogue that follows quickly dispels the temptation to give play a grand purpose, a role in any serious struggle between solemnity and play. Instead, festivity re-emerges and Nietzsche ridicules his own momentary gloominess that seemed to call for a somber reflection on the state of the soul in modern times. He concludes with a depiction of the joyfulness of play: “it strikes me that I hear all around myself most malicious, cheerful, hobgoblin like laughter: the spirits of my book are themselves descending upon me, pulling my ears and calling me to order” (247). An image that might look horrifying is given a frivolous edge. The spirits of his book do not pull him down, but rather away from the seriousness he had begun to voice. They intrude on the gloom that momentarily prevails, and in this sense are malicious hobgoblins, but the spirits of his text are also light-heartedly rough housing—wrestling and calling him back to his forgotten resolve to partake of lively action. Like Sutton-

Smith's intruders, they burst in on the game of philosophical worry, pull the player's ears, and run off with the ball.

Nietzsche concludes by allowing these figures of folly, the spirits of his book, to become actors that engage with and within his own discourse. They proceed to request a joyous song to which they can embark on that seemingly most difficult to justify of festivities, dancing to a piper's song with Nietzsche cast as musical satyr. His teasing response is part satyr and part self-satirical, mixing mischief with humor, as suddenly the text finds itself amid off key alpine entertainments that hint at the uncomfortable or mildly painful comedic spectacle to come: "My bagpipes are already waiting; my throat too – it may sound a bit rough, but put up with it; after all, we're in the mountains" (248).

Ultimately, *Gay Science* offers a criticism of seriousness accompanied by a portrait of the role that a particular kind of folly can have in the way one comes to experience the aesthetic as an appearance that affirms the onlooker's place in the moment of sensation. This representation of folly unfolds over the course of arguments that reference it and demonstrations that duplicate and re-affirm these references. Folly arises as a means of guiding inquiry with frivolity and superficial concerns seizing precedence.

Significantly, it is not simply any sort of frivolity that Nietzsche emphasizes. His sense of folly is distinctly aesthetic even when he does not reference art directly. That is because his concern is with the way we treat sensation and first responses, and whether we treat them as a conduit to transcend appearance or as entering more extensively into the world of the body and its vitality in the moment. In the follies he elaborates, Nietzsche shows a willingness to linger on an appearance beyond which there is nothing that is not of principal value in its contingent relation to appearance. The seriousness it

confronts, then, is particular to a tradition of aesthetics, a point that I argue acquires new resonance in Borges' follies.

### 1.5 Rabelaisian Laughter and Bakhtin's 'Follies of the Body'

Whether it be in the dance he claims philosophers should pursue or in the comedy of the body faintly hinted at in the roughness of his throat, we are reminded that part of Nietzsche's endeavor is to entangle play with the body in a series of moments that arise unceremoniously. The intrusion of the body, Nietzsche's measured naturalism, is different from the follies of the body that Bakhtin provides in *Rabelais and his World*. Bakhtin sets his analysis of folly to Rabelais and a history that has misunderstood the writer since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, impeding understanding of the significance of laughter and the manner of corporeal ludism that once elicited it. For Bakhtin, the bond between laughter and folly is such that he shifts at times between speaking of the two interchangeably. He even equates the two explicitly when he writes of a 15<sup>th</sup> Century theologian's defense of folly that in "this remarkable apology, foolishness and folly, that is, laughter, are directly described as 'man's second nature' [...]" (75). In this way, Bakhtin examines how folly and provoking laughter may be valued and eventually over time acquire disregard by being misconstrued (64-67).

His account of folly amid the 'history of laughter,' continues some aspects of Nietzsche's discussion of the body as a place of follies, particularly when Bakhtin

addresses the “material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque” (62).<sup>12</sup> However, when compared to Nietzsche’s discussion of the body, Bakhtin’s portrait of corporeal folly is much more extensive. The particular mode of experience through which they each present the invigorating folly of the body varies too: Nietzsche’s unfolds through the prism of a more individualistic notion of aesthetic experience while Bakhtin’s describes a folk cultural aesthetic with an emphasis on the grotesque. That sense of the material realm is experienced communally in the course of festival atmospheres within and beyond the work of art itself.

Even so, when it comes to the topic of the body, the two texts share in positing a “misunderstanding of the body” (Nietzsche 5). Nietzsche provides this very expression to explain the root fault of philosophy to date. Bakhtin introduces the idea of a later misinterpretation of the body in the folk humor of Rabelais. Whereas it was once philosophers that misconstrued the body, it is now variously a generation of moralists that come to understand corporeal scenes as indecent (Bakhtin 62-3), and a set of commentators in the centuries after Rabelais that lose the “authentic aesthetic and ideological key to these images” and now seek “false keys” (115). For Bakhtin, that missed interpretation accounts for the failure to see how the follies of the body can possess a “deeply positive character” in which “food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body” are “victorious” (62).

It is important to note that Bakhtin cultivates a particular understanding of the ‘positive’ laughter that is linked to folly and distinguished from what he terms the

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<sup>12</sup> This is but the first reference. The phrasing of “material bodily lower stratum” appears throughout *Rabelais and his World* and receives an extended treatment in the fifth and sixth chapters, the latter of which bears the phrase as its title.

‘negative’ laughter associated with satire. By so doing, he attempts to define folly and laughter anew. The Rabelaisian sense of laughter and foolishness is differentiated from what he takes to be prevailing notions of laughter, for in “the Renaissance [...] the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning.” He adds that it is this that “clearly distinguishes it from the later theories of the philosophy of laughter, including Bergson’s conception, which bring out mostly its negative functions” (71). The misfired interpretation of laughter that ensues in the centuries after Rabelais, then, rests on treating this dose of folk humor as either inconsequential or as masking a discernibly satirical purpose.

That is not to say that there is not an element of derision in Rabelaisian folly, but instead that any “negative derisive element was deeply immersed in the triumphant theme of bodily regeneration and renewal” (75). That renewal of the body, represents the key to the positive aspect attributed to laughter that will also predominate in the significance of folly for Bakhtin. That is, folly too achieves something, even when it seems frivolous and does not engage in a familiar mode of satire.

In portraying a folk folly of the body, Bakhtin sees a value in such scenes. This contrasts to descriptions of the material and the bodily realms each respectively as places from which the study of play was devalued and even ignored in the treatments provided by Schiller and Huizinga respectively. Bakhtin’s view of a misinterpretation of the material lower bodily realm is suggestive of a broader critique beyond Rabelais. That critique would respond to both Schiller’s disregard for the very material forms of play in vogue in everyday life and Huizinga’s willingness to ignore manners of play that were seen as residing too close to the body’s actions. The failure to appreciate art rooted in the

influence of folk culture, would then be part of the history of aesthetic reckoning that has abandoned a view of laughter and folly that would see such moments as anything other than triviality or an inappropriate vessel for meaningful content. Bakhtin's argument is crucial for presenting the point that in folly, particularly at a popular level, there is a way of playing and provoking laughter that can engage with meaningful themes and be "regenerative," unlike traditional satire. His sense of such play takes its lead from the alternately positive role permitted folly in another era.

A point he does not address, indeed one that the very design of his inquiry impedes, is whether such practices of folk folly co-mingle in contemporary art. He is provocatively silent in this regard, even as he describes misunderstandings of Rabelaisian folk humor that endure into the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries (54-8). Yet, if misinterpretations persist retrospectively, then, it is equally possible that the phenomenon of popular folk humor or a related occurrence itself endures, but is stubbornly ignored or misconstrued even today when the critic casts an eye toward the world of more contemporary art. Given that the chasm is not solely a function of time, critics may misunderstand popular folly wherever they find it, in the present as much as in the past. This consideration will prove important later when I examine the parallels between Bakhtin's understanding of the body and the grotesque alongside Cabrera Infante's sense of community in bodily laughter, in his novel *Tres tristes tigres* (*Three Trapped Tigers*).

## 1.6 Foucault's *folie*: the Convergence of Madness and Folly

In *The History of Madness* and "Madness and Society," Foucault goes beyond the period limits set by Bakhtin's inquiry and turns to address long-spanning historical attitudes toward a class of phenomena under the heading of *folie*. The term provides a degree of flexibility, conveying a shifting sense of madness that includes the sense of fool's play discussed thus far. Despite a seeming semantic convergence, in Foucault's text the fool's folly takes a starkly different path than madness or even the other follies discussed to this point. Relative to madness, the more frivolous side of *folie* sometimes becomes no more than an amusing or acceptable error. This sometime pejorative status within Foucault's discourse becomes problematic. Relative to the follies of Nietzsche and Bakhtin, then, the positive portrait of folly in Foucault's theorization of *folie* is at times more ambiguous. For while Foucault sees tremendous promise in studying what rationality has isolated or excluded, when he proceeds to argue for the importance of madness, he also seems to accept the exclusion of the fool's system of signification.

Despite such moments, however, Foucault leaves open the possibility of a surprisingly promising overlap and continuity between the two as forms of unreason. If the fool's folly, like madness, touches upon what is forbidden, then, it would seem to carry with it a setting that discomforts seriousness. It is here, that I argue we find a particularly useful way of applying Foucault's theorization to the question of serious play. This is because in this framing we see how in folly there is a disordering of rationality. The madman and the fool present different ways of talking about the shambles that result from the break with reason. *Folie* in the hands of either represents

not a way of acquiring value or ennobling relative to an accepted order, but of applying pressure to rationality and confounding the value for seriousness. While rationality may be serious about madness, this does not mean that the madmen or fools orient their own actions toward the proprieties of seriousness that would lend them value in terms of work or aesthetic ideals.

One begins to discern how Foucault situates *folie* theoretically in *History of Madness* during an extended pause from larger scale historical developments, when he turns his attention to unraveling the image of the Ship of Fools and the festivals of folly (“*Stultifera Navis*,” 3-43). The image of the ship of fools itself allows Foucault to develop his own thematic motifs about madness. Notably, that image comes to the foreground during the very same pre-Renaissance period that was Bakhtin’s focus. Likewise, where Bakhtin posited a chain of events that was vital to understanding Rabelaisian laughter, Foucault adopts a similar tactic in relation to *folie*.

The missing history that Foucault identifies, however, is not that in which medieval folk humor emerges, but a succession of confinements that begin in response to leprosy and into which madness progressively recedes (3-8). The case of leprosy, then, provides a frame through which to view the later confinements and exclusions wrought upon the forms of unreason that follow centuries later: “Once leprosy had gone and the figure of the leper was no more than a distant memory, these structures still remained. The game of exclusion would be played again [...]” (6). In the antecedent of lepers he explores the social rather than medical basis for confinement—or rather how one takes its lead from the other, since “rituals [...] had grown up not to suppress [the spread of an illness] but to keep it at a sacred distance” (5). Foucault’s argument is that this “sacred



distance” became necessary once more in the course of the “highly complex phenomenon of madness” (6).

It is at this moment that Foucault’s history includes a critical pause before the structures of exclusion are renewed in a new social concern: “only after a long latency period of almost two centuries did that new obsession take the place of the fear that leprosy had instilled in the masses, and elicit similar reactions of division, exclusion and purification, which are akin to madness” (8).<sup>13</sup> It is in the interstice of this “long latency period” that he provides an account of the richness of folly at times intermingled with madness and taking its own particular path in the realms of literature (21-5). For the purposes of the current discussion, a review of Foucault’s depiction of literary folly in “*Stultifera Navis*” and “Madness and Society” permits one to consider the significance of how folly is variously bound to or set apart from madness at different discursive moments.

Consider first, then, how folly emerges in the first case (“*Stultifera Navis*”). Before the game of exclusion and isolation can be played once more, Foucault portrays the emergent semiotic of *folie* as follows: “The rise of madness on the Renaissance horizon is first noticeable in this decay of Gothic symbols as though a network of tightly ordered spiritual signification was beginning to become undone, revealing figures with meanings only perceptible as insane” (16). This moment of anxiety and confusion when faced with the long rot of that prior logic and the “multiplications of signification”

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<sup>13</sup> While at this juncture Foucault’s use of madness to describe the societal exclusion of madness presents a potential for confusion, it is also part of a longstanding rhetorical tradition that surrounds folly. Nietzsche, for example, provides an example of a similar re-attribution of folly in *The dignity of foolishness*. What was formerly wise is re-cast as folly and vice-versa.

produces a richly fluid symbolism (17). Whereas the disorder of the period will elicit an effort to control it later, the first appearances of madness coincide with the image of the Ship of Fools and what Foucault describes as a more cosmically unexplained experience.

Foucault uses the image of the Ship of Fools to present a vision of the literal historical ships that carried away a town's undesirables (9). Simultaneously, however, he turns to the image as a symbolic depiction of the predicament of madness during this period. Thus, Foucault believes the image of the Ship of Fools captures the way in which madness remains adrift on the obscure waters of the unconscious (11). The maritime imagery on its own might occult the role of folly and how it is linked to his reading of madness at these two levels. In his discussion of a historical pause, then, there is a moment in his own discourse where madness borrows from folly in its own "richly fluid symbolism" (17).

However, while the two seem linked early on, associating the wisdom of fools with the experience of madness that brings forbidden knowledge, this meeting point is transitory. Even before the announced confinement that isolates madness, Foucault begins to portray folly in the literary realm by unfavorably contrasting it with madness. Accordingly, a whole swath of folly that takes shape in literature and philosophy is classified differently—its exploration of foreboding waters suddenly deemed superficial. Instead in these realms one finds a

[...] new dominion [that] has little in common with the dark kingdom [...] which linked madness to the powerful tragic forces that controlled the world.

This literary Folly is an attraction, but hardly a fascination. It governs all that is facile, joyous or light-hearted in the world. It is a madness that causes men to make merry and rejoice, just as it gave the classical gods 'Spirit and Youthfulness, Bacchus, Silenus and that quiet guardian of

gardens'. Madness was a shiny, reflective surface, with no dark secrets lurking below. (22)

Despite being a “madness that causes men to make merry and rejoice,” folly no longer serves Foucault as a means to identify the historical moment of madness in full bloom, nor to provide an image through which its cosmic fruit may be interpreted (i.e., a ship of fools on dark water). Instead, he links “literary Folly” to madness but depreciatively, as a “shiny, reflective surface” with none of the fascinatingly mysterious allure of its non-literary form.

What are we to make of the way Foucault depicts folly in this episode? His rhetorical maneuver creates a hierarchy in the attempt to re-value madness. That re-valuation is reminiscent of the already discussed efforts to value play through labor's sobrieties or the privilege of the beautiful. The fascinating force that surrounds the darker madness that Foucault believes belong to the Ship of Fools overshadows the effects of folly that he assigns to “literary Folly.” Despite this negative portrait, the lesser attractive, rather than fascinating, madness of folly seems to share something in its terrain with Bakhtin's account of scenes of folk humor and laughter. In its references to the surface, joyousness and rejoicing, and classical gods, the folly that Foucault touches upon is reminiscent of Nietzsche's gay science and his remarks concerning the profundity of “those Greeks” (8). In this respect, Foucault partially discounts partially that which Bakhtin and Nietzsche affirm.

Indeed, Foucault appears to re-enact the discursive valuation, whereby seriousness excludes the value of folly. Specifically, he does this when he juxtaposes and ascribes different functions to the madness entailed in literary folly when compared to that of the preceding Ship of Fools. Whereas the former was an attraction of the order

noted earlier (i.e., a “facile,” merry-making, rejoicing) in the case of its less shiny cousin we are told that “[f]or men of the Fifteenth Century, the fearsome freedom of dreams and fantasies born of madness held a power of attraction stronger than the pull of the desires of the mortal flesh” (18). Yet, in literature that attraction is altered so that Foucault declares of the representative figures of each folly that “[t]he dark cosmic forces at work in madness that are so apparent in the work of Bosch are absent in Erasmus [...]” (23). That divide is useful for Foucault’s rhetorical ends in separating madness and folly. However, it is not clear that the divide reflects an entirely candid assessment of Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*. Indeed it seems somewhat reductive, given the by no means straightforward nature of that encomium, which includes its own moments praising the value of madness.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, Foucault’s argues that with Erasmus rather than any animal “desires of the mortal flesh” that characterize the other madness we have “only follies, human forms of madness [...]” (23). According to Foucault, this disparity is the product of literature and philosophy, a kind of proto-confinement: for in their domain “the experience of madness [...] takes on above all the appearance of a moral satire” in which one no longer feels “the overwhelming threat of invasion that haunted the imagination of the painters” (24).

The division between word and image masks a divergence in Foucault’s discourse that is rooted in something other than the medium of expression: the position that each setting happens to take relative to madness. Whereas the literary folly allows one to

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<sup>14</sup> Erasmus, 57. Indeed, in the *Praise of Folly*, we see moments when folly and madness converge. For example, early on, Folly declares that “extraordinary folly is either very close to madness or is actually identical with it. For what does it mean to be mad but to be of unsound mind?”

stand outside, at a distance in a “world of calm, without secret, that is easily mastered and fully displays its naïve reductions to the eyes of the wise,” the paintings of the Ship of Fools are said to provide an experience from within.

Once more, Foucault appeals to qualitative sensibilities couched in the characterizations of each, for in one there were “*only* follies, human forms of madness” (23, my emphasis) that are also external to the experience of madness. Not only are these follies outside madness, far away and possessing a facile character: “Bosch, Brueghel and Dürer were earthly spectators pulled into the madness that they saw seething around them, Erasmus observes it from a distance that ensures that he is never drawn in” (24).

By the end of the depiction, Foucault imbues distance with classical and hierarchic imagery once more to reinforce a divide between the madness of Erasmus’ literary folly and the more earthly varieties: “Like an Olympian God [Erasmus] observes it from on high, and if he sings its praises, it is because his laughter is the inexhaustible good humour of the gods themselves” (24). Despite the contradictory depreciation of Erasmus’ follies as “human forms of madness” on the one hand and something that is observed “from on high” from the vantage point of “an Olympian God” on the other, the overall effect of the discussion may be to isolate that madness which makes merry at two extremes. Increasingly, the perspective establishes a portrait of folly as a playful luxury, no longer madness if the template hereafter is one of the seething variety.

Yet, in dividing this literary folly from a darker maritime madness, there is nothing to say that the *properties* Foucault assigns to literary folly are incompatible with the *functions* he designates to the madness that surrounds Bosch, Brueghel, and Dürer. After all, laughter, good spirits and the reflective shine of one type of folly could as easily

lead to ambiguity, disorientation and the chaos seen to result from a seething manner of madness. So it is that we may renew our inquiry into the problem of seriousness posed earlier and question how one knows that “the schema of the opposition between the cosmic experience of madness in the proximity of fascinating forms, and a critical experience of the same madness, as seen from the unbridgeable gap of irony” (25) are more than the product of a discourse that itself praises mystery above delight, metaphysical depths above superficiality and so on.

Such a critical reading of Foucault requires that one understand why he perceives a distinction between the two forms of folly in the first place. The divide between the facile madness of literary folly and the darker byways of the Ship of Fools in the relative status of each provide a clue. Alongside the rhetoric of inside and outside, there is also a sense of the relative institutional inclusion and exclusion of each. The acceptance within literature and philosophy that Foucault perceives one kind of folly to have received seems to determine its function for him later. That it gains a modicum of acceptance is enough to exile it to a kind of secondary status. Meanwhile the as yet un-reconciled, still raw and independent status of the other madness, the folly that still holds an attraction that hasn't been accepted or mediated by institutions makes it of greater import. The licitness of one folly divides it from the fascinatingly illicit state of the other. Foucault's madness is mad by virtue of its ability to present forbidden insights in such a way as to continue to pose a threat, but also because in its liminal position, barely conceivable to our cognitive framework, it also threatens sense-making itself. It confounds, and so becomes the object of restrictions. The case he outlines would seem to exempt facile or accepted forms of madness (i.e., folly) from the darker forms of madness.

Yet, here we come up against a problem, for the shade or ease of a given madness would seem determined in part by the given condition of its reception. Those conditions continually shift and over time may change substantially and even produce inversions, making one era's madness another's de rigueur folly. For example, what if merely human literary follies were to become illicit as they were taken to be more and more in the wrong? Could the temptations of madness become, over time, something different: an institutionally accepted manner of experience for literary language? For all the history that Foucault presents within his earlier text, he never entertains that swing of the pendulum. Nevertheless, it becomes more evident as a possibility when the status of madness or folly is viewed from the perspective of their relative inclusion or exclusion over time.

Intriguingly, in "Madness and Society," Foucault expressly adopts that very way of framing the issue. He explains at one point that it is now "[...] a matter not of knowing what is affirmed and valorized in a society or a system of thought but of studying what is rejected and excluded" (335). Shortly after, he adds what may already be surmised: "Madness has always been excluded" (335). Noteworthy in this shift is how the organization of that exclusion now includes four "areas of human activity" that include "labor, or economic production," "sexuality," "language, speech" and finally "ludic activities such as games and festivals" (336). The list marks a way of organizing his discussion of madness differently than in the earlier discussion of *History of Madness*. Now rather than emphasizing the historical development of exclusion in the figure of the leper, there is the spatial conceptualization of "marginal individuals" relative to these arenas of action, "persons who escape the norm" (336). To be sure, he includes the idea

of a history of confinement but describes a broader predicament into which madness and other exclusions fit relative to human activity in general.

While one might quarrel with the four parts he selects for this division of actions, it is noteworthy that now the account of madness is related to the marginalization of folly by their shared sense of unproductiveness – an opposition to work, that parallels the marginal status of frivolous play observed earlier. In this model, both folly and madness exhibit a challenge that disturbs and suggests the tenuousness of the order of each arena. However, in the course of his discussion of the third area (“language, speech”), a key difference between the two arises once more. Those that escape the norm in language and speech produce verbal art, for “[t]he words that poets use are of an aesthetic order and also escape the norm” (337). Later it becomes clear that folly to him is not part of that escape, instead “the fool was, in a sense, the institutionalization of the speech of madness” (339).

Literature too, with the exception of poetry—if we are to believe the earlier claim, does not escape until relatively recently: “up to the nineteenth century, literature was highly institutionalized for buttressing the social ethic and for entertaining people” (339). Thus folly and literature are linked once more, “up to the nineteenth century” as a function of their entertainment and institutional role. The key to when speech becomes wholly mad is grasped moments later when he observes that there is “a curious affinity between literature and madness” in contemporary literature, because it “has become totally anarchic” and has expunged its “highly institutionalized” role (339). Foucault does not explain how contemporary literature itself is not its own institution. Even more surprisingly, he now derives an entirely different assessment of Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*.



When turning to summarize the marginal status of literary language at a series of other points in time, Foucault writes: “In the sixteenth century [literary language] became more marginal than it was in the Middle Ages: [...] destructive and contentious with respect to society. That is true of Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly*” (339). The claim is entirely opposed to his earlier one, in which the literary folly embodied by Erasmus’ very same text presented ease and calm with the world in contrast to the chaotic forces of Bosch.

The shift in his appraisal of Erasmus’ work takes place as Foucault turns to frame the question differently, as a matter of how the words “of literature occupy a marginal position with respect to everyday language” (339). This is not to say that there is a way around the opposing statements. A different assessment of literary folly comes into focus for Foucault when he turns to the question of institutional exclusion and the marginal position of mad speech relative to those institutions. The fool now has a historical role in that institution: “under the cover of irresponsibility, he told, in a symbolic form, the truth that ordinary men could not state” (339). The conception of the fool as an institutionalized revelation of mad truths changes the picture and may allow Foucault the freedom to alter his claims about Erasmus. Even if that allowance acquires new meaning in Foucault’s theorization, the idea itself that the fool says what serious people are forbidden from saying is so well established during Erasmus’ time that he cites this as one of the benefits of folly.<sup>15</sup>

This alternative way of understanding folly in relation to the place of the fool and “with respect to language” allows an account that understands the formerly facile

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<sup>15</sup> When Folly adopts the role of theologian to comment on what Paul meant when he described himself as a fool in a letter to the Corinthians, she explains that “he knew that only fools have a license to declare the truth without offense” (Erasmus, 123).

madness as able to break with everyday productive language. The only differentiation that remains is that between the institutional tolerance afforded fools versus that which is denied of the mad. Yet, what if even that tolerance were to shift in certain institutions? The very proliferation that Foucault suggests takes place in contemporary literature supports the idea that over time, an institution's demands change. That historical development means that the experiences that those institutions marginalize and seek to exclude as mad would also change. When folly is no longer tolerated, does the fool become a poet? This is not a purely idle question, as we have seen in the preceding discussion when looking at the philosophical and theoretical discourse on play in which folly or frivolity was either ignored or set aside from the ludic.

Building on this account of the marginal status of folly, one may contemplate a possibility at the edge of Foucault's argument: that when faced with the demands of serious Art, it is the poetic folly of artists that comprises the madness that is to be excluded. Folly is a kind of madness and *vice versa*. The terms themselves designate varying interpretations of the defiance of reason. Both unsettle meaning, but in one case the action is attributed to fools when it seems to do so with a degree of acceptance, whereas more disturbing re-arrangements are attributed to the mad. Both uncover and draw attention to rationality and order.

Such a reading is made possible, by approaching Foucault's discussion of folly with an eye toward the problem of frivolity and tracing the past tension through his occasional division of folly from serious madness. This allows us to arrive at a way of understanding how an aesthetic order constrains literary foolishness, depicting it as something incomprehensible, distasteful and increasingly to be restricted. Put another

way: folly is the madness of a serious Art. In that madness, it may possess frivolity and still share in the attributes of madness that Foucault and others have historically found so compelling: an expression of forbidden truths and unreason.

## 1.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that while there is an important theoretical role for serious play, seriousness has held a grip on the discussion of play for far too long. Ehrmann's declaration that the time has come to treat play seriously and his subsequent re-working of play are in this respect the natural theoretical outcome of a longer tradition. Adorno's criticism of 'free time' and its dependency on work helped us to re-frame the effort to impart the values of work on play by illustrating how that new definition takes an antagonistic view of what remains outside its model of productivity.

Along with the effort to link play to the seriousness of work, the chapter considered how another tradition attempts to justify play by linking it to the beautiful. Thus, within the aesthetic tradition, we found that Kant and Schiller each attributed greater import to play when it could be linked to beauty and ideals, rather than to agreeable or everyday material expressions of play. While Schiller took pains to redefine play as being at the heart of human existence, and employed a measure of folly in that redefinition, I argued that his ultimate interest in the development of that existence to higher ideals caused him to leave behind that play which keeps the individual grounded in the sensory realm of nature rather than in the formal sphere of reason.

The emphasis on making play productive, a symptom of the effort to link play to the seriousness of work and related to the aspirations of an ideal of beauty, could also be seen in a series of other theorists of play. Thus, Huizinga treats play as socially or culturally developmental and of importance to the extent that it goes beyond the sensible. In his own way, with the exception of aleatory play, Caillois also envisions such goal directed play as the norm. The reach of this discomfort with the folly of play even extends to critics like Sutton-Smith who attempt a direct discussion of frivolity, but who nonetheless have difficulty giving this side of play its full account, locating it only indirectly in “the playful” rather than in play itself. The alternative to such an approach is suggested by Derrida’s sense of free-play and *différance*. While not providing a direct account of folly, Derrida’s theorization illustrates what it looks like to make the joyfulness and abandon of folly an integral part of play. To better define several senses of folly that explore such a positive definition of folly, then, I considered three theoretical perspectives on folly elaborated in particular treatments imparted by Nietzsche, Bakhtin, and Foucault respectively.

Each theory provides a template of a different sense of folly. Thus, the folly that Nietzsche calls upon provides a model of folly that plays on the aesthetic tradition by disrupting ascent to more ideal realms. That ‘folly of appearance’ will prove of interest to consider relative to some of Borges’ writings in the next chapter, which I argue confront an aesthetic convention by offering a self-consciously superficial alternative to ontological depth in art.

For their part, Bakhtin’s ‘corporeal follies’ provide a model of playfulness that responds to both the aesthetic and work sensibilities of seriousness. In emphasizing the

lower material realm, Bakhtin provides an account rooted in material existence. Similarly, in the use of the grotesque as an integral part of laughter, Bakhtin's bodily follies are no longer concerned with an escape into the beautiful ideals so important to Kant and Schiller. Relative to the work tradition of seriousness, Bakhtin's follies also resist the lure to become productive by taking place in the space of chaotic festival settings. In the third chapter, I will consider how such a notion of corporeal follies acquires new meaning in the humor of the body and the grotesque as these form a part of Cabrera Infante's novel, *Tres tristes tigres (Three Trapped Tigers)*.

While the model of folly in Foucault's discussion of madness and folly is more complicated and partially yields to the value for seriousness, it also eventually provides a framework for beginning to understand how folly can come to overlap with madness. That mixture of folly and madness will prove particularly useful to understanding how Cortázar evokes both sides of the unreason of *folie*. In particular, this will be a starting point in the fourth chapter to examine how this folly relates to a broader project in Cortázar's work of finding alternatives to prevailing rationality. In this way, I examine how Cortázar puts a strategy of 'mad folly' into action in a work that sometimes seems particularly frivolous: *Historias de cronopios y de famas (Cronopios and Famas)*

In these templates of folly, then, we find the alternative to that serious determination of play that figures so importantly into play theory. In what follows, the task will be to consider how individual writers particularize and exceed these preliminary definitions to address points of concern to their own setting in writing. Folly, then, will be important not only to the theory of play, but also to understanding how practice carves out a response to constraining forms of wisdom.

## Chapter 2: Follies of Appearance in Jorge Luis Borges' Narrative Art

### 2.1 Superficiality and Aesthetic Ideals

Borges *accomplishes something* in his work; he does not offer a sterile non-conclusion that plays with meanings without effect [...]. (Van Hee, 53)

We will analyze two stories that better exemplify Borges' technical ability to play with narrative voices. (Kellerman, 666)<sup>16</sup>

Ability or accomplishment—too often, to talk about play in Borges' writing is to remain within the bounds of such positive appraisals of the author's actions. Limited from the outset, the focus remains on Borges as the agent of a kind of play that can be swiftly accepted as holding value. We can see one consequence of this decision in the first citation, when Van Hee writes of “a sterile non-conclusion that plays with meaning without effect” and sets this apart from Borges' games which accomplish something (53). For Van Hee, play acquires value in Borges' work when it leads to conclusions, and not when it questions finality. In like fashion, the possibility that the surface itself would be a level worthy of analysis is obscured when Kellerman focuses not simply on technique, but on his own understanding of what constitutes praiseworthy ability. Kellerman's analysis of that “technical ability to play with narrative voices,” is the product of his own earlier decision “to omit the superficial in order to concentrate on a study of the various levels or planes of narration” (664).<sup>17</sup> In both critical framings, we witness a particular

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<sup>16</sup> The translation above is my own. In the original, Kellerman writes: “[A]nalizaremos dos cuentos que ejemplifican mejor la habilidad técnica de Borges de jugar con las voces narrativas.”

<sup>17</sup> Kellerman, 664. “[O]mitir lo superficial para concentrarnos en un estudio de los varios niveles o planos de la narración.”

way of situating what is meaningful about play by setting aside what is taken to dwell at the surface.

Yet, what if it were precisely a push toward the “the superficial,” or a play of “non-conclusion,” that exemplified an important aspect of Borges’ work? In what follows, I consider this very possibility in a narrow sense, as it relates to the concept of an aesthetic folly. Specifically, I examine how certain of Borges’ texts adopt a technique of aesthetic superficiality that partially parallels the folly of appearance that Nietzsche contemplates as a means of confronting aesthetic order.

Nietzsche’s formulation of folly in ontological terms will acquire particular resonance in the play that Borges initiates. In Borges’ follies, I argue that the result of such a renewed emphasis on the surface ultimately unfolds in certain of his fictions as an effort to empty appearance of substance and make it more difficult for meaning to settle into gravity at particular intervals of affect. Thus, while the putative content of a story or the situation of characters in that account would seem designed to sway with sentiment, this folly continually empties the scene of its full weight. As a consequence, Borges is able to cultivate a manner of storytelling that seems uncertain, i.e., unreal, not so much because of fantasy but because of a tone that is on the precipice of an unsettling irony.

This strain of play in Borges’ writing belies the effort to value the aesthetic as a wholly serious affair of substance and finitude. With these follies, we are regularly denied the final fullness of a story’s aim. This is not to say that Borges’ playfulness does not in other cases take serious turns, showing at times its own preference for metaphysical mysteries. However, an approach that focuses only on the serious setting for valuing play largely closes off an analysis of the element of frivolity that co-exists

and sometimes threatens to undermine the image of Borges as a solemn figure. In particular, then, I believe we risk otherwise neglecting the occasions when texts by Borges enact and articulate a sense of the value to be had in defying the aesthetic search for serious realities beyond the textual surface.

To frame this aspect of Borges' follies, I wish to begin by examining what his outlook on appearance shares with Nietzsche's. Specifically, how each envisions a folly in appearance that uproots a sense of the stolidity of language with particular aesthetic objectives in mind.<sup>18</sup> For both, I believe interest in appearance acquires tactical import as a practice that confronts a way of valuing art through the gravity of aesthetic ideals.

In the process, I believe we gain a better account of the ways Borges exceeds the aesthetic system that critics rely on to praise him. We also gain a view of how, in the pursuit of a certain superficiality, his texts reflect what it would look like for art to play off that system and become a folly of such ideals. In this way, the superficiality of Borges' follies serve to impede the procedure of aesthetic reverie. In this play of appearance, emptiness or aesthetic frivolity become a way of envisioning how to uproot serious play and expose the means by which sobrieties attempt to close off uncertainty. Folly lays bare the provisional ways in which elements of a text come together or fall apart.

Despite the shared concern with providing a value for the superficial experience of art, I do not believe we should simply re-read Nietzsche's aestheticism and his

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<sup>18</sup> It may already be evident that this sensibility has affinities with a post-structuralist moment and the way theorists confront the conception of the sign by breaking down transparency or a straightforward link between signifier and signified. My analysis focuses on how Borges and Nietzsche provide for frivolity in appearance to cultivate a strategy when faced with the traditional seriousness of aesthetics.



adoration of appearance in Borges' undertaking. Instead, I argue that it is necessary to consider how Borges sets forth his own sense of a folly of appearance within the broad framework that this entails, mainly privileging folly at the surface in aesthetic experience. After I return briefly to Nietzsche's sense of aesthetic frivolity, to highlight its key components, I provide a closer reading of how Borges articulates his own superficial experience of art.

Toward particularizing this superficiality, it will be useful to delve into three settings in which that sense of folly percolates from Borges' work. In the first two, Borges expressly turns to refer to a shallow outlook on the aesthetic, first in the midst of statements about his own art, and then in statements on reflexive art. In both instances, he proposes a process of experiencing narrative art that focuses on a play of emptied out semblance. While his own examples in talking about art suggest an effort to value emptied out appearance, they do not address how this may be key to a technique of folly in representation. For this reason, I turn to consider a third setting where criticism has begun to deal directly with folly in identifying a technique of emptying out appearance as it takes shape in a style of representation itself, termed "the put-on." While I take issue with some of the way Borges is framed by the put-on, the idea itself highlights an important component of Borges' follies of appearance: dissemblance.

After considering how the above folly unfolds in a perspective on narrative art more broadly, I turn to three focal points for reading a folly of appearance in his short fiction itself. In discussing masks, mirrors and photographs, I examine the disruption of grounding realities beyond individual objects of appearance and the space for avoiding such depths in narrative itself. Each object of appearance will provide an occasion in

which the text can dramatize a relation to appearance along varied but related lines. With each, I argue that the ultimate outcome of that folly is a different way of making the perception of essential realities vulnerable to the drift of appearance.

## 2.2 Borges and Nietzsche: The Art of ‘Appearance and Nothing Else’

[...] bajo los tumultos no hay nada. No es otra cosa que apariencia, que una superficie de imágenes; por eso mismo puede acaso agradar.<sup>19</sup>

[...] under all the storm and lightning, there is nothing. It is all just appearance, a surface of images—which is why readers may, perhaps, enjoy it.<sup>20</sup>

[...] what could I say about any essence except name the predicates of its appearance! [...] here there is appearance and a will-o’-the-wisp and a dance of spirits and nothing else [...];<sup>21</sup>

Both the passage from one of Borges’ prologues and the passage from Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* emphasize the importance of appearance, but how are they related beyond this initial commonality? In the first, we find Borges describing his own work in a preface and avowing a seemingly vacuous experience of literature. In the second, Nietzsche confronts the basic metaphysical privilege of essences over appearances and envisions his own sense of enjoyment in appearance and nothing else. Let us consider how these two moments share a common outlook on art, first by considering the example of folly in appearance that Nietzsche presents, and then how Borges manages to convey a sense of folly that takes its own approach to that proposition that the surface is paramount.

<sup>19</sup> Borges, “Prólogo a la edición de 1954,” *Historia universal de la infamia, Obras Completas I*, 307-8. All Spanish citations are from the *Obras completas*.

<sup>20</sup> Borges, “Preface to the 1954 Edition,” *A Universal History of Iniquity*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, 63.

In the 1935 prologue to *Historia universal de la infamia* (*A Universal History of Iniquity*), Borges already eschews depth in favor of appearance when he writes of how he has avoided writing psychological stories in favor of narrative governed by “un propósito visual” (305; “pictorial intention,” 3). The choice of a visual emphasis over stories that draw on an affective “psychological” bond has consequences beyond the stylistic opposition it seems to establish between stories that emphasize pictorial qualities and those that depict a psychological motivation. The contrast introduces a distinction between what each style takes for granted about its own reception. Borges presents his fictions as not participating in a world beyond artifice. To put this in the reductive but rhetorically useful terms of inside/outside, we might say that with the remark Borges describes a preference for denying the interior by subscribing to a principle of exteriority.

In the prologue from 1954 Borges elaborates on that preference by providing one of the most explicit appeals to a folly of appearance. When he refers to the view of eastern philosophers who believe that “lo esencial del universo es la vacuidad” (“the essential characteristic of the universe is its emptiness”) he adds teasingly that they are at least correct in that claim with regard to “esa mínima parte del universo que es este libro” (307; “the tiny part of the universe that is this book,” 5). This is the context for the remark that behind all the tumult there is nothing, only appearance “una superficie de imágenes” (“a surface of images”).

That declaration is accompanied by a series of moments in which each mention of appearance brings with it the diminution of seriousness. Thus, Borges writes that the eastern philosophers know what they are talking about, if they are talking about the stories, and the tumult without ground provides not edification or lessons in the emptiness

of existence, but gratification. Borges closes his remarks with a self-effacing reference to himself in the third person: “[e]l hombre que lo ejecutó era asaz desdichado, pero se entretuvo escribiéndolo; ojalá algún reflejo de aquel placer alcance a los lectores” (308; “[t]he man who wrote it was a pitiable sort of creature, but he found amusement in writing; it is to be hoped that some echo of that pleasure may reach its readers,” 5).<sup>22</sup>

*Nietzsche, Appearance, and the Folly of Art*

How, then, does this sense of an emptied out art relate to the issues at stake in the folly that Nietzsche proposes in *Gay Science*? One may recall that Nietzsche’s revaluation of folly emerges in part as an effort to redefine what was formerly deemed wise (e.g., prudence). As such, it is relevant to his wider project of revaluing values and in this sense linked to a basic iconoclastic dimension of his writing. At the same time, *Gay Science* describes a folly that is distinctly attuned to art and attempts to remedy the particular misconceptions of philosophy. We may observe this aspect of that concern in *Gay Science* when Nietzsche remarks that philosophy has been “a misunderstanding of the body” (5).

Yet, what does philosophy’s misunderstanding of the body have to do with art and appearance? For Nietzsche, one part of the “illness” or distorted “unconscious physiological needs” of philosophy has been to indulge a neglect of life in a “craving for

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<sup>22</sup> Since mirrors loom large in Borges’ writing, it is worth noting that a more literal translation of the second part of the quote would be ‘let it be hoped that some reflection of that pleasure reaches the readers.’ The mirror is implicit in the language employed. It seems even more appropriate in the present context that in a prologue about appearances an author’s communion with the reader is envisioned in terms of reflection rather than the auditory reverberation of an echo.

some Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above” (5). Folly will come to be a way of bringing us back to our senses, back to the experience of aesthetic appearances rather than metaphysical essences beyond appearance.

In “*Our ultimate gratitude to art*,” we see that it is not just art or folly alone, but their meeting that makes it possible to counter the oppressive will to truth. For, Nietzsche writes, that there are occasions when “we need a rest from ourselves by looking at and down at ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing *at* ourselves [...]” (104). The ability to step out of the frames we had taken to be true of ourselves and see that sense of things through the distance of art, makes existence bearable (104). In particular, “because we are at bottom grave and serious human beings” we need “the fool’s cap” (104). That union between art and folly, or lies and laughter, reaches its crescendo at the end of the section, when he asks: “How then could we possibly do without art and with the fool?”

In weaving together the aesthetic and the foolish, Nietzsche depicts both a particular use of art and a distinctive understanding of folly. The result is that art allows us to become foolish or “to float and play” (105), but that folly is also clearly attuned to the problem of honesty and the “severe demands” made by our pursuit of truth at any cost (104). Put another way, art enables foolishness while folly becomes artistic and directed at the surface rather than a truth that resides apart or beyond it.

The shift brought about by this alignment becomes a kind of folly that acquires a festive turn at the end of *Gay Science* when we see that remaining a lover of appearance means setting aside the sway of grave concerns in favor of song and dance (248). Already before this, however, in ‘*The consciousness of appearance*,’ Nietzsche’s folly is

already geared toward matters of art, as we see in the drift of dreams and waking that the passage describes: “I suddenly awoke in the middle of this dream, but only to the consciousness that I am dreaming and that I *must* go on dreaming lest I perish [...]. What is ‘appearance’ to me now! Certainly not the opposite of some essence [...].” (63). That insight, itself about what art puts forward (i.e., appearance) is only made possible by his stepping outside his dream and seeing himself at the kind of distance that makes existence “bearable” (104). Here we find a point of connection between Nietzsche’s concern with reversing the value traditionally given to what lays beyond appearance and Borges’ like minded use of appearances to undermine aesthetic depth.

However, in order to unravel the significance of play at the surface in Borges’ fiction, it is necessary to examine the context of Borges’ own turn to folly more extensively. We get a better sense of how he envisions a folly of appearance that undermines aesthetics at a series of other turns. In what follows, I discuss three areas where that turn to the surface is manifest in what I believe are ways particular to Borges. The first two take place within his own discourse, while a third emerges in a concept that has been put forward within criticism as an attempt to come to terms with the way Borges privileges the surface in public interactions with those around him. The perspective of that third technique, known as “the put-on,” extends to other settings in which Borges cultivates a highly ambiguous presentation.

While the first two settings I discuss highlight how folly figures into Borges’ discourse on literature, the third provides an illustration of that sense of play in something akin to a literary performance: interviews in which Borges invents temporary fictions about himself. In this third case, then, we will see how Borges blurs a clear

understanding of what, if anything, resides with certitude beyond appearance. In this way, it will demonstrate how folly emerges as a way of defying truth by confounding intention and affirming emptied semblance.

### *Tricks and Aesthetics*

What does the inversion of essence and appearance mean for Borges and how does he make use of it to generate a sense of folly in the context of fiction? As late as another prologue in 1969, introducing *Elogio de la Sombra* (“Prólogo,” 379-80; “Foreword,” *In Praise of Darkness*, 331-3), Borges returns to the sense of an aesthetic folly that can be pursued in relation to appearances. In the prologue he explicitly resists the well-worn concept of aesthetics in order to describe any patterns or consistencies in his own writing (379; 331). Instead, Borges prefers to refer to a series of “astucias” (“tricks”) that he has acquired over the years (379; 331).<sup>23</sup> Later, he differentiates his disdain for the abstractions of aesthetics from the far kinder view he takes of a reader’s response to a work. In the process, he makes it clear that his objection was to certain institutions that crop up around art. For while he believes a book is not the place to locate an aesthetics, that is only because “[...] el hecho estético solo puede ocurrir cuando lo escriben o lo leen” (380; “the aesthetic moment can only occur when the volume is written or read,” 332). That shift to aesthetic reception carries with it a focus on the surface of representation.

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<sup>23</sup> It should be emphasized that he uses the term ‘astucias,’ not ‘trucos’ or ‘trampas.’ While the English term ‘trick’ fits, it does not on its own capture the further sense of an action of cunning or astuteness, the latter sharing a common etymology with *astucias*.

Like Nietzsche, Borges here does not object to the idea of an account of art, but to the way the discipline of aesthetics has historically organized aesthetic experience and located affect or any other response as a property of the object itself and as possessing a constant character apart from or beyond the immediate instance. The choice to avoid such an approach attempts to confront the way of construing truth to exist independent of the reader's experience. Borges continues to emphasize the level of reception, when he proposes that a text should aim to signal the reader using "la emoción poética" (380; "poetic emotion," 332). Likewise, success in written expression results from chance and is determined after writing in the effect it acquires (380; 332).

Borges takes a final jab at the cherished notion of 'the beautiful,' when he adds that beauty is not sufficiently remarkable: "[...] en este mundo la belleza es común" (380; "in this world, beauty is so common," 333). The comment includes its own teasing suggestion that snobbishness should make beauty unappealing. This is accompanied by a very personal and provisional measure of merit rather than one mediated by what he takes to be the pre-determinative explanations of aesthetics: "Espero que el lector descubra en mis páginas algo que pueda merecer su memoria [...]" (380; "I hope the reader may find in my pages something that merits being remembered," 332-3).

What is afoot in this redefinition of a value to be had in shunning beauty, truth, and object-oriented aesthetics in favor of tricks, chance and the moment of sensation before a work of fiction? The call for an approach that lingers at the surface is the product of a willingness to tease, jest and generally efface familiar notions of aesthetic merit in which art is esteemed to the extent it can be shown to be about purpose and depth. Borges presses the position that it is better to have an encounter with sensations at



the surface, even if that meeting is the result of chance. In this regard, his folly of appearance is rooted in the question of how one may approach art without ascribing to it a concretely grounded reality.

*The Wit of Folly*

One finds a more complicated instance of this pursuit of delight, and eventual superficiality in relation to Art, inserted into the final moments of “Magias parciales del ‘Quijote’” (“Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*”). When Borges discusses the significance of self-referential moments across a series of works, we witness the display of a kind of fool’s wit. At the conclusion, he poses and responds to a last question on what is unsettling about certain texts by bending the discussion in an unexpected way:

¿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.”  
(50)

Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is a reader of the *Quixote*, and Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious.  
(46)

Much like a punch line to a long joke, the answer seems more concerned with putting forward an amusing conclusion instead of arriving at an explanation that responds to the question itself. The punch line, resides in his having found a pretense to say at the end of his essay that the *Quixote*, a work in which the protagonist reads romantic novels and comes to believe that he is a character in these same novels, has the effect of causing its readers to suspect that they too may be characters, albeit in a fiction of an undesignated

genre. The objective, then, is to arrive at a way of saying that the reader of the *Quixote* is vulnerable to the kind of madness that afflicts its protagonist as a reader of romances.

However, the answer Borges gives at the end of the essay also follows on the heels of an argument about reflexivity in literary art that was broader and more complicated than the consideration of humor by itself suggests. For it is not simply that he wants to say that the *Quixote* half charms its readers into a worry that they may be characters through simple self-identification. After all, the discussion that precedes his statement draws on examples, from the *Thousand and One Nights* and *Hamlet*, that run counter to his claim at the end.

Just as any unity between the three reflexive works becomes more strained, however, Borges presses the case for an all-embracing explanation of the kind he eventually offers at the conclusion. That disunity is already evident when he discusses an example in the *Thousand and One Nights* and gives a very different answer about why an interpolation in which “the Sultan hears his own story from the Sultana’s mouth” has the potential to be particularly unsettling for a reader, Borges wonders: “¿Intuye claramente el lector [...] el curioso peligro? Que la reina persista y el inmóvil rey oirá para siempre la trunca historia de *Las mil y una noches*, ahora infinita y circular [...]” (50; “Does the reader perceive [...] the curious danger—that the Sultana may persist and the Sultan, transfixed will hear forever the truncated story of *A Thousand and One Nights*, now infinite and circular,” 45)?

However, it is no longer a danger that is “infinita y circular” (“infinite and circular”) that preoccupies Borges at the end. In fact, that danger never quite materializes for the other two works, since both *Hamlet* and the *Quixote* include a finitude: Hamlet’s

play, which is not *Hamlet*, will end and the first book of the *Quixote* is already over by the time it appears in the second. Rather than reconcile this difference or accept it as a distinction, Borges does something else at the end of the essay. He pulls away from the answer already given in reference to *A Thousand and One Nights* and opts for a rhetorical symmetry. The answer with which he concludes suddenly, draws attention to itself as an imaginative indulgence: no longer endless storytelling, but the fantastic implication that if a character can be a reader, then, a reader comes to sense that he or she is fictitious. In this maneuver at the end of the essay, then, he tinkers with a delightful idea made all the more improbable by how he has broken from the line of thought he had previously established.

*Appearance without Ground: Aestheticizing Experience in the Folly of the Surface*

The character-reader exchange of the proposition he embraces at the end also entails a clever bend toward a particularly aestheticized folly. Roughly, the claim Borges arrives at in the final reader-character rhetorical reversal is to say that there are circumstances in which external realities can be aestheticized by reading and that this is in some regard unsettling. With this reversal, Borges presents the view that narrative art may now make all manner of appearance seem to lack the substance it once was seen to hold.

All that the reader might have once taken to be real in the world of her or his full array of senses, no longer seems so in some independently verifiable manner. The view presents the idea that a personal experience of reality is situated within the fluidity of

fiction and not concretely established details. In this way, what was once perceived to be empirically real begins to become susceptible to a doubt that all is an artifice molded by an anonymous other. Once more, the idea Borges introduces in the course of the discussion is more significant for revealing an outlook on art than for creating an argument that is extensively supported by examples of reflexive art. Rather than treat Borges' response at the end of the essay as an answer, then, we may find in it a tactic of aesthetic folly in the face of the appearance that fiction presents. That folly becomes conceivable to him when doubt or suspicion enters the reader's perception and the real is no longer taken to serve as a serious grounding point of reference for fiction.

A vertiginous experience, wherein real ground becomes a play of appearance in the hands of another, is not by any means uncommon in Borges' fiction. It can be observed at the heart of the plot and within the falsely cited epigraph from *Through the Looking-Glass* that begins "Las ruinas circulares" ("The Circular Ruins"). In the story itself, one finds a protagonist who sets out to create a man by dreaming him in rigorous detail (483; 97). When the dreamer goes to find his creation later, the dreamer discovers that he is himself dreamt by another: "Con alivio, con humillación, con terror, comprendió que él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo" (487; "With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he realized that he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him," 100). This vertigo in appearance also recurs at the end of "Los teólogos" ("The Theologians"), when one scholar discovers that the theological feud in which he had cast himself matters little to a divine intelligence: "Aureliano supo que para la insondable divinidad, él y Juan de Panonia [...] formaban una sola persona (595; "Aurelian discovered that in the eyes of the unfathomable deity, he and John of

Pannonia [...] were a single person,” 207). In both, a formerly unquestioned assessment of reality is reframed from a new unsettling vantage point. The drift of ungrounded appearance is crucial to the way both stories enact such a moment of vertigo.

That shift is also reminiscent of the basic reversal of the place of meaning that characterizes Nietzsche’s folly of appearance. Indeed, the inversion at the end of the essay offers its own fascinating variation on the aestheticist idea that life is art.<sup>24</sup> Borges proposes that our own lives may well be art, but somewhat terrifyingly in the hands of a nameless other. Like Nietzsche’s folly of appearance, Borges’ reversal complicates how one relates to reality and the attempt to arrive at clear demarcations of art and life.

We should at this point note an important pre-condition of that aestheticization in Borges’ account: the vertiginous moment in which one comes to face an unstable and self-conscious experience. The presence of this last element is crucial to the technique of folly that his fiction will offer, since the appearance of the fiction itself is made self-conscious with objects of appearance that draw attention to how things are seen and the difficulty of deciphering what lays beyond so many registers of appearance.

### *The ‘Put-On’ and Detaching Appearance from Substance*

Yet, how does Borges attain this effect in a play of appearance? The fuller mechanics of that instability become apparent in a third setting in which we encounter a particular style of expression distinctive to the way Borges counteracts expectations of

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of this idea as it relates to Nietzsche’s oeuvre in particular, see *Nietzsche, Life as Literature*. The thesis that Nietzsche aestheticizes life is central to Nehamas’ discussion.

sobriety. In, "Put-On by Borges: The Interview as Play," Ted Lyon gives an account of that technique. His discussion of the put-on provides partial support for the idea that emptied out appearances may extend not only to the way Borges talks about approaching fiction but to the play that is actively at stake in certain kinds of fictions. Lyon's discussion of the put-on suggests a sense of appearance emptied of revelatory function. A closer look at Lyon's account is useful in better understanding the dynamics of that play of appearance and why it should be so important for Borges' to be able to empty the beyond of its grounding effect.

Looking at a series of interviews, Lyon proposes that very often Borges adopts contradictory positions and improbable answers largely in a rhetorical manipulation of his interlocutor. Lyon eventually attributes this behavior to a style of fiction that, like the put-on, is treated as being more serious than it necessarily is (59). Both fictional indulgences form part of a style that unseats authorities and challenges manners of seriousness at various turns (65). Lyon highlights the put-on in terms that are reminiscent of the very sort of trickery and willingness to play at being the fool that could be seen in the preceding episodes.

The story of Lyon's encounter with Borges' use of the put-on provides an initial illustration of the practice. Lyon begins with a personal anecdote of meeting Borges and being subjected to an unusual strategy. In the midst of initial introductions, Lyon relates how Borges misconstrues Lyon's area of specialization and seems to believe that he is a Professor of English literature. Confused by this apparent misunderstanding, Lyon proceeds to clarify and attempt to impress Borges by explaining that he is a Professor of Spanish and that he teaches Latin American literature, including Borges' very own

stories. Borges' responds: "Oh, that's all too bad, [...] everything that's good has been written in English, you know" (57).

Lyon asks himself what Borges had just done, and explains how he came to realize that Borges was "gently playing verbal games with me [...] he often slipped into play and parody of interviews, and interviewers and the entire interview process. His most frequent technique in these games was the use of the 'put-on'" (57). The put-on, according to Lyon, entails one party "pretending the truth of something that is not quite correct" (58). As with other follies, the "put-on deflates seriousness. The expected straight answer is subverted and eventually sabotaged by uncertainty" (58).

That uncertainty is at times not apparent in Lyon's reading of Borges' intention, as when he believes that Borges clearly does not believe certain statements and by the initial definition in which he supposed that there are clearly correct and incorrect answers that could be known as such with certainty (58). Certainty relies upon an interpretation of familiarity, a winking irony, in which Borges would seem to indicate the truth of the matter to a knowing audience. Yet, what is remarkable about the idea of the put-on is that it entails a trick on the one who believes they may discern or attempt their own wink of familiarity—as Lyon himself found out in his initial interaction. The put-on questions secure knowledge, sharing in a distaste for pre-determinatively known truths.

This portrait of the put-on presents Borges' fictionalizing in interviews and short stories as co-extensive follies, in which both attempt to challenge seriousness. Increasingly it is also evident that the richness and ambiguity of the put-on is only possible by a process of strategic superficiality, a folly of appearance that empties out the ground of a definite reality apart and outside the moment of the utterance. The result of

the put-on's folly is a focus that remains on the surface, wherein anything more becomes a play of alternating possibilities that are unable to settle into a single distinctly dominant presence or reality.

Lyon's discussion is noteworthy for drawing attention to the way Borges treats the interview as a creative format, as "almost a literary genre" (58). However, even as Lyon illustrates the importance of uncertainty, he fails to fully explain that it is this uncertainty in the form of an emptied out appearance that sustains the put-on or its analogous folly in Borges' short fiction. In this respect, a crucial aspect of the folly in Borges' fictions remains only partially stated—that in order for him to adopt an incongruity that will confound, he must also detach appearance from substance in the moment he wishes to provoke uncertainty. To put-on, he must empty out the appearance of himself. For were there to be a clearly known and resolvable speaker, complete with self-evident beliefs, the one faced with the momentary performance would be able to resolve doubts far too readily.

Thus, while Lyon correctly notes that this uncertainty is essential to "deflating seriousness" (58), he does not consider what it is about the short stories or Borges' interpersonal fictions that allows for that uncertainty: a free-flowing playfulness that regularly effaces final indications. A second related problem in Lyon's conceptualization of the put-on arises in the idea that one should concretize and orient interpretation around a being defined precisely as confounding certainties. That is, the framework of the put-on contains a basic paradox when it proposes that Borges is the one who will make one wonder a thing or two about Borges.



In a general sense, this perspective finds a measure of resonance with a whole tradition of criticism that focuses on Borges' sense of irony or duplicity. Enrique Giordano's discussion of Borges, for example, reflects the perspective that treats the author's playfulness in acts of dissemblance as pursuing ironic ends. This can be observed when he describes how "Borges brings us to a skeptical view of the universe" from within the frames of games themselves ("Play and Playfulness," 219). He attributes that self-consciousness to the way the author "ironizes the [...] concept of play" (219). In his reading, that irony serves skepticism about the closed nature of games. However, this reading reflects a liberating way of understanding Borges. That view holds definite appeal. Nevertheless we could also ask what keeps us from seeing that irony in a bitter light. Why not view Borges as cultivating skepticism about what lies beyond the frames of the game? Nothing prevents this, unless we are able to say that we know the true thrust of the text is toward freedom and not entrapment.

My point in raising this question is not necessarily to argue for the cynical alternative itself. I wish to note only that when it comes to such irony, knowledge about the ironist's intent is implicit. Such an ironic reading accepts as a premise the view that dissemblance can be pierced and doubts settled. This very strategy is apparent also in the way Kellerman draws on irony to conclude his discussion of how Borges plays at different levels in his short stories. At the end of his discussion, irony flourishes in a long list as he observes that 'one discovers the irony of Borges' play/game'.<sup>25</sup> For Kellerman too, irony brings discovery and final realizations about the nature of the author's actions.

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<sup>25</sup> Kellerman, 670. He writes: "uno descubre la ironía del juego de Borges." The translation is my own.

However, such irony entails an assumed knowledge: we believe Borges is being ironic when he writes something because we believe that we know he could not really mean such a thing. Yet, what happens when that knowing has even a small measure of doubt? Dissemblance may lie anywhere as we are no longer certain of our basis for deciphering an ironic code. This is where I believe the concept of the put-on as a style of fooling exceeds the epistemological undercurrents of traditional literary irony. Irony as an explanation participates in a critical clarity of purpose that Borges' put-on as an act of folly is happy to ignore.

In an earlier discussion of Borgesian play, Giordano himself seems to be aware of the limits of such certainty. Giordano touches upon doubt as a quality of Borges' writing when he refers to how 'imperfect information' is crucial to a dramatic tension that characterizes the author's play.<sup>26</sup> Giordano's emphasis on the unknown here runs counter to the perspective that informs the reading of Borges as an ironist. That is, the observation arises according to a different critical strategy in interpreting Borges' play. The strategy in this case is to focus on suspense in play, whereas the ironist reading is one that attempts to resolve doubt. Yet, that resolution is not entirely possible in the subtle unraveling that Lyon's discussion of the put-on partially uncovers.

In what follows, I examine how uncertainty emerges out of a succession of appearances and argue that the ebb and flow, or interaction, of different ways of responding to the surface eventually leaves known realities falling prey to an appearance emptied of definite ground. In such stories, the text progressively removes indicative

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<sup>26</sup> Giordano, "Juego de la creación" 346. The term he uses in the essay, and which I translate above, is "información imperfecta." The translation above is my own.

certainty and substitutes an ambiguous semblance that challenges the seriousness of real essences beyond the pictorial plane of appearance.

The detachment of the surface from a connection with substance is important for understanding how folly carries over into Borges' strategy of uncertainty. The put-on allows us to see how these follies of appearance exceed the setting for Nietzsche's folly. Yet, if the put-on had as its condition a speaker emptied of definite reality, an end achieved by self-contradiction and uncertainty in interviews, what is the analogue to this practice in Borges' short stories?

In the analysis of this element of his fictions, I argue that one may follow the unraveling of factual or other ostensibly real points of reference in relation to three key objects of representation upon which I focus: masks, mirrors, and photographs. In this way, I examine how semblance is dramatized along these lines in six stories and argue that appearance is progressively emptied of a grounding in definite reality. In that crisis, brought on by the play of appearance, the real is no longer that which is covered by masks, reflected by mirrors and documented and retained in photographs. Instead, in each, we will find the setting for an encounter with appearance at the surface. Each folly provides a setting for art conceived as challenging the privilege of substance in aesthetics.

### 2.3 Reading the Folly of Appearance in Masks, Mirrors, and Photographs

#### *The Prophet's Mask*

Masks factor into at least two early stories from *Historia universal de la infamia* (*A Universal History of Iniquity*). The most explicit of these is “El tintorero enmascarado Hákim de Merv” (“Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv”), where a masked and later veiled protagonist becomes by turns a prophet, a leader in battles, and then a victim of his followers. In each of these stages, masks function integrally to first introduce, then sustain, and finally unravel the circumstances that support his status. However, it is in the last of these stages that we encounter a curious fold in the text that brings a re-assessment of what came before.

When the prophet's face is revealed, his followers learn that his veils cover not a supernatural visage, but a disfigurement that is white “con la blancura peculiar de la lepra manchada” (“with the whiteness of leprosy”) and that is “tan abultada o increíble que les pareció una careta” (“Hákim” 347; “so swollen (or so incredible) that it seemed to be a mask,” “Masked Dyer” 44).<sup>27</sup> Thus, a last masked semblance appears precisely as a consequence of his unmasking. The return of the mask at this juncture in the text, marks a shift in the understanding of masks. Formerly, within the story, the mask served only to cover and inspire awe and mystery with the power of the prophet's appearance. The debut of his mask, in which he wore a Bull's head mask and two blind men accompanied

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<sup>27</sup> Hurley omits ‘manchada,’ or ‘stain.’ This is a pity, since the term captures both the visual appearance of a stain as well as the clear connotation of something that has been tarnished.

him, prompted his first onlookers to ask for an explanation of “esa maravilla” (344; “this wonder” 41). The composed scene that he created allowed him to explain that it was a covering of a true appearance that was too powerful for men to witness. He explains that his companions are blind, “porque han visto mi cara” (344; “because they have looked upon my face,” 41). While there is something intangible and mysterious about the mask, its purpose here is to cover the prophet’s blinding face, and to signal that behind the Bull’s head or the white veils that later succeed it, there resides a ground for the masked appearance—be it supernatural and blinding or leprous and shielded from the glare of his followers.

At the end, though, when the story suggests that it is the unusually striking disfigurement of the illness that makes his face look unreal, the text shifts from using the mask as a thing that covers a final layer of truth, toward the idea that a mask represents that which defies expectations of true appearance. The mask and veil no longer defy a knowable truth by temporarily postponing revelation. Instead the disfigured leprous mask at the end of the story provides a surface behind which nothing can be structured. Its remarkable whiteness further links it to the veiled covering, which was also white, even as it redefines the function of the facial re-figuration of masks or veils from temporary symbolic expression (e.g., the white dressings that contrast with his rival’s black garb or the lion’s head mask), to a cipherless symbol.

A new disillusion further empties out the other masks of their potent essence, as the concluding passage now highlights a view of the prophet’s coverings as those of a self-serving fraud. When his “voice” tries one final ineffectual deceit and declares: “[v]uestro pecado abominable os prohíbe percibir mi esplendor” (347; “[t]hy abominable

*sins forbid thee to look upon my radiance*” 44), he is cut short by the more effectual spears of his followers. The adjective ‘abominable’ is particularly damning, as it links his obvious final deceptions to the elaborate belief system described earlier under the heading of “Los espejos abominables” (“Abominable Mirrors”) in which the story relates that according to the prophet’s view of the world “[l]a tierra que habitemos es un error, una incompetente parodia. Los espejos y la paternidad son abominables, porque la multiplican y afirman” (346; “[t]he earth we inhabit is an error, an incompetent parody. Mirrors and paternity are abominable because they multiply and affirm it,” 43). The prophet’s cosmogony and beliefs seem little more than an extension of manipulative rhetoric. The self-serving doctrine on mirrors also recasts a minor earlier detail. When Hákim suddenly disappeared, before his masked debut, among the items left behind in his workshop was a broken mirror (344; 41). Self-interest now casts that detail in light of a personal distaste for the reflective surface.

At the same time, more subtle doubts envelope the story as a whole, suggesting the impossibility of reaching behind a final layer of narrative. The story itself all along rests in doubt. When the narrator begins his recollections of the sources of accounts dealing with the veiled prophet he qualifies everything that follows: “Si no me equivoco, las fuentes originales de información acerca de Al Moqanna, el Profeta Velado (o más estrictamente, Enmascarado) del Jorasán, se reducen a cuatro” (343; “Unless I am mistaken, the original sources of information on Al-Moqanna the veiled (or, more strictly, Masked) Prophet of Khorasan, are but four [...]” 40). It does not begin, then, by stating that the narrator has recently exhausted his search and confirmed that the original

sources are but four. While the moment quickly fades from view, it indicates a world of doubt from the start.

Worse still, the narrator's parenthetical self-correction suggests something of a contradiction of the literal account that follows. The narrator refers to "el Profeta Velado (o más estrictamente, Enmascarado)" ("the veiled [or, more strictly, Masked] Prophet [...]"). The word only becomes accurate if one adopts the ultimately masked reading of the story: that the leprous skin is a fundamentally masked appearance. This is because the protagonist begins by being masked only briefly, veiled, and then finally uncovered before his followers to reveal the leprous shroud. So when the narrator makes a self-correction about Al-Moqanna being the masked rather than veiled prophet, to say nothing of his uncovering, he draws attention to a self-correction of mixed certainty. The contradiction of the literal and support for a metaphorical masking of his white leprosy undermines the factual accuracy of the narrative.

This complicates considerably the task of an account that attempts to collect a series of representations into a definitive history. For while there might be sources that the narrator fails to recall, this would still preserve the sense that there is something to be recalled by him or retold by his sources. That the narrator draws attention to his error in this second way more radically brings into question the value of such an approach and whether appearance should reveal (i.e., unmask or unveil) an independent *a priori* reality at all. Put another way, the aestheticizing of the narrative puts into question the act with which the story begins (i.e., documenting historical sources). The final uncertainty of what lies behind the protagonist's leprous mask at the end suggests the limits of that

historical exercise, since it will not explain or rend the veil of appearance that re-asserts itself in leprosy or the art of storytelling.

### *Impossible Imposture*

The role of masks in “El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro” (“The Improbable Impostor Tom Castro”) is less explicit. To begin with, the etymology of the term ‘*inverosímil*,’ used explicitly in the Spanish title, implicates precisely the issue of truth and appearance in the idea of an impostor who is unlike the one he imitates. Here and throughout the story, acts of fraudulence introduce the question of belief and its correspondence to a true reality. The narrative itself unfolds from pieced together historical sources, providing dates to tell how two men (Arthur Orton or Tom Castro and Ebenezer Bogle) plot to impersonate a young man (Roger Charles Tichborne) believed to be lost at sea more than a decade earlier.

The conspiracy itself is hatched in response to the newspaper advertisement of a grieving mother, Lady Tichborne. Poorly written correspondences on the part of the conspirators and a lack of similarity between Orton/Castro and Tichborne do not detract from the fraud. Instead, the quality of the impostor’s writing is overlooked and the departure of his features from Tichborne’s is the basis for proving authenticity, since an impostor would surely attempt a better resemblance and the ravages of time are already well accepted (“Impostor inverosímil” 320; “Improbable impostor” 15).

The story presents the debut of Orton/Castro as Tichborne in particularly semblance-laden language:



El 16 de enero de 1867, Roger Charles Tichborne se anunció en ese hotel. Lo precedió su respetuoso sirviente, Ebenezer Bogle. El día de invierno era muchísimo sol; los ojos fatigados de Lady Tichborne estaban velados de llanto. El negro [Bogle] abrió de par las ventanas. La luz hizo de mascara [...]. (320-1)

On January 16, 1867 Roger Charles Tichborne, called upon his mother. His respectful servant Ebenezer Bogle, preceded him. It was a winter day of bright sunshine; Lady Tichborne's tired eyes were veiled with tears. The black man [Bogle] threw the windows open. The light served as a mask [...]. (16)

The account itself places the mask of Tichborne on Orton/Castro, referring to the lost son when it is the impostor who enters the room. The passage also incorporates the cruelty of the mask's deception into its description of the mother's response in which tears are said to veil her vision. However, a return to irony continues the comedy of bad impersonations seeming the most authentic when the passage ends by inverting the custom of occluding with shadows: [l]a luz hizo de mascara [...] (“[t]he light served as a mask”).

While Orton/Castro never wears a mask or veil of the kind donned by the prophet, deception and the intrusion of surfaces complicate access to an ultimate reality. Even one of the impostor's 'real' names before the performance, Tom Castro, is reportedly derived of a family with whom he stayed briefly years before (318; 13). Throughout the story, the impostor's name shifts. Thus, just as he is dubbed Tichborne suddenly when he calls upon Lady Tichborne, he is variously referred to as either Orton or Castro, without warning, making it unclear which of these is the best for referring to his presence in a definitive fashion. In this sense, the slippage that presented the fraud as already accomplished in the narrator's referring to Orton/Castro as Tichborne is part of an emptying out of existence beyond nominal appearance. It is not that we have no idea

who he is, but amid these shifts it becomes difficult to confuse a name with an existence beyond the text. While that existence is tentatively present in a provisional fashion, the drift of the surface predominates in these shifts.

Within the plot, the mask of Tichborne, is eventually removed after an issue of inheritance arises, a trial ensues, and his co-conspirator dies in a foretold street accident that leaves the less clever and more plastic Orton/Castro to his own artistry. However, there remains an ambiguous understanding of what if anything lays beneath the mask of the impostor even after the fraud is revealed. Once more, as in the story of the veiled prophet, there is never more than another appearance beneath the masked surface.

This is because even though the deception is exposed at trial, his identity never really reveals itself apart from a provisional series of performances within the narrative. The inaccessible nature of the protagonist's ultimate identity is reinforced one last time when the story relates how, upon release from prison, Orton/Castro wanders towns, upholds his innocence or declares his guilt, depending on the audience (322; 18).

In this way, "Improbable Impostor" fashions a more subtle sense of masks, tying the question of personal identity and the obfuscation of that identity into a provisional and socially defined reality that shifts depending on the parties involved. The mask lurks in the face that various characters create and eventually contest. The unusual ending marks the fluidly changing aspect of his appearance, as the impostor now tries to fit the moment by becoming whatever he sees himself being in the eyes of others around him.

The outcome ultimately questions the nature of fraud. Imposture would require a fixed immovable existence beyond appearance that could be shown to definitely not be that whom the impersonator imitates. That existence is nowhere to be found. Where it

begins as a fraud, the mask ends by becoming an alterable changing face in which verisimilitude does not have the last word.

Why do these outcomes matter for the folly that the texts impart? Both “Hákim” and “Impostor inverosímil” dramatize the very question of what is known and what is not known that ultimately undermines the possibility of knowing beyond the appearance of the narrative itself. In “Hákim” the facts of history become more fragile, whereas in “Impostor inverosímil” it is the inapplicability of imposture itself that comes to the fore when identity ceases to settle into an existence beyond the masked surface. By the end of both stories, the mask of fiction tells of an artifice behind the mask that is no less confined to the surface in its reach, since facts and dates are trapped within the uncertain series of frames in which they arise. In addition to the underlying humor in each (e.g., in the idea that a definitive compiler is unsure of his sources in the telling and the best impostors are those that do not strive for resemblance), the stories enact a folly that uses appearance as the place of principal interest in which grounding sources are seemingly set adrift in appearance and nothing else.

Masks emphasize a covering that promises a disclosure to which the text ultimately denies access by emptying appearance of what could be revealed. By contrast, the unsettling effect of mirrors entails an over-saturation of appearance. In that duplication, there is no longer a single clearly corresponding essence behind so many appearances. That is not to say that at a basic level, mirrors do not resemble masks in becoming a source of confusion and repetition that emphasizes the unreality of appearance within the artifice of fiction. Both mirrors and masks provide a place where the relation between stable representation and a repetitive drift of appearance unfold.

However, while masks create an immersion in appearance by layering a series of shifting alternatives that are distinct from one another, mirrors incorporate more subtle corruptions of truth. Once framed by mirrors, a repetitive drift unfolds as minor departures between the real and its appearance make it difficult to maintain a distinction across a series of similar but not quite equivalent representations.

Here we should note that Borges does not tidily divide his narratives that draw on one object of appearance and the dynamics provoked by that object from another object and its dynamics. For example, already in “Hákim,” there were the broken workshop mirrors and the abominable mirrors of the prophet’s cosmogony in which the reader learns of the view that mirrors multiply and affirm a world of error. Even as mirrors figure into this evocation, in the context of the fraudulence and obfuscation of masks, the remark and all the other beliefs espoused by the prophet became subject to re-examination in light of his personal investment in them. That sense of a momentary disclosure is more particular to the play of appearance that masks provide, a function that is represented by the image of the veil or shroud.

*“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”*

The particular passage on mirrors in “Hákim” bears returning to because of its own overabundance elsewhere. The observation itself re-emerges in a slightly altered form in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” Mirrors appear from the outset, as the narrator of “Tlön,” credits the discovery of a fictional land, Uqbar, to “la conjunción de un espejo y de una enciclopedia” (*OCI* 461; “the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia” (*CF*

68). The topic turns to mirrors when the narrator, implied to be Borges, relates a realization after a long visit with Adolfo Bioy Casares:

[d]escubrimos (en la alta noche ese descubrimiento es inevitable) que los espejos tienen algo monstruoso. Entonces Bioy Casares recordó que uno de los heresiarcas de Uqbar había declarado que los espejos y la cópula son abominables, porque multiplican el número de los hombres. (461)  
 [w]e discovered (very late at night such a discovery is inevitable) that there is something monstrous about mirrors. That was when Bioy remembered a saying by one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar: *Mirrors and copulation are abominable, for they multiply the number of mankind.* (68)

Once more the term ‘abominables’ (‘abominable’) stands out. In addition, while ‘*la cópula*’ undoubtedly means copulation, it is also identical to the term in linguistics for the copula. Etymologically both meanings are derived from the idea of a ‘fastening together.’ Given that the narrator seems to overlap with Borges from the start, it is noteworthy that he does not also reveal any knowledge of such a conspicuous quote. Indeed, he actively presents himself as unaware and even skeptical of the origins. That crucial early discontinuity suggests several possibilities. The first is that the text creates the illusion of authorial continuity only to break it early on. A second is that the narrator himself is indeed the author of “Hákim” but has either forgotten or chosen to hide his knowledge of the quote and the cosmogony from which it derives. In either scenario, the narrator does not quite correspond to the person he sometimes seems to be.

*What’s in a (quote about a) mirror?*

The quote itself is not a casual line of little later significance. Without the narrator’s question the two would have no reason to search for Uqbar or make the discovery that it is a false entry for a past kingdom in Tlön, a fictional world produced by

a secret society of writers dedicated to elaborating an alternate culture, language, practice, and history in text. Before all this, however, the most immediate effect of the narrator's not knowing the citation is that he and Bioy Casares search for and at first fail to find the passage in a copy of the Encyclopedia that they have at hand. The narrator remarks that he suspected the friend had invented the source as a pretense for uttering the artful phrase (461; 69). Here, the doubt concerns the reality of whether the remark is rooted in a history that an encyclopedia purports to confirm.

When Bioy Casares calls the narrator later and tells him that he has a copy and reads the original passage over the phone, the mirror aphorism is repeated, but undergoes another transformation: “Para uno de esos gnósticos, el visible universo era una ilusión o (más precisamente) un sofisma. Los espejos y la paternidad son abominables (*mirrors and fatherhood are hateful*) porque lo multiplican y lo divulgan” (462; “*For one of those Gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are hateful because they multiply and proclaim it*” CF 69).<sup>28</sup> With this passage, the total number of iterations is raised to five: three Spanish versions and two English versions, the latter of which Bioy recites whenever he has occasion to provide a version in Spanish in “Tlön.”

Momentarily setting aside the English prose of the encyclopedia entries, since these largely match their companions in emphasis, we may focus on comparing three instances: 1) the abominable mirrors/paternity version in “Hákim,” 2) Bioy Casares' late-night mirrors/copulation version, and 3) the subsequent mirrors/paternity Encyclopedia version. The third version closely matches the first from “Hákim.” However, a major

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<sup>28</sup> In his translation of “Tlön,” Andrew Hurley omits the idea of Bioy's recalling or reading an English entry and paraphrasing it in Spanish.

discrepancy between the version that appears in “Hákim” and the one Bioy Casares recites over the phone is in that version’s Gnostic emphasis, in which the universe is “una ilusión o (más precisamente) un sofisma” (“Tlön” 462; “illusion or, more precisely, a sophism” “Tlön” 69). This stands in contrast to the version in the veiled prophet’s cosmogony, in which the world is “un error, una incompetente parodia” (“Hákim” 346; “an error, an incompetent parody,” “Masked Dyer” 43).

The differences in the ways of talking about why mirrors are distasteful reveal something about the respective stories in which each appear. In the case of Hákim’s cosmogony, the emphasis matches the eventual trajectory of the story’s protagonist. So it is only appropriate that one should find talk of error and incompetence in the story of a masked prophet that ends in an illusion that is unable to sustain itself. Indeed its place in his outlook makes it ironic that his story itself should serve as the proof of that claim about the world. Likewise, the citation’s shift away from error and incompetence and toward illusion and charm befits the story of “Tlön.” When society learns of the invented nature of that world, it provokes quite a different reaction than that found among the followers of Hákim. In “Tlön,” society embraces the lie:

Ya ha penetrado en las escuelas el (conjetural) ‘idioma primitivo’ de Tlön; ya la enseñanza de su historia armoniosa (y llena de episodios conmovedores) ha obliterado a la que presidió mi niñez; ya en las memorias un pasado ficticio ocupa el sitio de otro, del que nada sabemos con certidumbre—ni siquiera que es falso. (474)

Already Tlön’s (conjectural) ‘primitive language’ has filtered into our schools; already the teaching of Tlön’s harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has obliterated the history that governed my own childhood; already a fictitious past has supplanted in men’s memories that other past, of which we now know nothing certain—not even that it is false. (81)

To recite a version of the aphorism is to reveal something about the way appearance is refracted within the narrative. The discrepancies anticipate divergences between the two stories and indicate the varied fate of central representations in each narrative: Hákim as he presents himself ends in failure and an unsuccessful attempt at deception, Tlön ends by sophisticatedly persuading belief in the reality of a fiction over the fictional reality in which it appears: the story of “Tlön” itself.

*Ways of Knowing: The Mirror’s Surface and Encyclopedic Ground in “Tlön”*

The attempt to quell uncertainty with Encyclopedic knowledge is progressively undermined in “Tlön,” as other details of the story become infused with ungrounded appearance. The mystery of Uqbar’s absence from other books highlights its own tenuousness, but also introduces a degree of uncertainty about the tools that the narrator and his friend rely upon: “Esa noche visitamos la Biblioteca Nacional. En vano fatigamos atlas, catálogos, anuarios de sociedades geográficas, memorias de viajeros e historiadores: nadie había estado nunca en Uqbar” (463; “That night, Bioy and I paid a visit to the National Library, where we pored in vain through atlases, catalogs, the yearly indices published by geographical societies, the memoirs of travelers and historians—no one had ever been in Uqbar,” 70). Likewise, when another friend finds another copy of the *Anglo-American Encyclopedia*, he too finds no mention of Uqbar (463; 70).

Both incidents capture the fallibility of authoritative encyclopedias and libraries. Both also hint at the gaps of national and trans-national authorities of knowledge, since the narrator’s second nocturnal search takes him to the Argentine National Library and



the volume that often seems to omit and rarely to include the entry is the *Anglo-American Encyclopedia* itself earlier described as “una reimpresión literal, pero también morosa” (“a literal though laggardly reprint”) of a British encyclopedic project (461; 68). Thus, while both places of substance fail to verify the reality of Uqbar, they also become questionable themselves. That erosion of the real suggests an explanation for the cryptic later observation that fascination with Tlön prevents the narrator’s world from realizing even that their earlier reality was false. It does not so much replace the real with another reality that definitively contradicts it, but with an unreality that sows confusion.

That unreality is on display again after the search through the National library, when the narrator relates how he acquires a copy of an encyclopedia of Tlön. He describes the details leading up to that find with a similarly emptied out sense of appearance. The encyclopedia itself is found in a hotel bar, having been left behind posthumously by Herbert Ashe, a family friend of the narrator. After death, the narrator describes Ashe as lingering on in the hotel that was his place of residence with “[a]lgún recuerdo limitado y menguante [...] persiste en el hotel de Adrogué, entre las efusivas madresevas y en el fondo ilusorio de los espejos” (463; “[s]ome limited and waning memory [...] lingers in the hotel at Adrogué, among the effusive honeysuckle vines and in the illusory depths of the mirrors,” 70). That the place of residence itself is a hotel, adds to the sense that Ashe drifts between places. Anticipating that reaction, the narrator remarks that “[e]n vida padeció de irrealidad” (463; in life he was “afflicted with unreality” 70). When the narrator recalls that Ashe would visit England every few years, he bases even that statement on a tenuous appearance as it is represented to him: “juzgo

por unas fotografías que nos mostró” (463; “I am judging from some photographs he showed us” 71).

It is fitting, then, that the grounding substance of the volume he discovers on a visit to the hotel bar intermingles details that emphasize the unreality of the encyclopedia itself, which like Ashe, suffers from a certain unreality. That sense of the unreal converges with a momentary breakdown in plainer communicative enterprise, as artifice comes to the fore:

En una noche del Islam que se llama la Noche de las Noches se abren de par en par las secretas puertas del cielo y es más dulce el agua en los cántaros; si esas puertas se abrieran, no sentiría lo que en esa tarde sentí. (464)

On one particular Islamic night, which is called the Night of Nights, the secret portals of the heavens open wide and the water in the water jars is sweeter than on other nights; if those gates had opened as I sat there, I would not have felt what I was feeling that evening. (71)

The moment begins by presenting the author-narrator in an articulate inarticulateness.

That gesture recurs in other stories by Borges. It is present, for example, in another story

I discuss, “El Aleph.” In that case, Borges plays the narrator of the story and finds

himself stunned in the basement before the overwhelming experience of an *aleph* that

leaves him able to write about how he is unable to write or capture the experience. The

literary device he uses in both cases is a curious one, not least for the paradox it presents.

In both cases it draws attention to something that exceeds the grasp of art, but in doing so

it becomes particularly reflexive and draws us to the surface at the very moment of

splendor. No longer having to contend with metaphysical depths, because they cannot be

described, the narrator is free to concentrate on the surface. This experience of strategic

inarticulateness allows for an articulation of something that does not strain for what is

beyond semblance.

That new appeal to appearance shows itself in the ensuing description of the book. The details of the passage describe the fragile appearance of the book, which provides an appearance (i.e., the world of Tlön) that shakes reality of a defining substance or definite origin.

El libro estaba redactado en inglés y lo integraban 1001 páginas. [...] No había indicación de fecha ni de lugar. En la primera página y en una hoja de papel de seda que cubría una de las láminas en colores había estampado un óvalo azul con esta inscripción: *Orbis Tertius*. (464)

The book was written in English and it consisted of 1001 pages. [...] There was no date or place of publication. On the first page and again on the onionskin page that covered one of the color illustrations there was stamped a blue oval with this inscription: *Orbis Tertius*. (71)

That the number of pages is ‘1001’ implies a deliberate artifice in which the work itself explicitly alludes in numerical terms to another work of fascinating narrative, the *Thousand and One Nights*. The references before this to the night of nights provides another subtle way of insinuating that connection to literary rather than encyclopedic experience.

Missing references to places or dates of publication, and “una hoja de papel de seda que cubría una de las láminas en colores” (“onionskin page that covered one of the illustrations”), which bares the blue insignia, likewise emphasize the fragile existence of the work. The printed words themselves rest on a thinned out paper that partially obscures a color illustration that is only another layer of artifice. Like the mask behind the veil, the insignia folio of the encyclopedia itself presents an impression of appearance as entailing a succession of layers for which the ultimate ground is only another surface. Contrary to a sense of the weight and seriousness of that tome, both the fragility and translucence of the page on which the insignia rests convey the way appearance has become emptied out at the very moment when the encyclopedia would seem on the verge

of settling matters. Superficiality opens the text to artifice at the moment of structural resolution.

*Unhinging Appearance in the Theme of the Lost Beloved: Veiled Mirrors, Newspaper Portraits, and Billboards*

While the unreality of photographs figures into “Tlön,” in the vacation pictures that don’t quite confirm Ashe’s return trips to England, another story anticipates a new dramatization of appearance in more stark terms. In “Los espejos velados” (“Covered Mirrors”) one encounters a condensed version of an unconsummated love story of a kind that Borges returns to on at least two other occasions. The story it tells of a narrator’s impeded desire for a lost beloved forms part of the precondition to two stories that introduce photographic appearance, “El Zahir” (“The Zahir”) and “El Aleph” (“The Aleph”). In all three cases, a loose affiliation of elements links madness, appearance, and unrequited desire. Eroticism and loss become intricately entangled with appearance in a way that was not evident in the plot of “Tlön.”

With madness, each story portrays a character driven to extremes that come to displace the inertia of everyday reality. In “Espejos velados,” madness takes the beloved Julia. In “El Zahir” and “El Aleph,” the disruption of reality takes place around the narrator’s desire and wistfulness manifest around photographs of a now deceased beloved. Death changes little about how the narrator relates to his beloved via her photographic image. In both cases, photographs provide an occasion for increasingly pronounced non-attainment. Borges, the narrator in both stories, turns to a manic focus

on other appearances, on the heels of that first desire for a photographic appearance that never acquires a correspondence with a real figure within the story. Instead of meeting the real, he chases other appearances that intensify a sense of alienation in artifice as events ensue.

Unlike the duplications of mirrors, which create disorientating repetitions to convey a sense of folly in an appearance that will not be traversed, photographs occasionally serve as a contrast to unreality and serve to emphasize the vain attempt to establish a grounding sense of reality. That contrast sets the stage for a folly that drifts across associations of appearance, freed from the obligation to capture what seems out of reach in the beyond.

*“Veiled Mirrors”*

Before the folly of photographs, however, one finds an intermediate example that bridges the madness of the other two stories with the disorientation and duplication of mirrors, incorporating an echo of masking to unfold its own unreality. “Espejos velados,” (literally ‘veiled mirrors’) alludes in its very title to this saturated complexity of appearance. The term ‘velado’ links the story to “Hákim,” an association that is reinforced in the dread of mirrors that the narrator proclaims.

The story itself provides a brief recollection on the part of a narrator who recalls a childhood fear of mirrors and after one day relays this fear to a woman to whom he is drawn and feels a special affinity. He later learns that she has gone mad and covered all her mirrors in the belief that the narrator will appear in the mirrors in pursuit of her. In

very short form, the story touches upon a number of broad themes around the horror of mirrors. The most explicit of these is the idea that the image in a mirror may come alive or alternately create a prison for either the one who is surrounded by their spectral horror or for the one who is trapped within the mirror. A secondary consequence of this idea is suggested by Julia's seeing images of the narrator in the mirror and the idea that a mirror, after all, reflects what stands before it. That the narrator feels such affinity for her and is seen in her mirrors, would suggest most directly that he is a kind of double to her and/or that his attraction to her is in some ways an attraction to himself.

However, before one can take up any of these speculative possibilities, the narrator relates an iconoclastic anecdote that immediately complicates the task of interpreting mirrors and suggests once more that representation and appearance are at issue in distinctively aesthetic terms: "El Islam asevera que el día inapelable del Juicio, todo perpetrador de imagen de una cosa viviente resucitará con sus obras, y le será ordenado que las anime [...]" ("Espejos velados" 174; "Islam tells us that on the unappealable Day of Judgment, all who have perpetrated images of living things will reawaken with their works, and will be ordered to blow life into them," "Covered Mirrors" 297). The introductory anecdote says nothing of mirrors or of reflective surfaces, only of perpetrators of images. The anecdote also self-consciously introduces a reference to religious belief, once more linking the story to that other account of mirrors and veils, "Hákim."

The iconoclasm of the anecdote is also noteworthy. It criticizes a very particular aspect of the non-correspondence of reality with represented appearance: the difference between images of living things and living things themselves. Why does the story of a

young woman who has gone mad and covers all the mirrors in her house even begin with this seemingly academic observation on art? The remark introduces the alternative idea that mirrors present an image of the real in the manner that an artist perpetrates images of living things. Mirrors do not reflect or duplicate reality so much as generate it. This aesthetic view of the mirrored surface underlies its condemnation in the legend. That view becomes relevant to the story since it roughly parallels the role of the mirrors in Julia's house. The unsettlingly unreal image of the narrator stalking her is presented as a hallucination, but it also represents a departure into the aesthetic. That image is also the closest the story gets to breaking into fantasy, upon returning to the beastly threat intimated at the start of the story when the narrator remarked that he has discovered that "ese temor [de espejos] está, otra vez, prodigiosamente en el mundo" (174; "this horror [of mirrors] is monstrously abroad in the world again," 297).

### *The Veil of Detail*

Between the promise and the explanation of the nature of that horror that compels Julia to cover her mirrors, precise details serve to unsettle, rather than establish or clearly reveal a reality behind the narrator's account. The result is that one has only the representations of the narrator, now rendered suspiciously incomplete, even as a series of statements remains unusually precise. Thus, in rapid succession, one learns that the narrator met the grave young woman in 1927, that he first only knows her name and her voice over the telephone and then meets her in person on a corner at nightfall, that he feels a common bond between their ancestors and visits her in her family's large run-

down house where he would step out with her on walks in her neighborhood, “[d]e tarde—algunas contadas veces de noche [...]” (174; “[i]n the afternoons—only very rarely at night [...]” 297).

The certainty of these and other descriptive details provides an opening into an uncertainty that questions his account. The narrator never explains why he hears her voice before meeting her, even while he is precise on this point. In the same way, he discloses that he meets her first in person on a corner at nightfall, but later mentions that they go on walks regularly, but in the afternoons and only rarely at night. Thus while he relates the occurrence of their first meeting, he never explains how he went from a phone conversation to what looks like an illicit sojourn, or at least one that is not in keeping with the details that he later discloses in which their meetings are confined to her neighborhood by day and not street corners at night.

His description of Julia herself includes uneasy details, among these that she had “ojos alarmantes de grandes” (174; “alarmingly large” eyes, 297). The detail does not simply describe a physical attribute. It also clearly repeats the pattern of his fear before large mirrors and suggests that his alarm with her eyes is akin to his earlier mentioned fear. This resemblance could mean either that looking into her eyes entails a worry that he will see a disfigured reality, or that the source of concern before his original mirrors is not as he stated, but has something more to do with the unexplained intimacy he has with Julia.

Further complicating the light in which we could cast these suggestive personal details, he states that between them “no hubo amor ni ficción de amor” (“there was neither love itself nor the fiction of love”) but then remarks once more on the fear he



feels: “yo adivinaba en ella una intensidad que era del todo extraña a la erótica, y la temía” (174; “I sensed in her an intensity that was utterly unlike the intensity of eroticism, and I feared it” 298). The remark anticipates her later madness, but also draws attention to his earlier fear before large mirrors and the monstrosity that he promised at the start.

The disavowal also complicates the question of his attraction to her. He muddies the waters still more when he follows this immediately by explaining how he came to tell her of his fear of mirrors: “Es común referir a las mujeres, para intimar con ellas, rasgos verdaderos o apócrifos del pasado pueril; yo debí contarle una vez el de los espejos y dicté así, el 1928, una alucinación que iba a florecer el 1931” (174; “In order to forge an intimacy with women, one often tells them about true or apocryphal things that happened in one’s youth; I must have told her at some point about my horror of mirrors, and so in 1928 I must have planted the hallucination that was to flower in 1931” 298).<sup>29</sup> While he can pinpoint the dates for these events, the way he discusses them complicates the question of whether his role in them is not as he presents it. Is he trying to forge an intimacy with her, as he does with other women? Does he meet her on street corners or does he stick to daytime excursions? Does he feel a simple affinity for her or does he fear her and their affinity?

The thesis he eventually reveals, that he planted the seeds of her monstrous hallucination, is also suspect if one looks more closely. Her fear is not one of large mirrors that duplicate reality: “en su dormitorio los espejos están velados pues en ellos ve mi reflejo, usurpando el suyo, y tiembla y calla y dice que yo la persigo mágicamente”

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<sup>29</sup> Hurley translates “dicté” as “planted,” however, a more literal translation would be ‘dictated.’

(174; “in her room all the mirrors are covered, because she sees my reflection in them—usurping her own—and she trembles and cannot speak, and says that I am magically following her, watching her, stalking her” 298). Immediately, there is an apparent contradiction to the statement. How can it be that she cannot speak only to say that the narrator is magically pursuing her? The conjunction in such rapid succession suggests alarm but also provokes a measure of doubt. The disjuncture exposes the way the narrator is compromised in the account he gives.

Another incongruity arises from what Julia says that she sees and its relation to the promised monstrosity of mirrors that was introduced at the beginning of the story. While both her vision and the narrator’s fear at the start share in what they see (him), Julia’s fear is only related tangentially to what he described as being monstrous about mirrors when he said: “Temí, unas veces, que empezaran [los espejos] a divergir de la realidad; otras, ver desfigurado en ellos mi rostro por adversidades extrañas” (174; “I feared sometimes that [mirrors] would begin to veer off from reality; other times, that I would see my face in them disfigured by strange misfortunes” 297). Of course, her fear is not an anxiety about the welfare of his face and the misfortunes that may befall it. Instead, she shakes and is unable to speak because of a fear of the misfortune that may befall her in his pursuit (174; 298).

In the same manner, we cannot say that his fear has been imparted to her as a general fear of particular mirror-effects on an onlooker, since the young lady does not see her own face diverge from reality or misshapen by misfortunes. The narrator’s anxiety, then, is not that he has suggested a fear of mirrors altering an image of the onlooker in subtly disturbing ways, something that would present distortions for all, but rather that he

has suggested a horror of his own face appearing in mirrors: “Aciaga servidumbre la de mi cara, la de una de mis caras antiguas” (175; “What dreadful bondage, the bondage of my face—or one of my former faces” 298). The ambiguous servitude of the narrator’s face covers over this difference. The circumstance applies to both perspectives, since bondage could describe either his feeling in being trapped in the mirror or a feeling on her part of being made to serve his presence in the mirror.

The half-fulfillment of his promised horror with an even more uneasy one, along with the contradictions and gaps in his account, convey the idea that the narrative may not be as it seems to represent itself to the reader in the hands of a narrator that seems increasingly duplicitous. While the story is told from the perspective of one external to madness, the unreliability of the representations eventually allow Julia’s hallucinations to be on a par at least with the once staid claims made by the narrator and the story he does not quite reveal.

### *“El Zahir”*

Two other closely related stories add the theme of death to that of madness and unfulfilled desire: “El Zahir” and “El Aleph.” In both, the photographic image forms a place where settled and uneasy experiences of appearances compete. In “Zahir,” the unrequited object of the narrator’s affections is no longer ambiguously entangled with Julia, but consists in an admiration and fondness for Teodelina Villar. However, that story of unrequited desire that lingers after death is momentarily out of view. The story itself begins with a detailed description of the *zahir*. That description rapidly complicates

any clear sense of an object possessing finitely knowable specifications. As the narrator enumerates a chain of past certainties, he also raises questions about the basic significance of what a *zahir* is at all. Thus, the narrator, himself named Borges, tells us:

En Buenos Aires el Zahir es una moneda común, de veinte centavos; marcas de navajas o de cortaplumas rayan las letras N T y el número 2; 1929 es la fecha grabada en el anverso. (En Guzerat, a fines del siglo XVIII, un tigre fue Zahir; en Java, un ciego de la mezquita de Surakarta, a quien lapidaron los fieles; en Persia, un astrolabio que Nadir Shah hizo arrojar al fondo del mar; en las prisiones de Mahdí, hacia 1892, una pequeña brújula que Rudolf Carl von Slatin tocó, envuelto en un jirón de turbante; en la aljama de Córdoba, según Zotenberg, una veta en el mármol de uno de los mil doscientos pilares; en la judería de Tetuán, el fondo de un pozo.) (630)

In Buenos Aires the Zahir is a common twenty-centavo coin into which a razor or letter opener has scratched the letters *N T* and the number 2; the date stamped on the face is 1929. (In Gujarat, at the end of the eighteenth, the Zahir was a tiger; in Java it was a blind man in the Surakarta mosque, stoned by the faithful, in Persia, an astrolabe that Nadir Shah ordered thrown into the sea; in the prisons of Mahdi, in 1892, a small sailor's compass, wrapped in a shred of cloth from a turban, that Rudolf Karl von Slatin touched; in the synagogue in Córdoba, according to Zotenberg, a vein in the marble of one of the twelve hundred pillars; in the ghetto in Tetuán, the bottom of a well.) (242)

While there are clear indications (“el Zahir es [...] un tigre fue Zahir [...]”; “the Zahir is [...] the Zahir was a tiger [...]”), the mechanism by which a *zahir* manages to be all these things creates an initial vehicle of uncertainty within the narrative. Left to guess, one may speculate that with the exception of the present location, Buenos Aires, all the others emphasize the object's place in an Islamic geography that spans from southern Spain (“Córdoba”) and Morocco (“Tetuán”) to India (“Guzerat”) and Indonesia (“Java” and “Surakarta”).

In the march of unexplained certainties, there is a single instance of a framing that allows for the narrator to separate his own knowledge from the claims of a source: “según Zotenberg, una veta en el mármol de uno de los mil doscientos pilares [fue Zahir]” (630;

“according to Zotenberg, [the Zahir was] a vein in the marble of one of the twelve hundred pillars [...]” 242). The attribution may be a way to indicate a certain detachment from what seems like an overly fanciful claim, that the *zahir* would be not only objects and people (e.g., the blind man in a mosque), but also parts of objects (the vein in one of the twelve hundred marble pillars). Like someone retelling a tall tale, the attribution of an extravagant claim to someone else allows the speaker to momentarily emphasize her or his own reliability.

The story’s return to a posture of descriptive realism returns by locating definite times and places tied to an external reality: “Hoy es el 13 de noviembre; el día 7 de junio, a la madrugada, llegó a mis manos el Zahir; no soy el que era entonces pero aún me es dado recordar, y acaso referir, lo ocurrido. Aún, siquiera parcialmente, soy Borges” (630; “Today is the thirteenth of November; last June 7, at dawn, the *zahir* came into my hands; I am not the man I was then, but I am still able to recall, and perhaps recount, what happened. I am still, albeit only partially, Borges” 242). Whereas in “Espejos velados” the threat of mirrors and the contradictory details about the narrator’s relationship with Julia used details to veil, it is now the lingering question of what the *zahir* is that complicates any sense of simplicity in the immediate disclosure of facts. The possibility that the narrator should become only partially Borges, suggests a candid disclosure of artifice that also highlights the unreal effect of the object.

*The Substitutions of Desire: from Teodelina Villar to the Zahir*

When the narrator turns to the story of the events that lead to his possession of the *zahir*, he turns to another proliferating entity that holds a certain identifiable unity and sway over him. So it is that he reveals that his own story begins with the death of a beloved and the proliferation of her appearance in photographic form: “El 6 de junio murió Teodelina Villar. Sus retratos, hacia 1930, obstruían las revistas mundanas” (630; “On June 6, Teodelina Villar died. Back in 1930, photographs of her had littered the pages of worldly magazines [...]” 242).<sup>30</sup> Among the attributes of Teodelina Villar is her beauty and her rigorous adherence to fashion (630; 242). Both fascinate the narrator who describes her labors in the latter regard as more challenging than the observances of religious beliefs since “las normas de su credo no eran eternas, sino que se plegaban a los azares de París o de Hollywood” (630; “the laws of her creed were not eternal, but sensitive to the whims of Paris and Hollywood” 243). The result is that she shows herself “en lugares ortodoxos, a la hora ortodoxa, con atributos ortodoxos, con desgano ortodoxo, pero el desgano, los atributos, la hora y los lugares caducaban casi inmediatamente [...]” (630; “orthodox places, at the orthodox hour, with orthodox adornments, and with orthodox world-weariness, but the world-weariness, the adornments, the hour, and the places would almost immediately pass out of fashion [...]” 243).

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<sup>30</sup> Here Hurley interprets “obstruían” (‘obstructed’) as “littered.” While his translation conveys much the same sense of an abundance that may annoy, there is a difference of emphasis that is worth paying attention to in the present context. For to say that her image ‘obstructs’ is to say something about the dominance of appearance, whereas to say that it is ‘littered’ emphasizes to a greater degree what is discarded—detritus in print.

The transformations and transports of Teodelina Villar recall the metamorphoses of the *zahir* itself. The narrator's passion and disclosure shortly later that "movido por la más sincera de las pasiones argentinas, el esnobismo, yo estaba enamorado de ella" (631; "moved by the sincerest of Argentine passions—snobbery—I was in love with her [...]") (243), as well as his disclosure that he grieved for her loss, seem to provide a prologue to the *zahir*'s effects on him. The superficiality of Teodelina Villar and of his contact with her, which is confined to his following of her as a celebrity and no direct interaction, is reshaped when the *zahir* comes into his possession after her wake. The *zahir*'s appearance is the successor to the fascinating celebrity of Teodelina Villar in photographs.

The exchange between Teodelina Villar and the *zahir* takes place when a coin comes into the narrator's possession. The inherent symbolism of currency suggests already that it stands for and is exchanged for other things than itself. That symbolism already fits with the *zahir*'s own transformations, Villar's vogues, and the trade of one fascinating appearance for another in the narrator's thoughts. Indeed it is the coin's status as a symbol rather than a token/voucher (the function it has in the bar transaction that brings it into his possession) that suggests the idea of a chain of objects with no history being bound together by some unity of existence in the imagination:

Pensé en el óbolo de Caronte; en el óbolo que pidió Belisario; en los treinta dineros de Judas; en las dracmas de la cortesana Laís; en la Antigua moneda que ofreció uno de los durmientes de Éfeso; en las claras monedas del hechicero de *Las mil y una noches*, que después eran círculos de papel; [...] el pensamiento de que toda moneda permite esas ilustres connotaciones me pareció de vasta, aunque inexplicable, importancia. (632)

I thought of Charon's obolus; the alms that Belisarius went about begging for; Judas' thirty pieces of silver; the drachmas of the courtesan Laís; the ancient coin proffered by one of the Ephesian sleepers; the bright coins of

the wizard in the *1001 Nights*, which turned into disks of paper; [...] the thought that in any coin one may read those famous connotations seemed to me of vast, inexplicable importance. (244)

What is strange is that this would indeed be important for someone in reading, but not necessarily to the reality of coins in one's hand. The observation also proposes a remarkable unreality, since no coin is ever fully itself and not a symbol of any in a long series of other coins. At one level, this suggests the idea of aesthetic artifices being determinative of reality. On another level, the statement has an even more radical implication: no coin, even those of history or fable, is ever more than a refraction of other coins, none of which ever point to a real coin of the moment that exists apart from art.

The narrator at this moment supplants reading and the journey of reflection that art takes him on for the story of the coin and its details. Rather than a list of dates and places, his search to understand his illness, which consists of being unable to sleep or think of other things than the coin, leads him deeper into anecdotal narratives. When he strikes upon an answer, it too is presented in text:

En aquel libro estaba declarado mi mal. [...] *Zahir* en árabe, quiere decir notorio, visible; [...] la plebe, en tierras musulmanas, lo dice de "los seres o cosas que tienen la terrible virtud de ser inolvidables y cuya imagen acaba por enloquecer a la gente". (634)

Between the covers of the book was a description of my illness. [...] In Arabic, '*zahir*' means visible, manifest, evident; [...] in Muslim countries, the masses use the word for "being or things which have the terrible power to be unforgettable, and whose image eventually drives people mad." (246)

Thus we learn that he does not even know to call it a '*zahir*' until this late moment.

When he referred to the *zahir* coming into his possession, what looked to be a clear indication at the start is now shown to be speculation built on the representations of others. The artifice of his diagnosis is accentuated by the way he selectively extracts and



adorns his thought with a “superstition” of “the masses.” The *zahir*, then, looks to be the name he gives for a thing to which he has become attached and contemplates, but one that is taken to possess the quality of drawing that attachment differently across time and in different places. The *zahir* is in this sense aesthetic, an affect experienced in a person but attributed to the object before which the person possesses that feeling. The *zahir* is appearance, but in the text of the story it is not an appearance that is linked to an invisible entity hidden behind it, but to other appearances, its previous images remain inaccessible beyond that surface, like the reality of the face of Teodelina Villar before is to the narrator who has only photographs that are splashed on the covers of magazines after her death.

*Partial Realities and Loose Affiliations: Borges and Julita Villar.*

The unreality of Borges is re-affirmed when the Borges narrator very briefly observes that one of the sources in the book, Meadows Taylor, relates how the *zahir* was once “un profeta del Jorasán, que usaba un velo recamado de piedras o una máscara de oro” (635; “a prophet from Khorasan who wore a veil spangled with precious stones or a mask of gold” 247). The link to his earlier story “Hákim,” creates a curious paradox. Just as in “Tlön,” one must question why the narrator does not object or refer to his earlier story, if he is Borges the author of that other story. What is particularly troubling at this juncture is that Borges’ belief in the *zahir* as a narrator runs against something about which Borges as the author of his earlier stories must know that some of his readers are aware: that the “prophet from Khorasan” charms but does not drive anyone mad with

his appearance before his downfall. Within the story this should provide an objection to the narrator's belief in the *zahir*'s potency or a revision of his recollection of that earlier history that he investigated. That it prompts no such response is a reminder that the fiction of Borges as a narrator only partially corresponds to an external reality of Borges as an author of fictions.

The story also links itself to "Espejos velados" in an even more suggestive fashion, only to introduce a subtle distortion into the parallel. Just as the face of that story's narrator drives Julia mad, the narrator learns the *zahir* refers to "los seres o cosas [...] cuya imagen acaba por enloquecer a la gente" (634; "beings or things [...] whose image eventually drives people mad" 246). He constructs a second even more explicit parallel when he notes later that the younger sister of Teodelina, who shares a name and fate with the Julia of "Espejos velados," has gone mad. We learn this when Borges asks after Teodelina's sister and a friend responds: "—Pobre Julita, se había puesto rarísima y la internaron en el Bosch. Sigue dele temando con la moneda, idéntica al *chauffeur* de Morena Sackmann" (635; "'Poor Julita,' [...] 'she's become so odd. She's been put into Bosch. [...] She's still going on and on about that coin, just like Morena Sackmann's chauffeur" 248). Julia's mirror madness is exchanged for Julita's madness for an unreal coin. However, the recurrence of the name and the affliction float in a loose affiliation. Both the re-appearance of Hákim and of Julia invite a reader to search in other stories for correspondences that would settle the restlessness prompted by this recollection, only to have the details of each story deny such a settling of experience. The story of Hákim contradicts this signal of correspondence, and the source of Julia's fear in "Espejos velados" is the face of the narrator not a coin.

In a last attempt to get behind appearance, the narrator contemplates wearing away the image of the coin in his mind (636; 249). In this way, he attempts to get in touch with a reality beyond appearance, but the real Borges, the real Teodelina Villar, and the real deity will always be impeded by a succession of unrealities. Thus, the unattainable reality represented by the photographs of the beloved after death, provides a template for the unreachable final reality of the *zahir* coin as much as the partial Borges. In “Zahir,” the photograph provides intimacy, but it also empties out appearance of its grounding substance, introducing the alternative of a new drift.

*“El Aleph”*

In “El Aleph,” Borges’ deceased beloved is Beatriz Viterbo. Once more the story begins with the theme of photographs and loss. Borges recalls a feeling of sadness when witnessing a billboard advertisement of Beatriz being taken down: “Cambiará el universo pero yo no, pensé con melancólica vanidad” (658; “*The universe may change but I shall not, thought I with melancholy vanity*” 274). The moment captures the tension between a changing world and his desire to conserve an image of the past. He then recalls images of Beatriz from the past that adorn her family’s home and the unfolding occasions he has to revisit those frozen moments. Other fixed facts co-mingle with instability in details of the story. In this way, he relates that the billboard is in *Plaza Constitución*, and that he feels a loss when he realizes that the universe is moving on from his beloved (658; 274). He describes that feeling of drift as arising when he notices how the *Plaza*’s billboards display new advertisements. Poignancy, however, does not breed precision. For while

he recalls these details and others throughout, the image of the new cigarette advertisement remains indeterminate for the narrator: “[...] no sé qué aviso de cigarillos rubios” (658; ‘some sort of advertisement for blonde cigarettes’).<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in the billboard itself we find that unlike the visible finality that an individual photograph might provide, the advertised image changes and remains in his recollection only loosely. As such, the state of billboard displays at the beginning prefigures the way the narrator will lose his grasp of definite appearance at the end. As a consequence, that unreality seems fatalistically established early on.

*Desirable Appearance: the Wall of Photographs*

Fixed details return once more when he recalls a posthumous series of annual visits to Beatriz’s family home on her birthday anniversary, April 30<sup>th</sup>. In the visits, details relating to his beloved provide not only the clarity of precision but also the comfort of constancy against the changing commercial culture seen on the indistinct billboard. His visits, which bring him into contact with her surviving father and a first cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, mark a return to ordered custom. It is at this point that

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<sup>31</sup> Hurley translates this more loosely than I would like, as “some cigarette or other (*blondes*, I believe they were) [...]”; “The Aleph” 274. This rendition gives the impression that it is the narrator’s memory about the cigarettes that is uncertain. However, the indeterminacy in Spanish does not attach to memory generally, but to the specific billboard announcement or ‘*aviso*.’ There is also no speculative parenthetical emendation of what kind of cigarettes are on the billboard (i.e., “*blondes*, I believe”). In fact, the narrator knows that they are ‘cigarillos rubios’ (‘blondes’ or ‘blonde cigarettes’), and is uncertain only about the billboard image. For the present analysis this matters more than it might otherwise, since what is at issue here is the condition of appearance, as conveyed by the billboard. For this reason, I’ve provided a more literal translation above.

he returns not only to Beatriz on the billboard of his memory, but to photographs of her.

With each visit, he relives that constancy as though it were something new:

[...] de nuevo estudiaría las circunstancias de sus muchos retratos. Beatriz Viterbo, de perfil, en colores; Beatriz, con antifaz, en los carnavales de 1921; la primera comunión de Beatriz; Beatriz, el día de su boda con Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz, poco después del divorcio, en un almuerzo del Club Hípico; Beatriz, en Guilmes, con Delia San Marco Porcel y Carlos Argentino; Beatriz, con el pekinés que le regaló Villegas Haedo; Beatriz, de frente y de tres cuartos, sonriendo, la mano en el mentón [...]. (658)

[...] once again I would study the details of the many photographs and the portraits of her: Beatriz Viterbo, in color; Beatriz in a mask at the Carnival of 1921; Beatriz' first communion; Beatriz on the day of her wedding to Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz shortly after the divorce, lunching at the Jockey Club; Beatriz in Quilmes with Delia San Marco Porcel and Carlos Argentino; Beatriz with the Pekinese that had been a gift from Villegas Haedo; Beatriz in full-front and in three-quarters view, smiling, her hand on her chin [...]. (274-5)

The wall of photographs provides more than a comfortably definite mode of representation. Their rapid succession implicates them in a mode of storytelling with certain details that are always visibly available to the narrator. In this way, they disclose details of her past to the audience while the narrator invariably reveals his desire. His interest in her marriage, divorce, the gifts of others, and views of her in color, full-body and three-quarter angled portraits, smiling and finally in a pose with her hand on her chin all emphasize this aspect of the photographs.

At the same time, there is the seed of something else. The hand on chin photograph along with the earlier Carnival mask introduces some of the artifice that the description of the other photographs neglects in seeming to document episodes from Beatriz' life or Borges' interest in certain aspects of that life. So while the portraits that capture her at different angles seem to document her form, and the pictures from communion, marriage and after the divorce document stages in her life, the self-

conscious pose and the hint of spontaneous frivolity in carnival masks introduces an uncertainty about the simple appearance of facts. They also remind one that Beatriz is at once invented or costumed for all the photographs.

Borges returns once more to certainty and death when he observes that “Beatriz Viterbo murió en 1929; desde entonces, no dejé pasar un 30 de abril sin volver a su casa” (659; “Beatriz Viterbo died in 1929; since then, I have not allowed an April 30<sup>th</sup> to pass without returning to her house” 275).<sup>32</sup> The precision of his account becomes even more pronounced as he continues, describing the time of his arrival and the duration of his stay. He writes: “Yo solía llegar a las siete y cuarto y quedarme unos veinticinco minutos; cada año aparecía un poco más tarde y me quedaba un rato más; en 1933, una lluvia torrencial me favoreció: tuvieron que invitarme a comer” (659; “That first time, I arrived at seven fifteen and stayed for about twenty-five minutes; each year I would turn up a little earlier and stay a little longer; in 1933 a downpour came to my aid; they were forced to ask me to dinner” 275). The purpose, or at least the driving force for his return to the house and the photographs is reinforced later when the wooing of Beatriz and the trip to her photographic images after her death reaches even later into the night of her birthday:

[...] en 1934, aparecí, ya dadas las ocho, con un alfajor santafecino; con toda naturalidad me quedé a comer. Así en aniversarios melancólicos y vanamente eróticos, recibí las graduales confianzas de Carlos Argentino Daneri. (659)

[...] in 1934 I turned up a few minutes after eight with a lovely confection from Santa Fe; it was perfectly natural that I should stay for dinner. And so it was that on those melancholy and vainly erotic anniversaries I came to receive the gradual confidences of Carlos Argentino Daneri. (275)

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<sup>32</sup> Once more, precision breeds unreality. The year of her death, 1929, is also the year that is stamped on the twenty-centavo coin in “El Zahir.” That detail and the narrator’s obsession with her image prompt a consideration of who speaks when Borges narrates this or his other tales.

Like a suitor, Borges seems to celebrate having found an excuse to stay longer at Beatriz' house, even as paradoxically he acknowledges that it is all a "melancholy and vainly erotic" event. While standing in for Beatriz, or accidentally standing nearby during Borges' visits, Daneri is increasingly loathed by the narrator. Borges proceeds to ridicule Daneri with as much passion as he dedicated to Beatriz' beauty. He writes that Daneri holds a subordinate position "en una biblioteca ilegible" ("in an illegible library") and that "es autoritario, pero también es ineficaz," ("he is authoritarian though also ineffectual") adding finally that "[s]u actividad mental es continua, apasionada, versátil y del todo insignificante" (659; "[h]is mental activity is constant, passionate, versatile, and utterly insignificant" 275). The conversations and annoyances of Daneri become an occasion for the narrator to exercise his wit in a series of semi-comic circumstances where before he presented only the depressive topics of death, photographs that preserved the past, and a vain eroticism.

#### *Daneri and the Comic Rupture of Photographic Ideals*

The change of tempo begins in a ridiculousness that grows out of the anniversary visits. Borges returns for Beatriz but must contend with the frustrations of Daneri. The nostalgic pilgrimage to the photographs on the wall at first overpowers his distaste for Daneri, who receives praise only when he, like the images, serves as an appearance that allows Borges to recall Beatriz: "Tiene (como Beatriz) grandes y afiladas manos hermosas" (659; "He has (as Beatriz did) large, beautiful, slender hands" 275). While Daneri's hands may provide a promise of happiness, the attribution also momentarily

clouds the earlier romantic ideal of Beatriz. Just as one might wonder whether Daneri is as ineffectual to Borges as he says, one may also begin to question whether Beatriz is all beautiful hands (i.e., an appearance of beauty). Unlike Teodelina Villar, little is said of her apart from her photogenic appeal. Indeed, it is the surface definition of Beatriz that allows for the hands of Daneri to do something momentarily for Borges other than toil at useless things that irritate the narrator.

The narrator's efforts at presenting the absurdity of his visits persists when he continues to make Daneri the object of ridicule, remarking that his ideas on the state of modern man are "ineptas" ("witless") and that his presentation is "tan pomposa y tan vasta" (659; "so sweeping and pompous" 276) that he immediately thought of literature and inquires teasingly why Daneri has not written something about all this (660; 276). In this way, the romantic certainty of his former visits and the image of Beatriz overlap with Daneri and become intermingled with a reality that falls comically short of his former sentimental ideals. For the narrator, Daneri is consciously juxtaposed with the nostalgically unaltered satisfaction that he seeks in his regular return to the images of Beatriz. With this shift in the story, a tone of irony replaces a discourse steeped in reverential nostalgia.

At first, then, the new story of Daneri becomes a comic version of the story of Beatriz. Whereas Beatriz provided beauty, Daneri's poetry provides a show in which the poet's talents lie not in poetry but in "la invención de razones para que la poesía fuera admirable" (661; "the invention of reasons for accounting the poetry admirable" 277). Daneri's poetry, furthermore, seeks to capture pictures of places, something we later



learn is a function of the visions he has of the *aleph* in his basement. Before this revelation, however, there is only the absurdity of his poetry for the narrator:

Éste se proponía versificar toda la redondez del planeta; en 1941 ya había despachado unas hectares del Estado de Queensland, más de un kilómetro del curso comercio de la parroquia de la Concepción, la quinta de Mariana Cambaceres de Alvear en la calle Once de Setiembre, en Belgrano, y un establecimiento de baños turcos no lejos del acreditado acuario de Brighton. (661)

He proposed to versify the entire planet; by 1941 he had already dispatched several hectares of the state of Queensland, more than a kilometer of the course of the Ob, a gas works north of Veracruz, the leading commercial establishments in the parish of Concepción, Mariana Cambaceres de Alvear's villa on Calle Once de Setiembre in Belgrano, and a Turkish bath not far from the famed Brighton Aquarium. (277)

The list has a touch of the absurd, as it presents Daneri's poetry conquering the world with its tedium.<sup>33</sup> The narrator seems almost delighted at his own invention in making fun of that versification. At the same time, in negative form, the list hearkens back to the photographs that span time but focus on the *topoi* of Beatriz. Daneri's poetry, however, attempts to capture and enclose visions of the world in a particularly uninspiring fashion.

That the narrator proceeds to quote, describe and otherwise evoke a series of recurring readings to which Daneri subjects him, only adds to the ironic banality of the scenes that contrast with the romantically earnest first portion of the story. In this second stretch, the narrator casts himself as being subjected to the ridiculousness of long readings from Daneri, perhaps eliciting a kind of humorous sympathy with the fate of his once solemn anniversaries.

The comically tinged situation reaches its height when Daneri seems on the verge of asking Borges to write a foreword to a book of poetry (663; 279). Instead, Daneri

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<sup>33</sup> Worth noting also is the scorn attached to the humor, as when he refers to Daneri as “[é]ste” at the start, which could be translated roughly as “this guy.”

ineptly asks the narrator to write to a friend and request that he write the foreword. When the narrator agrees but opts not to follow through on the request, he proceeds to dodge

Daneri, growing particularly restless:

A partir del viernes a primera hora, empezó a inquietarme el teléfono. Me indignaba que ese instrumento, que algún día produjo la irrecuperable voz de Beatriz, pudiera rebajarse a receptáculo de las inútiles y quizá coléricas quejas de ese engañado Carlos Argentino Daneri. (663)

From early Friday morning on, the telephone was a constant source of anxiety. I was indignant that this instrument from which Beatriz' irrecoverable voice had once emerged might now be reduced to transmitting the futile and perhaps angry complaints of that self-deluding Carlos Argentino Daneri. (280)

Daneri disrupts the image of Beatriz, but the comic episode of Daneri nagging also finally seems to fully disrupt any remnants of reverence in the discourse with which the narrator first enshrouded Beatriz, her home, and Daneri's hands.

#### *A View from the Basement*

The story begins to change its tone one last time when Daneri calls Borges to talk about the demolition of his home and not to nag him. Borges now worries that Daneri's delusional grandeur has been replaced by delirium. Daneri's objections apparently are not a matter of nostalgia or the desire to preserve certainty and facts but that such an act will destroy the *aleph* in his basement which is the source of the fluid images and visions of the world upon which he bases his poetry. Seeming madness in Daneri gives way to a mad idea in the narrative: that such a place exists and that from Daneri's basement, at just the right angle, one might see visions of the world in an *aleph*.

The narrator's incredulity slides into curiosity and eventually into belief in that unhinged version of the story's reality that opens up anew in the second part of the story. In this way, the narrator begins by remarking after Daneri's disclosure of the *aleph*: "me asombró no haber comprendido hasta ese momento que Carlos Argentino era un loco. [...] La locura de Carlos Argentino me colmó de maligna felicidad; íntimamente, siempre nos habíamos detestado" (665; "I was amazed that I hadn't realized until that moment that Carlos Argentino was a madman [...] Carlos Argentino's madness filled me with malign happiness; deep down, we had always detested one another," 281). To revel in that madness, he visits Daneri to make a show of seeing the *aleph*. Following Daneri's instructions, the peril of Borges' action dawns on him only after he is in Daneri's basement: "Súbitamente comprendí mi peligro: me había dejado soterrar por un loco" (666; "suddenly I realized the danger I was in, I had allowed myself to be locked underground by a madman," 282). After contemplating whether Daneri may have poisoned him with a brandy on his arrival to cover up his delusion, Borges closes his eyes and opens them again and sees the *aleph* for himself (666; 282).

Once more, a series of images appear before his sight, but all overlap with each other in a single moment. The experience, contrasts to the photographs on the wall and the poetry of Daneri. Significantly, he is no longer trapped by the pictures of Beatriz and retreating to the comfort of stasis in a changing world, since the world is never captured by a single image: "En ese instante gigantesco, he visto millones de actos deleitables o atroces; [...] todos ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo [...]" (666; "In that unbounded moment, I saw millions of delightful and horrible acts; [...] all occupied the

same point without superposition and without transparency. What my eyes saw was *simultaneous*; what I shall write is *successive* [...],” translator’s emphasis, 282-3).

Unlike the other succession of images, representations that document in photographs and in bad poetry, the visions of the narrator in the long series of images he now describes in the basement include an interaction that only simmered beneath the surface in his desire for Beatriz when reviewing pictures on the wall. Thus, toward the end of a long list, he writes: “[...] vi mi cara y mis vísceras, vi tu cara, y sentí vértigo y lloré [...]” (667; “[I] saw my face and my viscera, saw your face, and I felt dizzy, and I wept [...]” 284). From the vantage point of the love story, “vi tu cara” (“[I] saw your face”) would seem to be a slip into addressing some manifestation of Beatriz. However, earlier in the long list he describes seeing Beatriz’s remains (667; 283), and does not do so by referring to these as the addressee’s remains. As such it would seem that the second person indicates another addressee than Beatriz—one to whom the narrator describes this vision: an unnamed figure that could be anyone but is most certainly also the reader.

The hyper-semous moment of an unreal vision overlapping impossibly with other sights marks a fundamental shift, both in the inclusion of a second person address but also in the scrupulously undetermined image that the term ‘you’ provides. The photographs on the wall fall to Daneri’s comically bad versification of appearance, which in turn finally also falls to the narrator’s prose accounts of an unreal vision in the basement. The outcome builds ultimately toward fundamentally undermining the stability longed for in photographs that no longer sufficiently capture an experience of appearance—an experience that now looks complexly ambiguous and barely describable.

Just as “El Zahir” concluded with a contemplation of reaching the truth behind appearance, “El Aleph” includes its own vain attempt to find the real *aleph*, when the narrator discloses that he believes that even that unreal vision which a succession of photographs and verbal art are unable to capture was “un falso Aleph” (669; “a false Aleph” 285). This proposition also remains uncertain, since he later doubts even the existence of a true *aleph* (669; 286). He concludes by observing how his once definite visions of Beatriz have changed to something different: “yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz” (669; “I myself am distorting and losing, through the tragic erosion of the years, the features of Beatriz” 286). As in “Zahir,” the once solid photographic image of the beloved is replaced by other visions. Once more there is an image of erosion, albeit now in the features of Beatriz, whereas in “Zahir” it was the hope that the narrator would be able to wear away his image of the coin that had been exchanged for Teodelina Villar (636; 249). Photographs and anniversaries are no longer able to preserve the reality of Beatriz’s face for the narrator, so that they are wiped from his memory regardless of whether the world changes and bulletin boards replace her image with new advertisements.

“Aleph” presents photographs contrasting to uncertain malleable realities. First suggestive scenes, like those of the carnival mask and the hand on chin artifice, open up an uncertainty relative to a documentary function. The comedies of Daneri and his poetry eventually come to loosen the hold of that ideal, then Daneri’s madness and the mad sights of an *aleph* undo the visual force of that past image of the beloved. Finally, the ambiguously true or false nature of the images that the *aleph* presents provides an uncertainty that corresponds to a new doubt about the photogenic reality of Beatriz in his

imagination. Photographs no longer capture an image of a past reality that could please or compete in any way with the succession of beatific appearances in dark.

#### 2.4 Conclusion: The Art of the Superficial

With each story and each object of appearance we may track a process of cultivated superficiality. Thus, the mask begins as something that covers a seeming truth behind it that will be revealed. However, the function of the mask in “Hákim” shifts at the end when the prophet removes a veil to reveal a disfigured face. That face, while providing a revelation, also hints at the complication of getting beyond appearance since the prophet’s face is not only white like the veil he wore before, but disfigured from its original visage. The white veil is rent to reveal his leprosy, but that leprosy will never be removed. Doubt further mingles with that impossibility in the story itself as a self-conscious presentation that will not allow an unmasking or unveiling of the truth. The narrator’s own self-correction and contradiction of later details suggests that the story itself, like the protagonist will never be denuded fully.

In “Impostor inverosímil” we witness the crisis brought on by appearance as elaborated in an imposture that the impostor himself eventually adopts as real alongside his own previous identities. Rather than uncertainty in layering, it is the continual shifting of these masks (Orton/Castro/Tichborne) that eventually undermines any sense that there is a knowable essence that is not a function of these shifts. The only place of knowing is provisional and in the moment of the fictional presentation, emptied of any sense of originating in an essential substance.

The pattern of masked follies is notable in momentarily offering a sense of certainty before layering or substitution creates doubt about what seemed to be revealed. The follies of mirrors, by contrast, seem to display an unadorned direct truth only to complicate the singular relation between appearance and reality by offering a saturation of appearances. In “Tlön” we see this in the multiplications of quotes about mirrors as well as in the way this is complicated by the presence of that same quote in the story of the masked prophet. Were the Borges narrator that appears in “Tlön” equivalent to the author of the earlier story, he would not be surprised to hear a friend recite a quote he had already used in “Hákim.” Likewise, it is the very lack of a correspondence between the Borges of the story and the Borges who wrote the other story that creates the need to search for a quote that eventually leads to the discovery of the fictional encyclopedia.

The encyclopedia itself in “Tlön” becomes a kind of oversaturated place, converging with the mirror’s duplications. Borges and Bioy Casares search through multiple copies until they find one that displays the fictional entry. Eventually the encyclopedia entry captures the interest of the general public so widely that the spectral world mixes with and replaces the reality that once was seen to precede it but which is increasingly forgotten.

A second mirror story marks a transition from the mirror follies of “Tlön” toward the follies that gain prominence in relation to photographs. The disorientation of mirrors in “Espejos velados” shares something with the replications of “Tlön,” but it also introduces a theme that gains prominence in photographs: madness and the lost beloved. The story creates duplication between the narrator and his disavowed love interest, but it does so in such a way as to create a measure of alarm about his role in her calamities. Is

he haunting her in her mirrors? Is his bond an affinity or an obsession? These doubts overwhelm the stated information to complicate the medium of its presentation. The central thesis of the story, that the man has suggested the idea Julia now hallucinates, no longer holds. Julia does not see a duplication of reality (unless he is her double), but is instead afflicted by seeing a former image of the man in her mirror.

The story's account of being trapped in the past in a framed appearance links it to the initial effect of photography in two stories of fantastic objects. In the stories of the *zahir* and the *aleph*, then, we find an account not of photographs that generate folly—as was the role of masks and mirrors proper—but of an object that is the measure of the pressures of a folly of appearance that arises from other spectral objects and increasingly erodes the ability of photographs to capture and document a memory that still speaks to the protagonists of each story. The folly of appearance is measured by what photographs are no longer able to retain. The stories, then, both chart a trajectory from that initial captive photographic effect to a moment when the photograph no longer speaks to new spectral fascinations.

The follies of Borges redefine the usefulness of a kind of aesthetic convention. In these follies of appearance it is no longer prudent to accept representations as providing the illusions of access to a stable reality. Instead, cleverness resides in remaining astute to the complications of appearance. That perspective is informed by the privilege Borges gives to appearance over what lies beyond it. While Nietzsche presents the metaphysical aspect of that reversal in his conception of folly that is linked to an art of the surface, Borges applies the shift from essence to appearance toward re-defining orthodoxies in reading short fiction. This use of folly to redefine an accepted wisdom is part of a



longstanding rhetorical strategy. To some extent, it will factor into the follies that I examine relative to works by Cabrera Infante and Cortázar. However, for Borges, one of the distinctive qualities of this folly is its way of removing the anchoring of appearance in a perceived material realm beyond the surface.

By their very conceptualization, surfaces tend to imply a sense of something else (i.e., a not-surface). However, what is remarkable in the play the stories unfold is the movement in appearance that obstructs access to that beyond. One consequence of this is a distinct sense of the disembodied quality to such carefully superficial depictions. This favor of the surface over a fleshy reality contrasts sharply with Cabrera Infante's follies in which the aim is precisely to evoke a body where it can no longer be found: in the memory of a vanished pre-revolutionary period. Later we will see that Cortázar's mad follies may resemble those of Borges to a limited extent (e.g., in the confusion they employ), but they do not do so from a play of appearance so much as from the shambles that ensue when disorder and alternatives to rationality reign in a strategy of *folie*.

What we miss if we concentrate on Borges as the progenitor of games of purpose, is how the texts are able to cultivate a superficiality that destabilizes substance. We see this with all three objects of appearance. With each object we may track how the reader faces a text that can be unabashedly superficial in its representations. Death, madness, or disguised eroticism becomes entangled with modes of evoking the surface. Objects of appearance are continually used to mediate grave themes and alter their reception. That death should be something that presents a setting for relating to appearance and not an occasion for morbid or metaphysical contemplation of the after-life, makes it more unreal. That madness should be a hallucination capable of altering what is seen in

mirrors, rather than a fundamental break with reason, likewise, casts it in a different light. Finally, that eroticism should be either hinted at or complicated in relation to indirect details of appearance or the way a narrator's eye wanders across the surface of things, lends a certain pictorial distance to desire.

By following these follies of appearance in relation to masks, mirrors, and photographs, we have been able to observe how Borges draws on what seems at times incredibly grim and even serious. However, seriousness in these cases should be seen alongside the effort to cultivate a kind of superficial experience in what he describes as fiction that is pictorial rather than psychological. We should also not lose track of the potential mischief in any seriousness, given the lessons of the put-on and the uncertainty that it breeds. Borges' follies of appearance, then, restrict us from giving over fully to the serious: death, fraud, or madness, may all inevitably become susceptible to a certain frivolity.

Chapter 3: Recovering Laughter: Corporeal Follies in Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres* (*Three Trapped Tigers*)

Y trató de imaginar cómo se vería la luz de una vela cuando está apagada.<sup>34</sup>

... And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out.<sup>35</sup>

[Folly] has the negative element of debasement and destruction (the only vestige now is the use of "fool" as a pejorative) and the positive element of renewal and truth. (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 260)

Loss and restoration are crucial to both Cabrera Infante's novel and Bakhtin's analysis of folly. In Cabrera Infante's novel, *Tres tristes tigres* (*Three Trapped Tigers*), this concern is plain enough in the epigraph from Lewis Carroll that the text employs to initiate a novel filled with Cuban idiom, fragments of life in the pre-revolutionary period, and extended sequences that explore different aspects of *la farándula*, or the nightscape of the capital. In all these moments, the work evokes a sense of a time and place that are gone. Yet, one of the most striking features of this portrait is the sheer absence of melancholy and the great abundance of folly and laughter that characterize the pursuit of what is essentially a nostalgic project. Indeed, that tendency toward the merriment of folly is present throughout. The novel refuses to take things too seriously, whether it is in its own experimentation with literary forms, games between characters, as well as a bevy of puns, jokes, and all manner of other improprieties.<sup>36</sup> It is in this surprising use of folly,

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<sup>34</sup> Cabrera Infante, *Tres tristes tigres*. The epigraph appears in Spanish at the start of the novel. It is a translation of a phrase in English by Lewis Carroll.

<sup>35</sup> Cabrera Infante, *Three Trapped Tigers*. The English translation provides Carroll's original phrasing.

<sup>36</sup> The mode of 'not taking anything seriously' ("no tomar nada en serio"), characterizes a longstanding tradition of Cuban discourse that Jorge Mañach famously discusses in his

then, that the novel invites its reader to consider the paradox described by the epigraph: imagining what the flame looks like once the candle has been put out.

For Bakhtin, in the midst of a critical inquiry into the lower material realm, recovering a sense of laughter from the past is at the heart of defining the plenitude he argues should characterize our understanding of folly in Rabelais. The history of laughter he traces is required precisely because we have lost our grasp of the sensibilities that once ran rampant in Rabelais' work. Bakhtin, therefore, sets out to recover that plenitude by theorizing folly's fuller capacity to convey both "debasement and destruction" as well as "renewal and truth" (260).

Given this shared concern with recovery and loss in the midst of laughter, it is fitting that Bakhtin's demarcation of an alternative to satirical laughter in the follies of the lower material realm should resonate with Cabrera Infante's novel. The association between Cabrera Infante's novel and Bakhtin's theories is not an altogether new avenue of inquiry. Ardis Nelson, for example, links *Tres tristes tigres* to Bakhtin and notes the rise of the Bakhtinian perspective relative to the Cuban author (xxiv). Nelson and other scholars, however, largely focus on the issue of carnival and less on the question of laughter in relation to the body.<sup>37</sup>

In what follows, I argue that Bakhtin's case for an alternative to the seriousness of traditional satire, should encourage us to go beyond some of the conventional distinctions that could divide comically frivolous or ribald laughter from tragic themes. I examine

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1930s essay "Indagación del choteo" (57). Certainly *el choteo* is important to the conversations between many of the characters in *Tres tristes tigres*, but it also provides a cultural point of reference for some of the novel's ease in turning to frivolity.

<sup>37</sup> In "*Tres tristes tigres*, or the Treacherous Play on Carnival," for example, M.-Pierrette Maluczynski also focuses on the concept of carnival, to argue against its application to the novel.

how Cabrera Infante's novel combines laughter and sentiment in one particularly effective sequence of corporeal folly, toward a strategy of endearment. I also examine how another series of scenes in the novel relate to Bakhtin's sense of grotesque follies and can be understood not simply as a matter of debasement but as an attempt to supplant certain cultural ideals with an experience of the body that is offered as more intimately authentic.

Bakhtin's fuller sense of the non-satirical quality of folly in the lower material realm provides an important way of understanding the more ample sense of frivolity and laughter in *Tres tristes tigres* that allows it to become a vehicle for capturing an experience of the past. Put simply, I examine the relevance of what Bakhtin recovers to Cabrera Infante's project of recovery.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.1 Satirical Seriousness and the Site of Folly

#### *Satirical Seriousness*

To better elaborate the sense of laughter that Bakhtin provides in relation to the body, let us consider the question of how the seriousness of satire distorts. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin argues that the non-satirical laughter of Rabelais is part of the

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<sup>38</sup> Nelson envisions the formation of the novel as an attempt to respond to what was rapidly vanishing from Cuban life after the first years of the revolution (39). As such, she speculates that, for Cabrera Infante, *Tres tristes tigres* comprises an effort "to preserve [the city's] essence by recording his own experiences and memories. He thus immortalized his life and his world at that particular time and place [...]" (39). My own inquiry is directed at investigating some of the mechanisms of that project. In this regard, laughter around the body plays a crucial role in bringing that perspective to life.

festive sensibility of the marketplace in which comic exaggeration and the grotesque, or a “culture of laughter begins to break through the narrow walls of festivities and to enter into all spheres of ideological life” (97). It is the supplanting of the lower material realm’s laughter with a satirical vantage point that produces “false keys” (115). Consequently, when an 18<sup>th</sup> Century critic perceives “the enormous amounts of food, drink, and clothes spent on Gargantua [...],” he misconstrues this as satirizing “how heavy were the king’s expenses imposed upon the people” (120). If we laugh, this view would have it be solely to efface and place the object of satirical scorn at a distance. The problem, Bakhtin observes, is that a satirical reading omits “the theme of abundance conveyed in these expenditures” and turns away from “the major tradition of popular-festive laughter” (120). Bakhtin’s core insight in this case is that the seriousness of satire has eclipsed our understanding of laughter and folly, casting these as negative things, whereas for Rabelais they are part of the way in which the lower material realm and the image of the body present a re-affirmation and renewal of life.

### *The Site of Folly*

However, it is here that we must question the theoretical model more pointedly. If we are to address the wider consequence of his perspective on the laughter of the body, then, we should also examine what in particular is renewed and who accrues benefit from such positive laughter. To a limited extent, Bakhtin acknowledges that individual instances of subversion or vivifying laughter play out along more particular lines. For example, he alludes to it in the more narrow frames of medieval order when he refers to

how the feasts of folly inverted particular seats of authority when “students relax from the official ideological system” (83). Again later, he notes that in a reading of the grotesque from the vantage point of laughter, we find that it removes the ceremonial seriousness through which people are restricted by “religious systems” that silence in the face of an overwhelming terror (335). In both cases, there is a response to particular pressures. Students confront medieval ideological systems that surround learning, while laughter responds to the fear created by a specific religious system. However, even in these cases, Bakhtin eventually appeals to notions of “man” and “cosmic elements” in such a way that it can be unclear how folly becomes more specifically implicated in outcomes that are more narrowly relevant to a particular setting (336). As a result, while Bakhtin provides extensive readings of Rabelais in this new light, at times there can be something atopic to the conclusions that ensue.

Beyond a more general renewal, I believe we will find it useful to examine the specific implications of an instance of laughter. If folly reinvigorates and reaffirms the material realm, how does it do so in response to restrictive representations that are also in evidence within the text? If we are to extrapolate in theoretical terms from Bakhtin’s understanding of the laughter of the body, then, we benefit from understanding how it comes to support the perspective of those groups that find their sense of experience in material form renewed. Just as one would not think of approaching scornful satire without identifying its object in a given instance, we would do well to read the code of folly and identify what is celebrated in given instances of non-satirical laughter.

A key issue in particularizing our reading of such laughter is to consider how individual textual formulations of the lower material realm or particular ways of situating

corporeal laughter produce specific encounters between modes or narratives of corporeal seriousness and a given site of folly. Thus, while Bakhtin's account of a laughter of the body provides a cycle of destruction and renewal, rather than simply dragging high themes down into a lesser realm, we should also remain attentive to how a non-satirical comedic relation to the body does something more in any individual instance.

Such an application of Bakhtin's theory to specific sites of folly is bound to lead to more ambivalent assessments, as one group's gain in folly may come not only at the expense of rulers but other subjects in a newly segmented realm of analysis. This is precisely one of the challenges faced in reading the bodily follies of *Tres tristes tigres*. While the novel's corporeal laughter unfolds by defining a theme for what is affirmed or partially recovered and what is brought down in humorous moments, it does so with complicated results. In what follows, I examine that complication in Cabrera Infante's follies as they develop a contrast, between antiseptic ideals and the messy life of the body that aims to provide a sense of communal restoration. I examine that development across two trajectories of folly, the first proceeds in a strategy of endearment, while the second proceeds along a path of grotesque laughter.

Both the path of endearment and that of the grotesque drag down certain ideals and uphold an admittedly highly subjective notion of the past. In the endearing follies of the body, I examine how Cabrera Infante's practice in one early chapter of *Tres tristes tigres* provides an alternative to a conventional association between seriousness and grim subjects or tragic realities. As such, I take it as a kind of response to the assumptions that inform a variety of criticism that treats frivolity and laughter as being in conflict with tragic material. Turning to the second setting for bodily follies, I examine Bakhtin's



notion of the grotesque and how his theorization of laughter in this setting acquires traction in a reading of a sequence of related episodes in *Tres tristes tigres*.

In the second set of grotesque follies, more than in the endearing bodily follies of the earlier chapter, we are exposed to the greater complications that arise in analyzing the site of folly. While this raises questions about the broad sweep of follies that renew in a more general way, it also serves as a reminder of the importance of a certain incredulity in relation to the project of Cabrera Infante's novel. The flame he or anyone else imagines after the candle has gone out is deeply personal and susceptible to enacting its own cherished ideals in need of their own undoing with folly. There is always a body that stands to gain from bracing laughter. The challenge, then, may be to remain aware of that exclusion while continuing to trace the set of factors that a given folly manages to put into play.

Before turning to examine Cabrera Infante's use of bodily follies in a strategy of endearing frivolity, we should also understand some of the critical assumptions that such a technique prompts us to re-think. For the scene of endearing laughter in the novel will highlight how frivolity can be distinctly humanizing and collaborate with the tragic. Whereas in the current case frivolity mingles with the tragic, a similar intermingling of otherwise disparate tones also characterizes Cabrera Infante's use of grotesque laughter in places where sentiment or nostalgia are evoked with surprising playfulness around elements of bodily experience thought, at times, to be best forgotten.

### 3.2 Uneasy Laughter: The Perception of the Comic Amid Tragedy

First, it is worth noting from the outset that the effect of endearment itself is not part of Bakhtin's account. As such, it represents one of the ways in which I believe Cabrera Infante's novel exceeds the territory Bakhtin explores. Nevertheless, that endearing folly shares something with the theoretical project that Bakhtin attempts to elaborate. Cabrera Infante's endearing laughter of the body confronts a modern circumstance in which seriousness threatens to obscure a fuller appreciation of the plenitude of folly.

#### *Reconciling the Tragic*

The importance of going beyond the reductive reading of laughter is conveyed poignantly when we consider the interpretive bind in which novels of this period find themselves. Drawing on playfulness or jokes, they also treat seemingly grave material. Yet, it is difficult to escape the sense that there is an obligation to address a history that is often tinged with tragedy, death, struggles, and suffering. Indeed, Cabrera Infante's earlier work *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* (1964) provides a relentless collection of events and the violence that is wrought upon a series of bodies, from indigenous people to those of African slaves and those who make early attempts at rebellion in Cuba. The body as a site of violence and tragedy stands in stark contrast to any notion of corporeal laughter.

At times, then, Cabrera Infante's writing is clearly concerned with the legacy of violence in Cuba. How, then, to begin to speak about, let alone make sense of laughter within the tragic procession of history? This dilemma is the one that Nicasio Urbina attempts to confront in writing about laughter in another novel. In referring to another iconic novel of the same period (*Cien años de soledad*), Urbina's discussion demonstrates just this discomfort with playfulness and laughter. However, I would like to propose that a close reading of the black page chapter in *Tres tristes tigres* suggests how the tragic and the frivolous do not necessarily operate in conflict with each other. Indeed, when the text presents a strategy of non-satirical laughter in a process of bodily endearment, I believe we witness how tender frivolity does not so much collide with tragedy as accentuate it. This first juncture in Cabrera Infante's bodily follies will illustrate how laughter and a measure of levity provide a way to reconcile the dualism of tragedy and comedy that seriousness attempts to sustain.<sup>39</sup>

The difficulty of grappling with that seriousness in the analysis of texts from Latin American fiction is illustrated by the critical stance that Urbina adopts in "*Cien años de soledad*: Un texto lúdico con implicaciones muy serias," ("*One Hundred Years of Solitude*: A Ludic Text with Very Serious Implications"). In his analysis, Urbina distinguishes between a ludic text and that text's serious implications. He argues that while *Cien años de soledad* sometimes engages in tactics that look less than serious, we

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<sup>39</sup> My reading of *Tres tristes tigres* in this regard aims to extend the broader effort to look beyond conventional conceptions of satire in the writer's work. Nelson identifies a similar sense of laughter in Cabrera Infante's writing. While she links that trait to the Menippean tradition, Nelson describes a use of laughter that can be distinguished "from our usual conception of satire, in which man's vices or follies are held up to ridicule with a decidedly moral or didactic purpose [...]" (xxiii).

must treat these as only masking the hidden seriousness of the text. He presents the conflict as follows:

*Cien años de soledad* is a profoundly serious book, the history it narrates is without doubt a tragic one and reflects a frequently painful reality; nonetheless, the whole work is conceived as a play/game, a refined ludic artifact full of insinuations and tricks, inhabited by winks to the reader, false clues, auto-referential and inter-textual allusions, disproportionate and false data, syntactic games that disarticulate the chronological continuity of discourse, thus creating a play/game of mirages [...].<sup>40</sup>

Urbina's 'nonetheless' ("sin embargo") is conspicuous. The transition implies that it would be unexpected to find a painful reality alongside 'insinuations and tricks [...] winks to the reader' ("insinuaciones y trampas [...] guiños al lector") and other games. Yet, there is nothing logically to prohibit trickery, manipulation or illusion from being used in the depiction of tragedy.

Why such concern for seriousness? Seriousness comes to color our assessment of frivolity and whether it may form a productive continuity with tragedy and sentimentality. In part the concern with seriousness is a complication that derives from the belief that if an author is giving winks to the reader, these might introduce uncertainty amid the depiction of tragedy or pain. In short, it is an effort to fix, to contain wild laughter and irony from spreading and confine them to isolated moments thereby establishing the seriousness of the text and reserving for it a place of privilege in interpretation. The concern for controlling laughter, no doubt also arises from the view

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<sup>40</sup> The passage furnished above is my own translation of Urbina when he writes: "*Cien años de soledad* es un libro profundamente serio, la historia que narra es sin duda trágica y refleja una realidad a menudo dolorosa; sin embargo toda la obra está concebida como un juego, un refinado artefacto lúdico lleno de insinuaciones y trampas, poblado de guiños al lector, pistas falsas, alusiones autorreferenciales e intertextuales, datos desproporcionados y falaces, juegos sintácticos que desarticulan la continuidad cronológica del discurso, creando así un juego de espejismos [...]" (137-8).

that it would be incompatible with tragedy—that there is something uncomfortable about treating tragic themes with anything other than seriousness.

The scandal that this turn to seriousness attempts to mollify, is the appearance of play that is at the margins of ordered propriety and the decorum generally sought for literature but deemed particularly necessary against the frames of a tragic reality. This seems to be the expectation that pressures the critic to argue that the novel awakens us to a sanctioned awareness of a textual game rather than to textual toying or joking around. The tactic allows Urbina to make play more gratifying according to a conventional aesthetic that measures the worth of a work by authorial ingenuity. In the process, he avoids having to deal with the ribaldry of textual delights, which are deemed incompatible, somehow, with the seriousness of purpose implied by a novel's depiction of tragedy and pain.

*Tender Flesh: Endearing Follies*

The critical stance Urbina reflects is of a sort that is unsettled by the black page chapter in *Tres tristes tigres*. Numberless and without heading, the chapter ends with a black page after the violent death of its narrator. In this sense, the chapter provides a definite textual encounter with the kind of tragedy that was taken to require seriousness. However, it also hints at dark humor by inserting a black page and the death of the narrator at an almost absurd moment, not at the end of the book or a critical juncture, but in the middle of a series of other vignettes. By remaining attuned to the way laughter

renews and humanizes with its introduction of the bodily material realm, one is able to explore this undercurrent of humor alongside the tragic.

The chapter itself breaks off from those that precede it and tells roughly of a man from the country (the narrator) who visits someone he does not know personally but who a third party has led him to believe may help him out of the dire straits in which he finds himself – now destitute and hungry. At the end of the chapter, the man shoots the narrator. As he falls to the ground, the chapter ends with a black page. The plot of the chapter regularly directs attention to the tragic, from the man’s despairing circumstances and constant hunger to the cruel outcome he suffers. The episode also stands out as one of the few scenes of explicit violence in the novel itself. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that along the way, the effect of tragedy is actually intensified by folly. This is largely because the narrator and even the man who shoots him are humanized through descriptions of their bodies that celebrate and affirm corporeal clowning, even under hardship. This play of the comic body draws the reader in closer to earth and grime in thematic contrast with an antiseptically distant reality that also appears within the chapter.

From the earliest moments, the lower material realm is evident in subtle ways. The chapter begins with the narrator looking to his own body and its dirtiness: “Antes de tocar me miré las manos: tenía una medialuna negra en cada uña” (57; “Before I knocked I looked at my nails: all of them were embellished with a black crescent of grime” 47).<sup>41</sup> This leads him to make what we learn is his second retreat so that he can now find something with which to clean his nails. Before finding “un palito” (“a twig”) that he

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<sup>41</sup> Unless otherwise noted, English quotations of *Tres tristes tigres* are from Suzanne Jill Levine’s translation, *Three Trapped Tigers*.

will use to clean his nails, the man remembers what happened the first time he had to go back down and postpone knocking on the door moments earlier (57; 47). Of note here is that when he cleans his nails he uses a piece of wood, what is at hand but also another part of the common earth around him. That it is also the second time he has gone up and down the stairs, adds a certain sense of the ridiculous repetitions he has to perform even as it expresses the difficulty of getting to knock on the door. Finally, he relates that on the previous descent “[e]l zapato izquierdo casi soltó el tacón” (57; “the heel of the left shoe had almost come off” 47). In his remembrance of that descent, he also creates the first explicit comic act and joke:

tuve que asegurarlo taconeando como un vesánico en la acera. No conseguí apretar el tacón, pero sí que una vieja que paseaba un perro se parara a verme desde la acera de enfrente. “Soy la respuesta cubana a Fred Astaire”, le grité, pero hizo como si no oyera: fue el perro quien respondió ladrando como otro loco más en aquel pedazo tranquilo de calle. (57)

I’d had to mend it by banging on the sidewalk like a maniac. The two parts refused to stay together and of course an old woman walking her dog had to stop and watch me from across the street. ‘I am Cuba’s answer to Fred Astaire,’ I yelled, but she acted as if she hadn’t heard me: it was her dog that answered, barking like one more lunatic in that quiet street. (47)

Right away, there are several jokes. First the physical comedy starts things off, in a scene that is more reminiscent of Chaplin than Astaire – banging his foot and terrifying the passerby, but not so much that the woman breaks her decorum or distance. His remark works in multiple ways. It creates anything from a comment on the absurdity of national symbols to the ridiculousness of trying to fit Cuba into Hollywood, and a comparison of that task to attempting to re-attach a heel that has broken off. At a very basic level, however, the scene maintains a juxtaposition between the impossibly pure world of 1950s

Hollywood and the plain one in which heels detach and one must groom with twigs nearby.

Thematically opposed, then, we have Astaire and the lady with the dog, versus our narrator's heel stomping and the twig. That contrast continues as the narrator enters the house. After his second climb, a servant of the house answers and views the arrival of the narrator contemptuously. When the man fumbles around for a piece of paper with something written on it (just what is written on it – we never fully learn) and hands it to the servant, the servant takes it “con un gesto antiséptico” (58; “with an antiseptic gesture” 48). While within the story this suggests a reaction to the narrator's appearance and indecorum, the moment sustains the thematic contrast between the humanity of the lower material realm and the inhumanity that cleanliness entails. The latter becomes unnatural and difficult to relate to, while the former expresses intimacy with a body that is awkward, dirty, and lovable.

When the man from the country walks in by the foyer, he describes seeing another man and we are introduced to a slightly different register of humor than that of the street. Inside, the narrator describes what he sees:

[v]i frente a mí un hombre joven (cuando entré estaba a mi lado, pero me volví) de aspecto cansado, pelo revuelto y ojos opacos. Estaba mal vestido, con la camisa sucia y la corbata que no anudaba bien separada del cuello sin abrochar sin botón. Le hacía falta afeitarse y por los lados de la boca le bajaba un bigote lacio y mal cuidado. Levanté la mano para dársela, al tiempo que inclinaba un poco la cabeza y él hizo lo mismo. Vi que sonreía y sentí que yo también sonreía: los dos comprendimos al mismo tiempo: era un espejo. (58)

I saw a young man opposite me (he was to one side of me as I entered, but I turned around), tired-looking with ruffled hair and hollow eyes. He was badly dressed, his shirt was filthy and his loosely knotted tie hung free of his collar, which had no button or clasp. He needed a shave and a limp unkempt mustache drooped round the corners of his mouth. I raised my hand to shake his, bowing slightly at the same time, and he followed suit.



I saw he was smiling and sensed that I was smiling too: we both got the message at the same time: it was a mirror. (48)

One still finds a degree of clowning, but this is accompanied by an extended unveiling or surprise at the end of the visual “joke” that is generated in prose. Likewise, when he says “los dos comprendimos al mismo tiempo” (“we both got the message at the same time”), this prolongs the illusion of the two entities until the final moment when the mirror is revealed. The moment captures a distinct playfulness and elicits a kind of sympathy for the innocent antics of the narrator.

In contrast to a sense of sympathy, the man who answered the door stands and responds to the mirror handshake entirely differently: waiting impatiently and directing the unwelcome guest to a waiting room. On his way out of the hallway, the narrator sees “jarrones con flores artificiales” (“vases of artificial flowers”) and “una mesa con revistas” (58; “a table with magazines” 49). Both the flowers and magazines register with the clean distance of the lady with her dog and the servant with the “antiseptic gesture.” The vase of artificial flowers does this for obvious reasons, its contrast to the natural grime of his nails and the twig. The magazine’s role is not revealed until later when the narrator observes that Gabriel, the man on whom he has called, is “una celebridad, un magnate, un líder político” (62; “a celebrity, a tycoon, a political leader” 51) and that his image appears regularly in magazines and other media. The magazines, or media images of Gabriel, become a point of contrast in ideal form to the narrator’s experience of the celebrity’s bodily degradation moments later.

The text presents this contrasting degradation when Gabriel walks in and he receives a scrutiny with a rather different point of focus than that provided by the press:

[n]unca lo había visto en persona: nada más que en la televisión, de pasada, comiendo perros calientes uno tras otro, mientras anunciaba una marca de salchichas. Eso ocurrió hace tiempo y ahora era una celebridad, un magnate, un líder político. Los perros los comía de verdad, porque estaba gordo, indecentemente. (60-1)

I had never seen him in the flesh: only a passing glimpse of him on television eating hot dogs one after another to advertise a brand of sausages. That had been a long time ago and now he was a celebrity, a tycoon, a political leader. He really must have eaten the hot dogs because he was fat, indecently so [...]. (51)

The ideal image of him on television contrasts with the comic vision of him in person.<sup>42</sup>

While clearly the narrator makes fun of him in unflattering terms, the comic vision also provides a space that contrasts with the media image and in this sense very tenuously aligns Gabriel's body with the corporeal comedies of the narrator against the antiseptic snobbery of the servant, the woman on the street, the artificial flowers, and images of people on television.

The chapter ends when the narrator asks for Gabriel's help and we learn that he is the son of a woman that Gabriel knows and that he has left the country because he wants to be a writer for theater or television and “[a]llá no hay futuro para nadie” (62; “[t]here's no future for anyone there” 52). Gabriel tries to dissuade the narrator, telling him the city is no place for “un muchacho de campo como tú” (62; “a country boy, like you” 52). The class differences of the country versus the city signal a break from the shared corporality of Gabriel in person and the narrator. That break intensifies when Gabriel calls the narrator by the name of Antonio even after he corrects Gabriel and reveals to us that his own name is Arsenio. The first mention of his name personalizes the narrator further, at a critical juncture. Gabriel ominously continues to depersonalize him by calling him

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<sup>42</sup> Levine's translation accentuates this point in a felicitous way when she phrases the idea of seeing him in person as seeing “him in the flesh.”

“San Antonio” (“Saint Anthony”) and asks if he wants “una ayuda” (64; “a start in life” 54). The narrator answers that he does and Gabriel accedes:

—Bueno, te la voy a dar —dijo y levantó la pistola y apuntó para mí. Estaba a menos de dos metros. Disparó. Sentí un golpe en el pecho y un empujón en el hombro y tres disparos que me parecieron llamadas a la puerta. Me aflojé todo y caí para delante, sin ver ya, mi cabeza golpeando, duro, el brocal de un pozo que había en el suelo y caía dentro. (64)  
 —Good, I’m going to give you one, he said, raising his pistol and leveling it at me. He fired from a distance of less than two yards. I felt a blow in my chest, a violent jolt in my shoulder and a savage kick in the pit of my stomach. Then I heard the three shots, which sounded like someone banging on the door. My body went limp and I fell forward, already blinded, my head hitting hard the hard shoulder, the mouth of a well instantly dug in the floor. I fell into. (54)

A black page provides a visual depiction of the blackness of death into which he collapses (65; 55).

The same body with which he provided his comedy, now serves to express the cruel and tragic ending in a flesh that is more tender for all its earlier acts. That playfulness now confronts the finality of a black page. The innocence of his folly and the personalized qualities that came to the foreground make that violence more vicious. Less an inevitable functioning of a process, the result seems more avoidably tragic. That the comedic corporality of Gabriel who is one part sausage joke and one part fleshy reality should now return to an antiseptic cruelty adds to the startling quality of the conclusion when juxtaposed to his earlier depictions in which he even seemed vulnerable when appearing to stutter while talking with the narrator (60, 63; 50, 53). Gabriel’s stutter, too seems to diffuse violent tension just before it re-emerges.

While it is something of a commonplace to say that we laugh so as not to cry, the ending of the chapter suggests that, in some sense, bodily follies capture something more intimately comic and that as a result laughter may accentuate tears. That is, the chapter is

no less poignant for the moments of frivolity and clowning that intermingle with and precede the “tragic reality” that the text also depicts. The risk, then, that the scene draws attention to is that in wishing to do justice to a tragic reality we may miss some of the richness or complexity of feeling in the text. In the current example, we might even fail to appreciate some of the unexpected ways in which tragedy and comedy do not so much collide as collude.

### 3.3 Grotesque Follies of the Body

#### *The Grotesque: The Gaping Mouth*

A second strategy of corporeal folly in the novel develops along another track but picks up some of the black page chapter’s contrasts between bodily authenticity and antiseptic commercial culture. Since this second track of folly draws on a sense of the grotesque with close parallels to elements of Bakhtin’s conceptualization of this phenomenon in Rabelais, it is necessary to briefly review two aspects of that theory that will prove distinctly pertinent to this feature of *Tres tristes tigres*.

For Bakhtin, an important part of the grotesque lies in the image it crafts of the face. To illustrate the function of the grotesque, he begins by noting how “eyes have no part in these comic images” and explains that this is because ordinarily eyes “express an individual” (316). When eyes appear in a grotesque description, they protrude and, in that corporeal outgrowth, suggest the explosion of the confines of the individual (316). It

is in that growth and altered experience of confines that facial features become a place for the grotesque (316-17).

While eyes may play a part, it is the mouth that is “the most important of all human features for the grotesque” (317). Indeed, the gaping mouth often predominates to the point that “the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss” (317). The “bodily abyss” of the mouth, in turn, proves integral to the limitlessness of the grotesque body. It is neither a simple exaggeration, nor even a repugnant one. Instead, the gaping mouth’s amplitude provides an ecstatic experience: “the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world [...]” (317). As an exaggeration, then, the gaping mouth is notable for removing the individuality of the face and of those around its grotesque formation.

The laughter that ensues is a response to bodily excess. What might have seemed solely destructive is instead crucial to understand through laughter and an element of the comic that provides a sense of renewal accompanying destruction and effacement. As a style of depiction, the grotesque is also envisioned as eliciting non-satirical laughter that plays between debasement and renewal. More specifically, Bakhtin argues that the laughter of grotesque images addresses the kind of terror that “is used by all religious systems to oppress man and his consciousness” (335). Rather than succumb to this oppression, “folk images relating to this struggle helped to develop true human fearlessness” (335). In this way, people could appropriate an overwhelming experience by situating it on the more manageable scale of the body. The ecstatic element of exaggeration dissolves a sense of the individual, but it establishes a sense of community

in shared laughter at folk images. In *Tres tristes tigres*, that process plays out partially in the use of a group's response to dominant mass culture by embracing the grotesque.

For the moment, however, we may note simply that the grotesque translates crisis into laughter and allows for something else to emerge where fear formerly kept it in check. By laughing when these conventions are incorporated into the world of the grotesque, one renews the world of the risible subject as it resists the dictates of a serious institution. In Bakhtin's case that resistance is to the church, whereas in Cabrera Infante's novel, resistance becomes a way of forging authenticity in response to ideals that no longer seem to capture that part of the past that matters to memory.

*The Grotesque: Scatological Appropriation*

In addition to the play of size that he describes in relation to the body and facial features, Bakhtin highlights another element of the grotesque that links his analysis to the happenings of Cabrera Infante's novel. This can be observed in Bakhtin's reading of scatological laughter. Whereas the exaggerations of size mark a folk transformation that replaces the individual in terror with a risible shared space of response, scatological laughter proceeds by a different mechanism: "Dung and urine lend a bodily character to matter, to the world, to the cosmic elements which become closer, more intimate, more easily grasped, for this is the matter, the elemental force, born from the body itself" (335). Here too there is an appropriation, for scatological material "degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter" (335).

In that transformation we witness a process of folly. However, what is notable about this area of the grotesque is that dung and urine become the body's comic interpretation of otherwise fearfully restrictive matter, "represented in the material bodily lower stratum [that] is degraded, humanized, and transformed into grotesque monsters. Terror is conquered by laughter" (336). Whereas with corporeal exaggeration, the body is the site of laughter, now it is also the engine. That is, the grotesque may either transform the body or be the product of the body's transformation.

Rather than an act of simple caricature or degrading alienation, in conjunction with laughter, the grotesque provides something more intimate in its appropriation and even in the sense of folk community that it renews. Just as laughter in its non-satirical emphasis also generally acquires a renewal of the sort observed in the black page chapter's endearment, the grotesque produces images that confront but which also re-define fear and dominant authority by measuring these on the more manageable scale of the body.

*Sites of the Grotesque in Tres tristes tigres: the Long Night, the Morning After, and the Writing on the Stall.*

In a series of inter-related scenes that draw out a grotesque register for the laughter of renewal, Cabrera Infante continues the contrast between antiseptic remote realities and a human messiness that the black page chapter introduced. Whereas in the earlier episode the man from the country was the means for inserting that material world in contrast to city snobbery, upper-class comforts and media images, now the place of

earthiness is in a particular side of the city itself, *la farándula* or the nightlife and all its spectacles as explored by a press photographer. In what follows, I examine two scenes from the night and one from the morning that follows. The narrator's experience of bodily misadventures in the night will form the primary locale for a new set of follies. Formerly, the lower material follies that uncrowned ideals entailed bodily clowning in a strategy of endearment, now it is the immersion of the world into the grotesque that provides a sense of the stifling ideals beyond the lower material realm.

In the first two scenes, that folly is articulated in a male libido that unravels an ideal notion of attraction to a female body. Thus, in these sequences as well as in others that play out along these lines in the novel (e.g., when Silvestre relates his comic exploits and contrasts these to a Hollywood storyline and conventions, 177-82; 167-72), it is the female body that provides a grotesque materialization that becomes a locale for introducing an experience of plainness that contrasts with attempts to glamorize eroticism through remote ideals. In each, romanticizing tendencies are ruptured with a laughter at the shared non-glamorous and more humanizing experience of the body. A third scene, the morning after a night's excursions, captures the experience of the grotesque in the body of the narrator himself as he awakens.

It should be noted from the outset, that the follies of the first two scenes are largely developed within the frames of gendered role-playing, in which the male narrator nonetheless comes to pursue comically grotesque corporality. So while it will be useful to observe the way the scenes play within the frames of a narrative of male desire for female bodies, we should not deceive ourselves that even this folly deals with bodies (or the narratives that could surround them) in a comprehensive fashion. Neither should we



believe that it provides a renewal or appropriation for all. Rather, the scenes attempt to deal with a very limited set of dominant ideals, while entirely ignoring others—including those they support in their own problematic way.

That said, in the course of the third scene of corporeal misadventure, the morning after, we are made more explicitly aware of what is at stake for the novel itself in this and the other scenes of folly that span the endearingly comic and the vulgar: a sense of the authenticity of writing itself when it attempts to ground itself with a corporeal sense of the past. That the memory of that past it attempts to support is selectively developed from a particular perspective does not alter the basic attempt the novel makes to suggest a space in the body from which to confront other ideals. It does, however, suggest that we should remain aware of the limitations of that attempt in the novel's case.

I conclude by examining one final exchange in which a character (nicknamed Bustrófedon) proposes that literature should be written either on the walls of bathrooms or in the air in conversation. I proceed to link this to the epigraph with which the novel begins to propose that the novel attempts to stake a claim to a sense of authenticity through the proximity of the body to writing. It is important to qualify this effort, by noting that the follies of the body that the novel offers are situated within experiences that themselves may require redefinition through folly. While I take it that the text does not provide that redefinition, the technique of frivolity it applies to other ideals makes it impossible to fully close off the possibility of such laughter at the novel's own notion of authenticity.

*The Storehouse of Effluence*

The first scene of the three grotesque sequences begins with a descent into the nightlife itself and a new narrator's immersion in the material reality of *la farándula*. Immediately following the black page chapter, the scene continues the sense of a collapse into darkness and transforms the shade of death into the shadows of nightlife. The narrator, now a photographer variously referred to in the novel by the monikers of *Códac* or Nadar, describes running into a character of that nightlife, Vítor Perla:

Vítor tiene una revista que se dedica a poner muchachitas medio encueros y a decir: Una modelo con un futuro que salta a la vista o las poderosas razones de Tania Talporcual o la BB cubana dice que es Brigitte la que se parece a ella y cosas parecidas, que no sé de dónde sacan porque deben de tener un almacén de mierda en el cerebro para poder decir tantas cosas [...] (66-7).

Vítor has a magazine entirely devoted to half-naked girls [...] and captions like: A model with a future in sight—or rather two! [...] and so on and so forth, so much so that I don't know where the hell they get their ideas from, they must have a [storehouse of] shit [...] in their heads to be able to talk like that [...]. (56)<sup>43</sup>

While Vítor's published works degrade through tacky insinuations that only allude to the body (“un futuro que salta a la vista”; “a future in sight—or rather two!”) next to photographs of similarly clichéd diminutive references to female bodies (“muchachitas medio encueros”; “half-naked girls”), the narrator goes directly to the lower bodily realm to challenge that cheap ideal. His joke, then, not only repositions Vítor and the magazines he publishes, but also introduces a grotesque corporality that counters the terms on which the body is presented in print.

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<sup>43</sup> The English translation of the current edition refers to a “shit factory,” whereas the Spanish provides for an “almacén de mierda” or ‘storehouse of shit’ (67; 56).

Nonetheless, as his reflections wander and he contemplates how it offends him to think that this would be done to models that only recently were hard working young women, he too falls into the language of the magazine and its lurid ideals:

[...] ayer nada más era manejadora o criadita o trabajaba en Muralla y hoy está luchando con todo lo que tiene para destacarse. Ya ven, ya estoy hablando como ellos. (67)

[...] a part-time waitress who is now a full-time temptress, or who only yesterday worked in the garment center in Calle Muralla and who today is hustling her way to the top with all she's got. (Fuck, here I am, already talking like those people.) (56)<sup>44</sup>

While there is a degradation of Vitor and his magazines, there is also a kind of demotion of the attempt to seem above and apart from that world. He too slips into the ridiculous insinuations he has just berated and proceeds to laugh at himself for falling into the same effluence with which he has re-interpreted the cultural ideal of the pin-up. His slip also anticipates the difficulty of attributing straightforward readings that would treat that laughter as an unambiguous renewal. Even as he drags it down, there is a degree of ambivalence that may partially perpetuate that ideal.

### *Irena's Gaping Grin*

When Vitor suddenly introduces the photographer to someone nearby, the chaos of the night and the darkness of the club produce a kind of surreal effect where people suddenly appear: “y no sé de dónde sacó una rubita chiquitica [...] sacó a Irena por un brazo como si la pescara del mar de la oscuridad [...]” (67; “out of nowhere he produced

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<sup>44</sup> In some ways, his slip is more explicit in English. While still obvious in Spanish, an alternative translation of what he says could read as follows: ‘she’s struggling with all she’s got to stand out. You see already, I’m already talking like them.’

the cutest little blonde [...] he hauled [Irena] by the arm like fishing her up from the sea of darkness” 57). Vitor’s ‘catch’ will become notable to the narrator along two seemingly contradictory lines: first, for her diminutive size, and then for her mouth and the way it seems to envelop and completely surround him. The narrator’s eventual focus on the mouth does not take the obvious romantic route of describing lips, but rather exaggerates a fascination with teeth. The effect of that focus eventually magnifies Irena’s mouth while the rest of her body shrinks ever smaller and disappears in the darkness.

Irena’s diminution begins when she is compared to a Hollywood icon: “se parecía a Marilyn Monroe si a Marilyn Monroe la hubieran cogido los indios jibaros [sic] y hubieran perdido su tiempo poniéndole chiquita no la cabeza sino el cuerpo y todo lo demás, y cuando digo todo lo demás quiero decir *todo* lo demás” (67; “[she] looked like Marilyn Monroe if the *Jívaros* had abducted her and cut her down to size, not just shrinking her head but all the rest—and I mean *all* the rest [...]” 57).<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to know where to begin to address the speaker’s remark. Clearly it aims to draw on a certain fraternal crudity, both in referring to a shrunken body and to acts that a tribe would only commit in the imagination of the speaker and his imagined audience.

Without accepting the narrator’s invitation, we may nonetheless note that for all its offensiveness, the remark also presents a bizarre invention in the story he suggests. So while the observation participates in the retrograde qualities of a 50s or 60s Hollywood conception of tribes and what they might do to a blonde starlet, it also places that scenario in an alien frame. At one level, its offensiveness and not its ready acceptance on

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<sup>45</sup> At the end of the English citation, I have omitted an additional detail that is not included in the original Spanish, which concludes the statement with: “*all* the rest.”

the part of the audience, is an integral part of the message the text conveys at this awkward moment.

After they are introduced, the question of Irena's body ceases to form the primary focus of the narrator's attention. Its smallness, then, is not an attraction so much as an expression of its diminished prominence in his perception. Instead, he turns to her grin and provides a hint of the grotesque mouth:

[...] y la rubita se ríó con ganas levantando los labios y enseñando los dientes como si se levantara el vestido y enseñara los muslos y tenía los dientes más bonitos que yo he visto en la oscuridad: unos dientes parejos, bien formados, perfectos y sensuales como unos muslos [...]. (68)  
 [...] and the little blonde laughed like she meant it, lifting her lips and showing her teeth as though she were lifting her dress and showing her thighs and she had the prettiest teeth that I have ever seen in the darkness: even teeth, well formed, perfect, like a row of thighs.<sup>46</sup>

After a while of talking, he reflects on how he wishes he could "tocarle los dientes" (68; "touch her teeth" 57). Not only is her body vanishing in the darkness, her mouth seem to grow not just in focus but also in imaginative size, when he contemplates caressing her teeth. The comparison of the teeth to a row of thighs also enlarges this part of her mouth even as it suggests grotesque growth and the re-arrangement of the body's parts. The simile is built on its own exaggeration too, in the idea itself of a row of thighs.

The overall effect recalls Bakhtin's description of the grotesque as a mixture of exaggeration and the loss of clear boundaries. Where does the individual begin in this bodily excess? The focus on her mouth rather than her eyes or lips comes at the expense

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<sup>46</sup> I have provided my own translation of the passage above. Levine's translation is more adaptive and introduces its own playful elements that, while representing the tone of the speaker, part from what is said in certain respects. She translates the relevant passage as follows: "This incredible shrinking version of Marilyn Monroe smiled eagerly, turning up her lips and flashing her teeth like she was raising her skirt to show her thighs and her teeth gleaming in the darkness were the prettiest thing I've ever seen: perfectly even, well-formed and sensual like a row of thighs [...]." (57)

of a more orthodox exposition of the eroticized body. Instead, Irena's Cheshire mouth preserves the place of corporality even as the rest of her body disappears. The darkness all around, into which both their bodies fade, itself brings out the grotesque theme, suggesting a second material pit that blends with that into which his gaze falls while becoming absorbed with her grin.

When the narrator attempts another cliché of seduction, foot play, it once more leads to comedic circumstances that follow from the extreme absurdity of her size. He is briefly uncertain whether he has even found her foot because it is so small. When he moves to comment on hands he recalls how he loses her hand in a less than romantic way: “la mano se me perdió en mi mano y la estuve buscando como una hora por entre las manchas amarillas del hipo que yo muy charlesboyerescamente hacía pasar por manchas de nicotina [...]” (68; ‘I lost her hand in mine and was searching for it for about an hour between the yellow jaundiced stains that I very charlesboyeresquely passed off as nicotine stains’).<sup>47</sup> Clearly there is a comic exaggeration of the body's diminutiveness, since it is not just that he can't find her foot under the table but that he escalates the joke by saying that he couldn't find her hand while holding it in his own. Rather than building into a series of serious intensifications, as he moves from bottom to top, we find a joke that makes fun of the narrative into which he places himself. Added to this joke about her hands is a certain sense of self-effacement, as he jests about the appearance of his own hands in the process.

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<sup>47</sup> This translation is my own too. Levine's translation omits the “charlesboyerescamente” joke and inserts a profanity that while not inconsistent with the character, happens in this case to add something where it is not.

The effect is to present a comic courtship gone wrong.<sup>48</sup> Rather than exchanging glances, banter and fleeting contact, the scene plays out in terms of grotesque exaggerations that draw one into a material experience of the body rather than into one that leaves the body and its comedic misadventures behind in favor of allusions or romance. While the process does not elicit endearing laughter in the way that was done in the preceding episode, it does attempt to preserve a laughing experience of the body in comic imperfection. Whether in the image of the shrinking Marilyn or in the teeth that are portrayed as inciting the desire to fondle an enlarged mouth, imperfection unravels amatory discourse.

The narrator falls deeper into darkness as he kisses Irena (now Irenita):

[...] ahora profundamente en la oscuridad [...], en la oscuridad cincuenta, cien, ciento cincuenta metros por debajo de la superficie de la luz nadando en la oscuridad, mojados, besándonos [...] sin cuerpo, solamente con bocas y con dientes y con lengua solamente, [...] idos del mundo, absolutamente en órbita. [...] Fue entonces cuando la vi por primera vez. (68-69)

[...] in the deep darkness now, in darkness fifty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty fathoms under the edge of light swimming in darkness, in the lower depths, wet kissing, wet all over [...] bodiless except for mouths and tongues and teeth [...] out of this world, lost. [...] It was then that I saw her for the first time. (58)

As he plunges deeper into the darkness of the nightclub, Irena and the narrator's individual bodies become imperceptible, leaving only the formation of mouths, tongues and teeth. The grotesque exaggeration in this instance is that of the gaping mouth that swallows all. The nightclub itself and the darkness all around them become part of that all encompassing mouth. When he gets up from this descent into the material realm and

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<sup>48</sup> The reference to Charles Boyer and being suave relate that folly in courtship to cinematic frames of reference that come apart. For while he may act the French heartthrob of the 40s and 50s, he also uncovers what that ideal masks in his case: the yellow jaundice of his hand.

the ecstatic exaggerations he experiences, the person he sees for the first time is not his companion in the darkness but a nearby figure of bodily abundance that will provide another cycle of grotesque laughter.

*La Estrella and the Authenticity of Exaggeration*

The moment marks the first appearance of La Estrella, who contrasts now with the exaggerations that surrounded his encounter with Irena. La Estrella is “enorme” (“enormous”), with “brazos como muslos y de muslos que parecían dos troncos sosteniendo el tanque del agua que era su cuerpo” (69; “arms like thighs, with thighs like tree trunks propping up the water tank that was her body” 58). In this way, his attention shifts to a second body with the potential for exaggerations. However, just as his laughter entangles him with that at which he laughs, first Vitor Perla’s storehouse, then Irena’s unusual attractiveness, now, too, he jokes even as he shows an infatuation with La Estrella.

The scene continues the contrast of the antiseptic and the authentic corporality of the grotesque when La Estrella later unplugs the jukebox: “lo arrancó casi con furia [...] y dijo, Se acabó, [...]” (72; “saying, Enough’s enough, [...] almost tearing it out with rage” (62).<sup>49</sup> The action marks her personality, but it also provides a striking statement in broader terms against a certain inauthentic mass culture. The narrator re-introduces that

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<sup>49</sup> ‘Se acabó’ may indicate a sudden end of the sort Estrella initiates in ripping the plug from the wall (i.e., ‘it’s over’), or an end that is the result of exhaustion (i.e., ‘it’s spent’). The word order in this case indicates that she *does* tear the chord from the wall, “casi” modifies “con furia” not her action itself but its manner.



contrast when he remarks how what she puts into her singing varies from the records of the jukebox by being

algo más que el falso, azucarado, sentimental, fingido sentimental en la canción, nada de bobería amelcochada, del sentimiento comercialmente fabricado del feeling, sino verdadero sentimiento [...], una voz coloidal que fluía de todo su cuerpo [...]. (73)

something other than false, saccharine, sentimental or feigned emotion and there was nothing syrupy or corny, no fake feeling or commercial sentimentality about it, it was genuine [...] a colloidal voice that flowed the whole length of her body [...]. (62)

The statement breaks with some of the remnants of the bravado of the narrator's account of his desire for Irena. Instead of unfolding in the key of Irenita, the narrator's observations will now be set in that of the more complexly ambiguous body of La Estrella. That body and the authenticity linked to the voice that emerges from it displace the ideal of the nightclub performer as starlet, epitomized by a precursor of Irena, Cuba Venegas. In this way, the body and singing produce a contrast with a hollow commercial culture in which the body is not present, or only there by insinuation. The material realm of La Estrella confronts that tacky cultural ideal with brash candor.

Lest we sweeten and romanticize that authenticity, recommitting ourselves to a kind of idealization, the narrator proceeds to remind us of the grotesque reality in which everyone seems to reside once we take away the saccharine. He re-introduces laughter and the comic follies of the body when he observes how La Estrella “[p]arecía incansable [...] golpeando el suelo con una sandalia que era una lancha naufragando [...] toda su cara por delante del cuerpo infinito [...]” (73; “seemed inexhaustible [...] beating time with her sandal on the floor, a sandal that was like a motorboat [...] the whole of her face pushed forward ahead of her infinite body” 63). The first part of the description of La Estrella's sandal hitting the floor is almost cartoonish. However, as she thumps her foot,

the gesture recalls the dancing in which the narrator from the country tried to re-attach his heel by stomping (57; 47).

In both instances of the foot hitting the ground, we encounter a blunt gesture that places the body into vigorous contact with the material world. The infinite body would seem to draw on the full growth of her body in his perception—filling it and the scene with her earthy presence. In contrast to the mouth of Irena, where darkness swallows him, La Estrella fills the scene. However, in both, we are faced with comic exaggeration that resists taking flight into higher worlds by drawing on a grotesque transformation.<sup>50</sup>

The grounding of metaphysical splendor surrounds La Estrella, so that it even makes its way into the imagination of the narrator, amid his admiration for her authenticity. We see it once more, after he throws a party at his apartment for her debut and meet industry people. The event collapses after a disagreement in which La Estrella storms off. During the party that ensues, chaotic conversations supervene and La Estrella emerges once again. Now drunk, she crawls under an antique wood and straw Cuban sofa-bench, where the narrator is speaking with some friends. When she snores noisily, from beneath the narrator, the reaction to the sound prompts a chain of other comico-grotesque materializations:

Bustrófedon que no vio ni veía a La Estrella me dijo, Nadar mi socio ¿estás inflando un globo? queriéndome decir (yo lo conozco bien) que me estaba peando y me acordé de Dalí que dijo que los pedos son el suspiro

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<sup>50</sup> While I agree with Malcuzyński that La Estrella is a nostalgic figure with a grotesque body, I would disagree with the claim that this means she is primarily an ideologically regressive figure and part of Cabrera Infante’s recreation of “a decadent bourgeois system through the representation of the nocturnal way of life” (41). Just as it is reductive to say that La Estrella provides a general renewal for all, I believe it is too simple to say that she is “a degeneration of the authentic grotesque image” (42). Both assessments define La Estrella ultimately outside of her context in the novel.

del cuerpo y casi me reí porque se me ocurrió que el suspiro es el pedo del alma [...]. (135)

Bustrófedon who couldn't or didn't see La Estrella said to me, Nadar, *mon vieux*, are you blowing up one of your balloons? meaning (I knew him too well) that I was farting and I remembered Dali said once that farts are the body's way of sighing and I almost started laughing because it occurred to me that sighing is the soul's way of farting [...]. (124)

The bodily laughter that erupts from La Estrella's respiratory vibrations prompt a series of playful reflections on bodily functions that eventually link the metaphysical to wholly physical material elements and the world of the party itself. A party's celebrations replace the industry event. That event is unable to launch La Estrella into celebrity, not because she is less than it, but because the world of celebrity is itself unable to establish itself in the sensibilities the novel pursues. There is perennially a fleshy sigh to undo antiseptic representations.

*Scatology and the Mess of the Morning After*

After abandoning the party for another trip into the night and returning home once more, the narrator finds La Estrella asleep and having taken over most of his bed (141; 131). He attempts to claim a corner on which to sleep and the night comes to an end with the comic image of the narrator attempting to claim a corner. In moving from the bodily abundance of night to the next morning, the narrative shifts into a more clearly scatological register of the grotesque. On waking, the narrator realizes that at some point in the night he landed on the floor:

me desperté fuera de la cama, con un charco de sudor debajo del cuerpo, en el piso. Recordé entonces que me había tirado en el suelo al otro extremo del cuarto, cerca de la puerta y allí me dormí. ¿Tenía el guante de un motorista en la boca? No lo sé porque no sentía más que un sabor a

bilis y sed y ganas de vomitar más que de beber, pero lo pensé bien antes de levantarme. (174)

I woke up out of bed, on the floor in a pool of sweat. I remembered then that I had thrown myself to the floor on the far side of the room, near the door and that I had slept over there. Did I have a motorman's glove in my mouth? I couldn't say, because I couldn't feel more than the taste of bile and thirst and the desire to vomit more than to drink, but I thought about it carefully before getting up.<sup>51</sup>

From the pool of sweat and the image of him falling asleep on the floor to the taste of bile and nausea contemplated through the substance of vomit, the grotesque lower bodily realm permeates his waking experience.

Jokes and a certain fanciful laughter also form a part of the scene. For while he has the taste of bile, he jokes first that perhaps he had a glove in his mouth. Rather than fear or a more grim reaction to his hangover, we encounter a comically fanciful speculation. The thought replaces the unpleasant sensation in his mouth with a joke. That he wakes up on the floor in sweat and ridiculously recalls landing on the other side of the room at one point in the night, also captures what the passage as a whole is doing. That is, it drenches him in the body and shoves him into the risible lower material realm.

When he gets up off the ground, he continues to explore the intersection between laughter and grotesque corporality as he makes his way to the bathroom. On the way, he realizes that La Estrella must have left early that morning. Before the bell to his apartment awkwardly interrupts him, he describes his time on the toilet:

[...] sentado en la taza, leyendo esas indicaciones que vienen en cada rollo Kodak, que estaban tiradas por el suelo del baño no sé por qué, leyendo esa cómoda simpleza que divide la vida en Al Sol, Exterior Nublado,

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<sup>51</sup> Levine's translation includes the implied idea that he must have dragged himself across the ground in the course of the night (164). Given the importance of ground to my own analysis of the text, I have opted to avoid any confusion by providing a more constrained translation of the passage.

Sombra, Playa o Nieve (nieve, mierda, en Cuba) y finalmente Interior Luminoso [...]. (175)

[...] sitting on the can, reading those instructions that come with every roll of Kodak film which had been left on the floor I don't know by whom, reading this conveniently simple division of life into Sunny, Cloudy, Shade, Beach or Snow (snow in Cuba, they must be joking!) and finally Clear Well-lighted Indoors [...]. (165)

There are at least three comic flourishes in the scene.<sup>52</sup> The first of these resides in the idea that a novel would relate this moment at all. The grotesque is the source of humor itself and confronts narratives that might avoid depicting such scenes. Authenticity and the grotesque are linked here once more. The box of film itself provides an opening for the second and third comic elements of the passage that introduce their own relief in laughter.

The second flourish entails a more indirect suggestion of humor. As with the positioning of the leather glove, the locale of the Kodak box suggests exaggerated circumstances without providing further details about how the object should come to be in such a place. Is it ordinary detritus or something new from the previous night's happenings?

The third flourish of humor is the most notable and captures a key insight into the message of the novel's use of the grotesque even as it itself turns away momentarily from the toilet. His laughter at the absurdity of the label's organization of life into four categories and the inapplicability of that order to Cuba presents a kind of microcosm of what the grotesque does in the novel. That is, it provides a place from which to laugh at how an ideal that is disseminated on a mass scale fails to fit with 'real' experience, lived in the realm of the body. The gap between Kodak's organization and Cuba, like other

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<sup>52</sup> The Spanish does not refer to joking, but instead emphasizes the grotesque with an expletive for dung: “[...] Nieve (nieve, mierda, en Cuba) [...],” 175.

disjunctures in the novel, is a source of laughter that re-enforces the divide between ideals and the authenticity of the lower material realm.

The renewal that presents a particular bodily experience as laughing triumphantly over the failure of ideals, can be seen in many of the other moments of folly. For example, we saw it when the narrator fixates on Irena's teeth and gums rather than her lips and eyes. While she makes him think of a Hollywood icon, she also becomes a grotesque transformation of that cinematic figure. A similar operation was also evident in the black page chapter, when the man from the country referred jokingly to his heel stomping as being the Cuban answer to Fred Astaire (57; 47).

The contrast to Hollywood versus real life appears again and again. We see it even after a friend (Silvestre) visits the photographer in the morning's mess and proceeds to tell his own story of the night before while the narrator dresses to go out and visit another friend (Bustrófedon) in the hospital. Silvestre relates an account of another amorous encounter gone awry (177-182; 167-72). That story relays how he came to discover the next morning that the woman he thought he seduced, who models herself on Ingrid Bergman, wears a wig and looks entirely different without makeup.

In one way, Silvestre's story is one of those episodes in which one man attempts to impress another with his prowess. In another respect, its comedy grounds the world they occupy in a material realm that self-consciously empties the narrative of the glamour that might be involved in boastful exaggerations. In this regard, the romantic role-playing falls flat in Silvestre's retelling. Instead of Silvestre's awakening with the faux star that he hoped to have corrupted, he finds a wig by his side between them (180; 171).

### 3.4 Conclusion: The Writing on the Stall

Repeatedly, then, to speak of the body is to find a way of avoiding a set of conventional ideals. Ultimately, the novel replaces otherworldly cleanliness with a model of literature as participating in the ephemera of the body. The follies of the body become implicated in an attempt to draw out more authentic appropriations of culture. What is at stake over the course of these materializations is a renewal of the way one may cast experience in aesthetic terms with greater attention to corporeal experience and its ability to confront with laughter and misadventure. This is made explicit when the material realm makes its way into the terrain of literature itself in one more exchange.

In the narrator's recollection of Bustrófedon after his death, we find an account of a voice recording of him reciting the way various Cuban writers would describe the death of Trotsky. When he breaks out of his rendition of the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén's voice, another friend interrupts him and a conversation about literature results.

According to his friend, the point that Bustrófedon appeared to make was that

[...] la literatura no tiene más importancia que la conversación [...]. [...] Bustrófedon dijo bien claro esa y otras veces que la única literatura posible estaba escrita en los muros [...]. [...] Bustrófedon dijo que él se refería a la de los muros de los servicios públicos, lavatorios, retretes, inodoros o escusados [...]. (281)  
 literature is no more important than conversation [...]. [...] Bustrófedon had said very plainly on this and other occasions that the only possible literature was written on walls [...]. [...] Bustrófedon said that he was talking about the walls of public conveniences, men's or gent's, bogs, W.C.s, johns, cans, loos, escusados [...]. (277)

After providing a series of examples of said writing, Bustrófedon describes another option: “la otra literature hay que escribirla en el aire, queriendo decir que había que hacerla hablando [...]” (281; “the other literature should be written on the air, in other

words, you make it simply by talking [...]” 278). In the novel, however, conversations often resemble the writing on the stalls, so that the two are different manifestations of a single literature. Both disrupt institutionally fixed literary expression, a point suggested before this when conversation bursts in and interrupts Butrófedon’s performance of national literature. What is at issue is not just an experiment with past masters, but the notion of that literature itself. Rather than becoming absorbed in something remote and constant, the idea suggests that literature should be written around the temporality of the body.

This conception of literature and the body allows us to understand corporeal follies in another light. The notion of a literature written on bathroom walls, like those other sites of laughter, is a way of capturing a sense of a more authentic experience in art. The follies of the body comprise an attempt to make more remote aesthetic categories something more intimate. That intimacy of the flesh becomes linked to the project of recovery suggested by the epigraph. Imagining means reclaiming a sense of memory through corporeal laughter. What remains is a literature that is not the memory of golden days, now gone, but something in the air only for a little while—a trace of the way the past once looked to some.

In this effort, we should remain aware of a final qualification. For we must remain mindful of who is drawn closer and for whom the novel’s laughter provides a way of facing institutions. *Tres tristes tigres* may require its own measure of folly to renew other corporeal experiences that are not given their due. This is because Cabrera Infante’s novel, for all its bodily laughter, may yet be defined as providing something



other than a renewal for all. Instead, it offers a self-consciously selective renewal of the material realm, as experienced almost exclusively by male parties.

Despite the important limitation of the novel's particular perspective, frivolity in the work provides a formulation of how the follies of the body could yet challenge the ideals or wisdom that the text sometimes seems to accept a little too readily. In opening the text to folly, it is difficult to say even if the novel's sense of wisdom in bodily sentimentality and nostalgia will ever completely establish itself in a more static fashion. Laughter, after all, can be contagious.

Chapter 4: Frivolity and Madness: Folly in Cortázar's *Historias de cronopios y de famas*  
(*Cronopios and Famas*)

4.1 Cortázar's Folly: The Technique of Frivolity and Madness

Irónicamente se le ocurre que si hubiera una silla cerca podría descansar y respirar mejor hasta ponerse del todo el pull-over, pero ha perdido la orientación después de haber girado tantas veces con esa especie de gimnasia eufórica que inicia siempre la colocación de una prenda de ropa y que tiene algo de paso de baile disimulado [...]. (Cortázar, "No se culpe a nadie" 295)

Ironically, it occurs to him that if he had a chair nearby he could rest and catch his breath before putting on the pull-over all at once, but he has lost his orientation after having spun many times in that sort of euphoric gymnastics that always initiates the placement of an item of clothing and which has something of disguised dance steps [...].<sup>53</sup>

"No se culpe a nadie" tells of a man who must leave his apartment to meet his wife and shop for a wedding gift. Since it is cold out, the man goes to put on a sweater. Rather than proceed with his day, he becomes entangled and loses his bearings until he stumbles, feels the cool air outside and realizes that he has fallen out a window from twelve floors up. However, before the fall, the story lingers in the disorientations, acrobatics and comedy of someone becoming stuck in a sweater while getting dressed.

Amid these collisions and disruptions, the moment above is noteworthy because it highlights the way humor prepares the way for horror in the story. As such, it allows us to glimpse a complex and characteristic application of folly within Cortázar's writing. That technique appeals at once to the inventive possibilities emerging from the folly of

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<sup>53</sup> "No se culpe a nadie" (or 'No One's Fault') is omitted from English editions of *Final del juego*. Here, and in the discussion that follows, I include my own translation.

comic absurdity, a playful frivolity, even as a more alarming dissolution of order lurks nearby in something closer to madness. In those first moments, the narrator introduces a series of comic dislocations. The humor of that new perspective can be seen in the physical comedy of the character. Habitual actions are recast, as everything looks different from within the tangle of a sweater. Getting dressed becomes an “euphoric gymnastics” and now “has something of disguised dance steps” to it. In the narrator’s view of events we find an awareness of the amusing delight made possible by a folly that removes routine from a sober context.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside these lighter comparisons another experience of folly begins to emerge. The new dance has an edge to it. That threat remains in plain sight with the idea that there is something ironic about the man’s disorientation and his inability to find a seat. The duplicity of that irony allows for a darker possibility in the implication of his acrobatics near the window. That ironic gap forms as the man contemplates only the lesser but related consequence of his disorientation—not the open window, but the absent chair. Rather than laughter, irony introduces the grim material toward which the plot of the story turns ineluctably.

The contrast between this menace and the earlier frivolity is stark. Yet, I believe that we need to read the two in conjunction with one another. For together they comprise a technique of folly that Cortázar employs here and elsewhere in his writing. How, then, can we begin to understand the way Cortázar uses these two tracks of folly? A look at

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<sup>54</sup> I wish to build on Chávez Silverman’s inquiry in “La función de lo lúdico en *Historias de cronopios y de famas*” (54). For her part, Chávez Silverman conceives of “una actitud [lúdica] en busca de una correspondencia con la actitud del niño” (54; ‘a [ludic] attitude in search of a correspondence with the attitude of the child’) that elicits curiosity in the reader, rather than confusion (61). However, I would argue that confusion or disorientation operates in tandem with playfulness in a technique of mad folly.

the story itself reveals how the proximity and overlap between the risible and the alarming on display in the single moment of dance extends to the story as a whole with sections in which either laughter or alarm takes precedence. A closer reading of the rest of the story will provide an illustration of how these two tonally contrasted follies meet in a functionally complementary fashion.

After a closer look at the operation of that folly in the story, I turn to defining the significance of such play for a wider project of questioning rationality. To find a theoretical frame of reference for the proximity of madness and frivolity, relative to such a project, I turn to Foucault's notion of *folie*.<sup>55</sup> I relate such *folie* to the playfulness that Saúl Yurkievich locates as a more systematic property of another work by Cortázar, *Historias de cronopios y de famas*. I then turn to a more detailed analysis of the frivolous and mad follies of *Historias*, across a series of moments in the text. I conclude by proposing that while *Historias* may eventually establish its own sense of a new prudence with the folly it advances, the text also forces a degree of openness in presenting an encounter that lays bare the process of readerly sense-making.

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<sup>55</sup> Nogueira Peredo takes note of a conjunction between *History of Madness* and a different work by Cortázar. In “*Rayuela e Historia de la locura: Una aproximación*” she argues that *Rayuela*, like Foucault's work, explores the constructedness of Western thought (66). Nogueira Peredo proposes using Foucault's understanding of madness to understand the way Oliveira attempts to erase the opposition between reason and unreason in the novel (66). Intriguingly, she sees *Rayuela* as sometimes crediting madness in ways that Foucault does not. In particular, she notes that for Oliveira madness is associated with greatness, as much as with disaster, since others will initially perceive historical triumphs as the work of “un lunático” (74; ‘a lunatic’). Nogueira Peredo, however, does not examine the concept of *folie* itself as a playful madness that captures the combination of frivolous and unsettling disorder.

*Alarm Borne of Comic Dislocation*

First, what is the role of playful frivolity alongside more alarming follies? In “No se culpe a nadie,” we find some answers to this question when looking at the story a bit closer. Alongside the tension in which danger seems to lurk nearby, albeit not yet given full reign, there are a series of moments that explore a departure from order and an entrance into the absurd. These include, for example, when he continues whistling a tango even after he has become stuck in the sweater (293), when the man wonders whether he has tried to put his head through one of the arms of the sweater (293), and the already cited instance when the narrator compares the man’s struggling movements with a dancer’s acrobatics (295). Throughout the story, there are references to the absurdity (293, 294, and 296), silliness (“la tontería,” 293), and ridiculousness of his actions (295).

The text repeatedly highlights the frivolity of a situation that results from the story of shopping. In that turn away from one set of exigencies toward a folly of comic discovery, the story explores the narrative possibilities that would be ignored in ordinary social customs (e.g., shopping, preparing for a wedding, or putting on a sweater to go out into the cold) and introduces a basic departure from tedious rituals in order to plumb phenomenological chaos. The result is an experience of disorientation that proposes a place of laughter relative to sober bearings. However, just as we saw in the brief passage, in close proximity to this laughter, a more alarming folly emerges. The comic image of the man putting on his sweater is replaced with a more threatening chaos in his thoughts and perceptions themselves. His struggle in the dislodging of fabric and pigment from

the wool of the sweater and ensuing difficulties breathing herald the clear arrival of something darker (295).

That shift from the earlier frivolity seems well established by the time the narrator describes how the man feels his hands are like a pair of rats trapped in a cage and how from within the sweater it seems as though one hand may be gnawing on him (295). From there, humor moves into horror.<sup>56</sup> The certainty and clarity of his earlier playful entanglement shifts as the man himself realizes the danger of the window and his blind motion: “[...] alcanza a pensar que la ventana ha quedado abierta [...] es peligroso seguir girando a ciegas” (295; ‘the thought occurs to him that the window is open [...] it’s dangerous to keep spinning blindly’). As confusion mounts, he begins to wonder even about his physical orientation in a more disturbing way: “[...] quizá ha caído de rodillas y se siente como colgado de la mano izquierda [...]” (296; ‘perhaps he has fallen to his knees and he feels like he is hanging by the left hand’).

The scene marks a shift. The protagonist moves from the occlusion of the sweater that allowed him to experience things differently, to a clear unpleasantness. That new discomfort presents an unsettling paradox, even as it emphasizes a thematic continuity. For even as the sensation of kneeling on the ground is contradicted by that of dangling

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<sup>56</sup> In an interview with Evelyn Picon Garfield, Cortázar relates how a famous news account several years after he wrote “No se culpe a nadie” startled him because of its resemblance to the story (*Cortázar por Cortázar* 101). In Paris, a man decided to play a joke on his family and surprise them one day by coming home early, wearing a rubber mask. The mask’s mouth opening did not line up properly and he accidentally asphyxiated himself. While the news account is equally chilling, what is so curious about Cortázar’s linking it to “No se culpe a nadie” is the extent to which it highlights a kernel crucial to both: the way death emerges from playfulness in a sudden way. Aside from this quality, the short story and the news account are quite dissimilar. The man in the sweater does not asphyxiate, while the tragedy of the man with the mask does not happen before going out to meet someone, but after he has returned home to play a prank on his family.

above it and hanging by the left hand, the two postures intimate struggle while expressing confusion. When the man finally feels as though he has left that confusion, we come to realize that the coolness of the air and impossible posture of simultaneously kneeling and hanging provide a way of depicting the disorientation of his fall out the window (296).

The change of tone offers an alternative experience to that of humor, but in what ways does it share something with the folly contemplated in comic dislocations of order? The first comic disorientation counters any rational consensus that putting on an item of clothing could not provide an opportunity to entertain new arrangements through comic re-framings. The second disorientation emerges from the very same confusion within the sweater that sparked a comic re-framing. The playful perspective from within the sweater, then, eventually provides a launching point for a more disturbing loss of coherence.

In these moments, it is never a question of a fool acting on his own and producing a kind of laughter that has particularly invigorating effects (e.g., Bakhtin's notion of positive laughter). Nor is folly a matter of confronting the belief we place in the ground beyond appearances (e.g., Nietzsche's play of appearances). Instead, Cortázar draws on two kinds of disordering ways of re-fashioning the familiar: 1) the risible material the fool generates in presenting new arrangements and recasting order in an absurd light and 2) the material the unreason of madness engenders in compelling one to perceive the limits of prevailing order in a more directly disturbing manner. This perspective allows us to view Cortázar's rapid shifts between these registers not just as complementary, but as a means of cultivating conceptual and narrative disorder in the text's articulation. In

this respect, alarm builds on laughter to introduce a departure from order and an entrance into an alternative.

Contrary to the critical assessment of Cortázar as a serious writer, this technique highlights an element of frivolity that I believe may be reconciled with some of the efforts Cortázar pursues elsewhere. In what follows, I examine Sara Castro-Klarén's discussion of that project and question her characterization of it as wholly serious. I propose that the kind of folly displayed in "No se culpe a nadie" may be integral to understanding one way in which Cortázar pursues the goal of questioning rationality.

*Frivolity at the Frays of Seriousness*

Nothing in Cortázar's work is frivolous or facile. One can indeed readily find a playful attitude and an unusual (black) sense of humor [...] but it becomes only a tool that cracks the safe of absolute reason.<sup>57</sup>

The above observation arises in the midst of Castro-Klarén's discussion of the affinities between 'pataphysics, surrealism, and Cortázar's playful experimentation. The statement itself puts forward two thoughts. The first, that there is nothing frivolous or facile in Cortázar's work, is supported in part by the second—in which an exception is momentarily contemplated, but eventually resolved. Both claims introduce a perspective that will preclude the analysis of folly in as much as it makes use of frivolity. The first assertion is troubling in its simple sweep. It proposes an absolute that would be difficult to entertain, even if the totality of Cortázar's work were the subject of analysis. Whether such seriousness is deleterious or meritorious, one would have to abandon incredulity to

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<sup>57</sup> Castro-Klarén, 221.



believe that everything in Cortázar's work is serious and devoid of frivolity or ease. The second statement is particularly problematic in its own regard. The logic of the claim, that the playful attitude and black sense of humor are not frivolous or facile because they crack "the safe of absolute reason," requires not just that we believe in the absence of frivolity from Cortázar's work, but that we accept its complete ineffectuality when it comes to unraveling rationality. The absence of frivolity becomes a virtue that resists the folly of play or humor not befitting the edifying seriousness of his work.

In crediting Cortázar with this manner of virtue, we lose the opportunity to consider how one particularly effective technique for undoing the effects and habits of reason may be to embrace certain kinds of play to which frivolity contributes. Why, then, would a critic opt for an approach to play that obscures the frivolous or facile dimension of folly in Cortázar's work?

### *Aesthetic Coherence*

The absolute claim Castro-Klarén advances can best be understood relative to two points in her discussion. The first is evident when that inquiry frames its task as one of "establish[ing] a coherent aesthetic backdrop [...]" (218). The second centers on the particular terms she uses to exclude folly from Cortázar's work and define what is absent: the 'frivolous' and the 'facile.' Consider the first point: what it means for an inquiry that examines play to become a matter of establishing an aesthetic backdrop. At its simplest, this could mean no more than highlighting how Cortázar, 'pataphysics, and surrealism all share in a basic project. However, why should all this require the absence of frivolity or

ease? That exigency emerges because Castro-Klarén's approach pursues something more than an exposition of common aims or a shared strategy for attaining those ends. When she excludes frivolity, she also takes the position that it is necessary to argue for the legitimacy of both those aims and means relative to an aesthetics that values seriousness.<sup>58</sup>

This background concern is evident in the second point that we may draw upon to understand the proclaimed absence of frivolity and ease. The terms 'frivolous' and 'facile' both contrast with a view wherein hard work is equated with the success of actions. That the terms 'frivolous' and 'facile' exalt play as a serious struggle is supported by a remark that precedes it. Several paragraphs prior, Castro-Klarén mentions the negative example of the "tendency of 'automatic writing' to become a facile and frivolous verbal game" (221). Independent of that contrast that marks one as estimable and the other as less so, if at all, it is unclear how playful tools and the "frivolous verbal game" are so different in their outcomes. Castro-Klarén uses this pair of examples to create two shades of play. Cortázar's playful attitude and that "unusual (black) sense of humor" reside firmly on one side, while the "frivolous verbal game" of automatic writing remains hopelessly adrift on the other.

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<sup>58</sup> Castro-Klarén is hardly alone in focusing on Cortázar's seriousness. In "Historias de cronopios y de famas: ¿Obra 'prescindible' de Julio Cortázar?," John Marambio highlights the reception of *Historias* in the early years after its publication, by noting how critics were scandalized that such a serious writer as Cortázar should write such a book (133-34). Marambio objects to this assessment of the book, rather than the values that inform that reaction, and blames the "tendencia lúdica" ('ludic tendency') of *Historias* for the way critics overlook the work's true seriousness (140).

*Dark Comedy and the Promising Tactic of 'Folie'*

While I wish to take issue with the scope and outlook on frivolity that her analysis adopts, I also believe that in defining a project in Cortázar's experimental writing, Castro-Klarén provides an important context for folly. In addition to this context, her eventual claim that Cortázar undermines a certain aesthetic propriety in these efforts allows us to frame the practice of folly as we encounter it in a less explicitly experimental but highly playful work: *Historias de cronopios y de famas* (*Cronopios and Famas*). Even though Castro-Klarén does not discuss *Historias*, the affinity she perceives between Cortázar, surrealism, and 'pataphysics acquires significance in understanding the backdrop to play in this work.

Castro-Klarén argues that with all three we witness an attempt to challenge reason and the customary conceptual apparatus through which we experience reality by an artistic practice that looks for exceptions or moments of disruption that break from familiar registers (223-26). Thus, surrealism looks to the dream as a place for "a third modulation of thought" (223), while 'pataphysics explores exceptions and "the principle of deviation" for a way of breaking with habit and imagining new arrangements of significance (224). Along with "erasing the time-space distance between the writer and reader" (228), she notes how the process of producing a new modulation and undoing the habits of past rationality are a particular point of unity between Cortázar and the pursuits of surrealism and 'pataphysics (227). The absurd also becomes linked to this re-imagining of the world and "the arrangement of things and their significance [...]" (229).

Once we take away the appeal to work and seriousness, we may better examine the role of frivolous follies in Cortázar's writing. The interplay of that frivolity with other disjunctures becomes newly susceptible to analysis in light of the very project Castro-Klarén describes. That is, we are able to examine an otherwise ignored feature of Cortázar's writing in the fresh light of a project that confronts habits and rationality. Far from detracting from that project, frivolous folly unravels the seriousness that establishes and maintains reason. Importantly, it does so in interplay with jarring breaks that together cultivate a sense of the uncertainty of that which might otherwise seem plainly evident. The effort to provide an aesthetic justification that is rooted in grave productivity impedes the analysis of moments that pursue something else. In order to understand how the author's works may confront the orthodoxy of art without committing himself to a measure of value that re-establishes that extant outlook, we are called upon to re-examine Cortázar's playfulness.

In dark humor, we find a place from which to theorize folly in an interaction between laughter and alarm where laughter is not a means to fulfilling a serious purpose so much as a way of cultivating absurd alternatives to habit. I would like to propose that this proximity between the risible and death or violence, while not surprising, should also not be approached by subsuming laughter into the distress of shock. Laughter need not be the result of nervousness. Instead, we may approach laughter and alarm as expressing responses to distinct but closely related registers of folly.

*Foucault's Folie and the New Modulation*

By considering the example of the sweater story (“No se culpe a nadie”) we were able to grasp a basic sense of the disruptive interplay of humorous playfulness and mad breaks in the text. Yet, we had not framed these two registers of folly in more theoretically meaningful terms relative to the project of folly envisioned in relation to the project Castro-Klarén describes (i.e., the disruption of habit and the discovery of alternative modalities). It is this gap that Foucault’s notion of *folie* allows us to bridge. For it provides an account of *folie* or madness and the fool’s folly as each exploring alternatives to rationality.

We may recall that the first chapter considered *folie* in the context of examining the question of how frivolity or non-serious play has historically been marginalized within both the sphere of philosophical aesthetics as well as in more recent theoretical accounts of play that preserve the privilege of seriousness. Like Bakhtin and Nietzsche, Foucault offered a useful perspective that problematized restriction—in this case, in his account of the marginalization of madness.

However, particularly in his earlier work, *History of Madness*, Foucault’s own discourse also presents its own unease with folly’s frivolity. The result was that while there are still important points of overlap between madness and the fool’s currency, as when Foucault describes a literary folly that emerges as “a madness that causes men to make merry and rejoice” (22), a problematic divide also takes hold. Thus, despite the shared ground in which the fool came to provide another expression of madness, the split between the two functions of *folie* eventually took on a difference of distinction.

Foucault's contrasts in the earlier work sometimes became a means of providing madness with value over the disordering delight of the fool.

As a consequence, madness and delight in folly become more strongly polarized and charged with value in that difference, even as they seemed to share in putting forward an alternative to order and the prevailing systems of meaning. Fortunately, Foucault does not extensively enforce the split between madness and folly in the remainder of his later discussion in "Madness and Society." Instead, he largely focuses on a contrast between figures of folly and madness in relation to their reception over time and the roles each provide.

That focus suggests a more nuanced portrait of the relation between the fool's folly and that of madness. The madman comes to be defined as presenting truths that are forbidden or barely conceivable within the reason of a particular era. Madness acquires a relative status over time. Rather than an independent existence in the madman, *folie* designates a conceptual space. This means that madness becomes a historically excluded disordering, in contrast to the relative inclusion of folly.

It is at this turn that we come upon an important theoretical implication of Foucault's framework. For folly and the once darker madness seem more to indicate not fundamentally different forms of unreason, but alternate and at times overlapping interpretations of the defiance of reason as it is attributed to an existence. In this new overlap, we return to the proximity of folly and madness entailed in the term '*folie*' itself. We also find a key to the way Cortázar makes use of receptively divergent but functionally complementary ways of confronting rationality. In the interplay of these registers of folly, Cortázar plumbs alternatives to prevailing order and reason.

I turn to examine the applicability of this play of risible and more sinister folly more closely by considering how it may form part of Yurkievich's formulation of a view of the play of fantasy in *Historias*. Specifically, I consider how his characterizations of that play convey a sense of the distinctive way the text shuns normative pressures. Rather than strictly serious, earnest experimentation, Yurkievich's reading of *Historias* suggests an undercurrent of folly in need of closer study and differentiation from play elsewhere in Cortázar's writing.

#### 4.2 Particularizing and Distinguishing the Folly of *Historias de cronopios y de famas*

How can we relate Foucault's conceptualization of *folie* to the play of a specific work by Cortázar? Saúl Yurkievich's discussion in "El juego imaginativo: fantasía intermediaria y espacio potencial" ('The Imaginative Game: Intermediate Fantasy and Potential Space') suggests that outside the concept's use in individual short stories, *Historias* may be a particularly promising place to approach with this idea of the two-fold play possible in *folie*.

#### *The Fast and the Pure*

Yurkievich offers the following disclosure at the start of his discussion of fantasy and the play he takes to be particularly evident in *Historias*: "Julio Cortázar makes it clear that he wrote his *Historias de cronopios y de famas* in little time and 'as a pure game' [...]" ("Julio Cortázar aclara que escribió sus *Historias de cronopios y de famas* en

poco tiempo y ‘como un puro juego [...]’” 125). Much as Yurkievich’s use of the author to settle doubts about the text cries out for a response, I would like to argue that we should pause and not allow the flawed process of his argument to hinder our analysis. Specifically, that even if his stated reason for that belief is insufficient, we should still seek to understand the significance behind what it is that Yurkievich wishes to attribute to Cortázar: a work that is written quickly and as a pure act of play.

If we take the statements not as they are offered, but symptomatically as revealing something about Yurkievich’s own view of *Historias*, then, we find something curious in the idea of velocity and pure play (or an action committed purely as a game). That is, Yurkievich’s representation reveals an incipient theoretical response to the text in the kind of play it believes may be supported: that of the quick and the unadulterated. Both qualities mark *Historias* in a particular way. In advancing the view that *Historias* was written quickly, Yurkievich provides a value for suddenness and the short form. Likewise, in suggesting that the work unfolds within a universe of undiluted play, we find a figure of speech that conveys unmitigated carefree activity.

The mark of speed makes an appeal to the psychology of the sudden, in which authenticity and innocence characterize that which bursts from the soul spontaneously. The second characterization continues this idea in a subtle way. For we see a more complicated notion of play behind the casual remark that the work was written ‘purely as a game’ or ‘as pure play’ (“como un puro juego”). With the citation, Yurkievich portrays Cortázar as writing the work without appeal to utilitarian demands or interests that would detract from writing purely as a playful recreation. That is, his writing it ‘purely as a game’ or ‘as pure play’ introduces the idea that a work might proceed in a series of



associations unburdened by necessities or schemes. The carefree play that the disclosure attempts to place at the head of Yurkievich's discussion portrays the author as willing to ignore a plan of action or prior commitments. There is something potentially unsettling in play that adopts these propositions. For in both the quick and the pure there is a loss of clear limits and definite projects. Increasingly, the speed and unencumbered play of fantasy looks like sheer folly—a way of resisting aesthetic order and coherence.

### *The Folly of Fantasy*

What, then, does this have to do with a folly wherein laughter and alarming ruptures are linked to challenge rationality? Yurkievich visits the question of such disruptive folly in the play of *Historias* subsequently, when he describes the disordering effect of fantasy as follows: 'Absolved from the strict observance of orderings, fantasy can alter the natural order, [...] entertain itself by dislocating the world through ludico-humoristic nonsense and unhinging [...]' ("Absuelta de la estricta observancia de los ordenamientos, la fantasía puede alterar el orden natural, [...] divertirse con dislocar el mundo por intermedio del dislate y del desquicio ludicohumorísticos [...]” 126). No longer is that play an instance of delight in pursuing the quick and the pure. Now it is a question of addressing the disordering effect of fantastic play.<sup>59</sup>

While Yurkievich does not proceed to theorize nonsense ('dislate') or unhinging ('desquicio') further, both terms suggest that there is an opening from which to examine

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<sup>59</sup> In "Historias de cronopios y de famas: El placer del juego," Carmen Domínguez joins Yurkievich in perceiving a disruption of order in the operations of the fantastic (35). However, Domínguez links that disruption to deconstructive play (35), rather than the admixture of madness and frivolity that I discuss.

the question of how the play of folly in Cortázar's fiction is linked to the shambles and chaos created in and around laughter and something darker.<sup>60</sup> In particular, he acknowledges that the natural order changes when fantasy is freed from its adherence to order.<sup>61</sup> Yet, he does not say this is inherent in fantasy. Rather it is a property of the way Cortázar plays with fantasy.

*Distinguishing Historias de cronopios y de famas*

It is noteworthy that it is in Yurkievich's discussion of this epigrammatic text, and not in his analysis of *Rayuela*, that this element of disruption comes to the fore. This folly of the text should be distinguished from the kind of play that so often garners attention in Cortázar's work. While one can largely credit the focus on play and the game in Cortázar to responses to *Rayuela*, this has tended to generate attention on the

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<sup>60</sup> The terms also suggest a parallel to the two settings of *folie*: that of the fool who will offer nonsense and that of madness, in which categories and concepts become unhinged from their former order.

<sup>61</sup> There is a more general consensus that *Historias* is concerned with this question of transforming familiar experience and altering perception of the everyday. In addition to Yurkievich who refers to "el orden natural," Chávez Silverman also sees the playful attitude of *Historias* as part of such an altered outlook (60). Chávez Silverman, in turn, attributes this sense of the work's concern for transforming the familiar to Manuel Durán, who discusses it in "Julio Cortázar y su pequeño mundo de cronopios y famas." Garfield places it in another context in *¿Es Julio Cortázar un Surrealista?*, when she links such transformation more broadly to surrealist endeavors (119-161). The focus of my own analysis is on the issue of how the folly of *Historias* creates openings in rationality and conceptual order.

novel's "Tablero de dirección" ('table of instructions' 13), framing the analysis of play in terms of the machinations of the text in relation to a reader.<sup>62</sup>

When Yurkievich refers to ludico-humoristic nonsense and unhinging, however, this touches on a particular play of unabashed foolishness and not simply on a structure of novelistic disjuncture and authorial mastery of a reader. In *Historias*, this element is more expressly at work in a series of short treatments that provide a chain of exercises that generate something more properly designated as the play of *folie*. Rather than treating the text as a game played by the reader, *folie* entails a play that re-situates rationality and sober order. As such, it offers a strategy of incoherence. The folly it offers is not necessarily a ludic artifact that presents its own parameters and boundaries within which meaning is shaped. Instead, signification takes place in the breaching of rational boundaries.

In what follows, I examine Cortázar's *Historias* with a focus on the way the text intermingles playful and alarming follies. Specifically, I examine how the work moves between these registers to cultivate an altered outlook. Whether in comic disruption or in the mad disjunctures and dissolution of reason, this folly provides an opportunity to tease loose threads of discursive order.

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<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Michael Hardin's "Non-cooperative Game Theory and Female Readers: How to Win the Game of *Hopscotch*." Hardin equates reading the novel with playing a game (57).

### 4.3 The Folly of Cortázar's *Historias de cronopios y de famas*

La tarea de ablandar el ladrillo todos los días, la tarea de abrirse paso en la masa pegajosa que se proclama mundo [...]. (*Historias* 407)

The job of having to soften up the brick every day, the job of cleaving a passage through the glutinous mass that declares itself to be the world [...]. (Cronopios and Famas 3)<sup>63</sup>

From the start, Cortázar's *Historias* takes up the problem of the way habits alternately follow from and re-enforce a given way of reasoning. Consequently, the text attempts to put into question the concepts on which our reasoning relies to reckon with reality. Repeatedly, the work suggests an approach that challenges reason with an admixture of fooling that includes everything from teasing to dark humor and wild disruption—all toward a dissolution of customs of thought.

Shortly later, the text puts that task in everyday terms by proposing that we resist the inertia wherein we find it far simpler “[...] aceptar la fácil solicitud de la cuchara, emplearla para revolver el café” (407; “to accept the easy request of the spoon, to use it, to stir the coffee” 4). The remark has a deceptive simplicity. While one could understand the answer to the spoon's “easy request” to necessitate a stern orderly response, it is the spoon that represents the order that such austerity would attempt to keep from spinning away.

Rather than say that we should resist habitual concepts (i.e., the spoon as a thing that has a particular function in relation to a cup of coffee), the text offers the idea that halts the exercise of custom: the thought that the spoon itself requests that one use it to stir the coffee. One hardly stirs the coffee from the same perspective, if at all, once one

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<sup>63</sup> As provocative as the idea of “cleaving a passage” is, we should note that it is derived from “abrirse paso” which translates more strictly as “opening a passage.”

has thought of the action as answering the entreaties of cutlery. While the folly in that proposed fantasy is subtle, it disrupts the very centripetal force of custom it depicts.

In this first instance, as in so many others in *Historias*, the model of order already has the seed of its own unraveling in the way the text presents custom. Along with the representation, there is a dislocation of the custom that is represented. The combined effect that we see in the case of the spoon, where we are at once presented with custom and the unraveling of the perspective that sustains familiar habit, is explored with particular force throughout the first section of *Historias*, (“Manual de instrucciones,” 405-18; “The Instruction Manual,” 1-25). Throughout, the instructions present an invitation to custom and seeking out direction, even as the directions offered unravel the productivity of instruction by choosing absurd material, unlikely means for accomplishing a goal, or a complete break from the frame of providing guidance, successful or otherwise.

### *Instructions in Melancholy*

In the first of these instructions (“Instructions on How to Cry”), we see this paradoxical thrust in the way advice undermines the very aim toward which the text offers directions. The instructions themselves appeal to laughter or cerebral detachment rather than placing the reader in a place of tears. When the text advises “[d]ejando de lado los motivos, [...]” (409; “[p]utting the reasons for crying aside for the moment [...]” 6), the broader romance of melancholy itself is undone. By setting aside the belief in the

importance of one's reasons for tears, we also set aside the idea that there is a natural motivation in the action that arises from sentiment.

The instructions in crying model themselves on a lesson in manners when they mention the proper way of crying as being “[...] un llanto que no ingrese en el escándalo, ni que insulte a la sonrisa con su paralela y torpe semejanza” (409; “[neither] a big commotion nor [weeping] that proves an affront to the smile with its parallel and dull similarity” 6). However, this too applies pressure against the force of sentiment that might inspire bawling or bittersweet expressions that reveal an admixture of melancholy and pleasure.

The process of emptying the act of crying of its sad affect continues, recast in the light of self-pity: “Para llorar, dirija la imaginación hacia usted mismo [...]” (409; “In order to cry, steer the imagination toward yourself [...]” 6). Alternately, outwardly directed sadness is teased too, when the directions entertain the possibility that the technique of steering the imagination towards oneself may not work for some people—not because they are selflessly altruistic, but owing to having acquired “el hábito de creer en el mundo exterior [...]” (409; “the habit of believing in the exterior world [...]” 6). The moment provides a casual rupture in passing. Like the subtle shading of the inviting spoon it also recasts habit. Belief in the world, an otherwise basal state of affairs, becomes just another permutation of the situation.

In that re-shaping of how we see habit and the teasing of those motivated by outwardly orientated sympathies, then, we find a suggestion that runs against the order of sadness in a more sudden way than the incremental ridiculousness entailed in presenting instructions for crying. That opening in the fabric of orderly instruction is torn further

when we are told that if we are unable to cry because we have “contracted the habit” of that belief, “[...] piense en un pato cubierto de hormigas o en esos golfos del estrecho de Magallanes *en los que no entra nadie, nunca*” (“think of a duck covered with ants or of those gulfs in the Straits of Magellan *into which no one sails ever*” 6). Neither thought is sad in itself. Even if we were able to conceive of sadness relative to the first (e.g., by supposing that the circumstance is a harmful one for the duck and that the creature is under distress or imminent disfigurement), the second guidance proposes not the disappearance of people or the possibility of harm done to other sentient creatures, but a void: a place where no one ever goes.

That second guidance creates a complete break, given the context of the instructions or any relation between sadness and the void. Even more striking, the instructions continue as though this break never happened, turning to the gestures involved in “the weeping itself,” and concluding by observing: “Duración media del llanto, tres minutos” (“Average duration of the cry, three minutes” 6). The return and continuation of the preceding instructions is perhaps less surprising than it should seem. In the break and the distancing treatment that proposes the folly of ridiculous instructions we find a shared labor: the unraveling not simply of the basis for crying, but of its coherence or the logic of melancholy affect. The instructions undermine rules by proposing a set of principles that unravel rationality *and* sentiment, both of which would draw on a common logic of crying that is unable to establish itself.

*Sight and Scent Singing in the Shadows*

A similar break within instructions occurs in the directions on how to sing.<sup>64</sup> The text advises that one will know one has begun to sing correctly if, when singing a single note, one hears “[...] algo como un paisaje sumido en el miedo, con hogueras entre las piedras, con siluetas semi-desnudas en cuclillas” (439; “[...] something like a landscape overwhelmed with dread, bonfires between the rocks with squatting half-naked silhouettes”) or if one hears “un río por donde bajan barcas pintadas de amarillo y negro, si oye un sabor de pan, un tacto de dedos, una sombra de caballo” (439; “a river, boats painted yellow and black are coming down it, if you hear the smell of fresh bread, [a touch of fingers,] the shadow of a horse” 7), then, one is well on one’s way to having sung well.<sup>65</sup> The instructions say nothing of what it means if you hear something else (e.g., a different colored boat) or nothing at all—the plainest of possibilities.

The instructions on how to sing are deliberately incomplete. This is precisely because in proposing a synesthetic experience, they introduce imaginative exercises that unravel the coherence of distinct places. One hears things that one would expect only to experience in other sensations. The instructions proceed on the assumption of a new order in which one may no longer take rationality and perceptual order to provide a way of organizing sensation into judgment (e.g., the success of song).

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<sup>64</sup> In the English edition, the “Instrucciones para cantar” follow after the crying instructions. However, in *Historias* it appears within the section entitled “Material plástico” (439).

<sup>65</sup> *Historias* 439. The English translation omits “un tacto de dedos.” I have included it in brackets.



However, much like the list of things that one should picture to elicit tears, in the list of sights that would indicate success in singing, we also experience the unraveling of a certain textual coherence. So while the first scene simply introduces the conceptual re-ordering of a synesthetic experience, by proposing that if one sings correctly one will see a definite visual composition, the second and third consist of a series of fragmented sensations. The bond between elements in the series is severed in the succession it presents in moving from the sight of boats on a river to the aroma of fresh bread, the touch of fingers, and the shadow of a horse. The boat introduces another sight, which is interrupted by the introduction of a scent, then, replaced by the touch of a person's hand, and finally interrupted by the horse's shadow.

### *Listing Fear*

In their mischief as directions and in providing breaks from a sensory order, these instructions continue the mixture of folly and mad ruptures that made possible the departure into *folie* observed in the first instructions on how to cry. That pattern is continued with greater emphasis on disjuncture in a third set, "Instrucciones-ejemplos sobre la forma de tener miedo" (410; "Instructions On or Rather Examples of How to Be Afraid" 8-9). However, once more, the text scrupulously avoids providing a formulation, in this case of how to be afraid. Rather than offering a method for fear, one finds an eclectic list that draws attention to the way fear arises as a response.

The list itself ranges from the sound of a dog barking in the distance, a place from which statues might be seen moving by moonlight, a watch that upon removal reveals the

presence of blood and small teeth marks, and a visit to a doctor at the end of which the patient notices the man is wearing women's stockings (410; 8-9). Having made it clear that there is only a response of unease, and not a method of fear, this set of instructions embarks directly on the task of cultivating confusion. The fragmented quality of the list supports this disordering effect since any single item never provides a fuller relatively coherent context for the other items. The text creates a departure from reason in the seeming arbitrariness of the set of fearful things.

In addition, alongside the eclecticism of the list, there is repeatedly the suggestion of a sudden fantastic break where mild disquiet may yield to a more profound unease. So while the dog barking in the distance may seem relatively tranquil (if still off-putting), the moving statues, biting watches and the surprise of a doctor's wearing stockings in his office all provide a sense of the unnerving dislocation of statues, discomfort with a watch and the sense of surprise that may await one when visiting a doctor's office.

Taken together, these instructions/examples and the preceding instructions shape disorientations. Offered as a way to get a bearing on tears, song, and fear—they instead insinuate the possibilities of absurdity and chaos. Notably, rather than doing so through the affect of those primal human experiences to which they refer (e.g., fear), guidance challenges the coherence through which one might customarily order one's outlook.

### *Curating Follies 1: Explanation as Playful Invention*

An underlying component of the disorientation afforded above is the way instructions challenge interpretive ground. When an outlook is thrown into confusion

and no longer able to sustain its coherence, interpretation changes from a structured and ordered activity into a series of inventive associations that unsettle once established contexts. That process continues in a more explicit manner in another set of instructions that present themselves precisely as guiding comprehension, “Instrucciones para entender tres pinturas famosas” (411-13; “How to Understand Three Famous Paintings” (10-13).

As with the other instructions, however, the guidance invites the reader to indulge in the mode of discourse it partially denies. The result, once more, is not simple satire or abjection, but an instance of *folie* that unravels reason from inside the discourse in which it exercises itself. A series of playful speculations and associations unfold from elements of paintings, breaking loose from an orderly discourse and introducing a mixture of fooling and a starker unraveling. The chain of those associations breaks with the visual coherence of the paintings in much the same way that the idiosyncratic item in a list could be seen breaking with the conceptual unity of the list. Thus, in the case of discussing Raphael’s *Lady of the Unicorn*, the guide takes the painting to provide an insight into its subject not because of the painter’s intent, but that of his rivals who deface it to make it more accurately reflect the wrong person’s correct condition (411; 11). Rather than clarify, restoration renders expressive insight more tenuous, since returning the painting to its original state means we no longer see the truth that was layered on by vandals.

Along with the symmetry of improvement by defacing and diminishment by restoration, the text sheds other conventions by introducing a surprising animus toward some of the subjects. For example, when describing a painting by Titian, the guide begins: “[e]sta detestable pintura [...]” (411; “[t]his hateful painting [...]” 10). The prose

of the instructions on how to understand paintings breaks from the model of historical truth and plays against the detached privilege that can accrue to placards or museum guidebooks as a consequence of their seeming to present impartial information.

A more explicit example of partiality can be found in the process of playful and somewhat reckless speculation that follows associations rather than historical facts. This is the case, for example, when the text contemplates an imaginary episode in response to the painting of *La dama del unicornio* (*Lady of the Unicorn*): “Cuántas veces Maddalena Strozzi cortó una rosa Blanca y la sintió gemir entre sus dedos, retorcerse y gemir débilmente [...]” (412; “How often Maddalena Strozzi cut a white rose and felt it squeak between her fingers, twisting and moaning weakly [...]” 11). The fragment interpolates a scene without the iconography of the unicorn or any other element in the painting itself other than the woman, now set in a different scene than that evident in the painting. It replaces the painting with a fantasy of Strozzi’s routine. Like the watch with teeth on the wrist of a traveling salesman, the rose that squeaks uses an element of the fantastic to introduce a break in the fabric of ordered reality.

A similar departure from the act of simple explanation or direct description occurs in the guidance relative to another painting, an iconic portrait of a portly Henry VIII by Holbein. The text breaks off into the *folie* of a more sustainedly disjointed list when it proceeds to enumerate what others have seen when looking at the painting: “Se ha querido ver en este cuadro una cacería de elefantes, un mapa de Rusia, la constelación de Lira, el retrato de un papa disfrazado de Enrique VIII, una tormenta en el mar de los Sargazos [...]” (412; “an elephant hunt, a map of Russia, the constellation Lyra, a portrait of the pope disguised as Henry VIII, a storm over the Sargasso Sea [...]” 12). After this,

the text entertains an even more stark option: “[...] ese pólipo dorado que crece en las latitudes de Java y que bajo la influencia del limón estornuda levemente y sucumbe con un pequeño soplado” (412; “[...] the golden polyp which thrives in the latitudes south of Java and which, under the influence of lemon, sneezes delicately and succumbs with a delicate whiff” 12).

There is an element of humor in the oddity of the list, but particularly in the view that the painting depicts the pope disguising himself as a schismatic. Like the other painting, there is also a disorder that plays out visual associations. The portrait of Henry VIII might be any in a chain of exceptions or departures from accepted custom. Like the rose, the golden polyp acquires anthropomorphic qualities (i.e., sneezing) that provide a further entrance into the imaginary.

The playful and particularly disruptive association of the painting with a marine landscape is facilitated by an association that is never expressly stated and which one must look to the painting by Holbein to observe: that the King’s sleeves include a shoulder area that is globular and yellow and which resembles a golden polyp. In turn, the oyster and shells of the extended account of that particular interpretation of the painting’s content can be seen as having a basis in the visual appearance of other elements of his vestment.

In the accounts of the paintings, invention and imaginative speculation replace cold explanation. Settled or historical groundings succumb to a series of shifting associations that explore alternate paths of signification. Thus, humorous or discordant associations play against a prevailing rationality about represented content as well as what constitutes the proper way of presenting the interpretation of that content. As a

result, yellow cloth can become the basis for stating that a painting of Henry VIII is in some subtle way not quite all that it seems to be, and contemplation of a misattributed subject's life in non-historical detail creates an opening for exploring a fragmentary narrative in which roses come alive.

*Curating Follies 2: Re-working the Calm into Violence and Shambles*

A different feature of the painting passages draws out a series of ruptures other than those that play on custom in a comic vein. Specifically, we see a glimpse of a more absolute break in the way the descriptions of the paintings are replete with a strain of violence alongside chaotic disjointedness and playful associations. Thus, at the end of the unicorn painting (412; 12), we are told that the unicorn will kill the woman when it “[...] penetra en su seno majestuoso con el cuerno labrado de impudicia (“digs into her superb breast its horn working with lust”) and that the woman herself also holds in her hands “la copa misteriosa de la que hemos bebido sin saber” (“the mysterious cup from which we have all drunk unknowingly”). Finally, the guide reports that the vessel in her hand holds “el vino rojo y lechoso de donde salen las estrellas, los gusanos y las estaciones ferroviarias.” (“that red and foamy wine from which come the stars, the worms, and the railroad stations”).

The tranquil portrait of a woman with a kid sized goat curled up in her arms is transformed instead into a scene of unexplained violence that clearly touches upon a sexual theme in lingering on lust and her bosom, to say nothing of the candid characterization of the creature at the start as “[un] animal fálico [...]” (411; “a phallic

animal” 11). Even after this darker scene, however, the text presents an exegetical discussion of a cup depicted in her hands. That exegesis is vaguely elegiac and poetic rather than orientating with sources of information. It also takes its own lighter turn toward disjuncture in the railroad station mention that parallels the former mad unicorn scene in its break, but in a peaceful tone.

The painting of Henry VIII includes a similar rupture toward the end of the guide’s discussion, when we are told: “[e]ste hombre que te mira vuelve del infierno [...]” (412; “[t]his man looking at you comes back from hell [...] 13) and that as you step back from the painting “lo verás sonreír poco a poco, porque *está hueco* [...] como una figura de barajas cuando se empieza a levantar el Castillo y todo tiembla” (412-13; “you will see him smile a bit at a time, because he is empty [...] like a playing-card figure, when you begin to pick him up the castle and everything totters” 13). Just as before, looking becomes an act of exploring an alternative to familiar orientation, as playfully delusive contemplation gives rise to a fantastic appropriation of visual material. In the immediate case, the flat painting becomes a flat world that can be picked up like a card and which will unravel in that act. The violence of the underworld lingers nearby.

That dissolution of the mimetic surface provides an opportunity for one more dose of fooling. At the end, an implicit visual resemblance between the painting in question and a King in a deck of cards creates a discreet joke in the mention of the play-card figure. The joke briefly returns the text to the comic plane as a mischievous upending of the painting’s historical weight, or that of Henry VIII, when the text compares the figure’s imposing presence with an everyday object. In this last regard, that folly provides a way of leveling the portrait and the historical world it might be used to

establish, turning instead to play in the moment that takes up what is at hand in an improvised fashion rather than turning to authoritative sources.

What one must note in all these instructions is the way the text cultivates an alternative experience of customs by shifting between playful fooling that momentarily dislocates an accepted perspective and a mad disordering that knocks the newly loosened perspective from its place of standing. From the play of these two tactics of folly an alternative may emerge. Thus, Sadness offers an entrance into conceptual rather than affective chaos. Singing becomes a way of experiencing layered and confusing visions rather than moving emotional responses to items on a list and not imminent peril. The instructions for understanding paintings display the opposite process, replacing habits of affect with procedures. Since the custom of interpretation is already depersonalized and historical in this case, breaking in on that familiar coherence entails a different transformation.

### *Material plástico*

In the instructions, the pursuit of *folie* affords an alternative to otherwise evident options of discourse. The result is a multiplication of alternatives that transform the circumstance through which the portraits are received. This process itself repeats as a technique throughout the work in other exercises in perception, particularly in another section entitled “Material plástico” (437-68; “Unstable Stuff” 55-105).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> One should note that there is only a conceptual instability that pertains to mutable material. Such material is not necessarily ‘unstable,’ if by this term one has in mind the sense of something explosive.



Turning to several stories within this section, we may see how the play of fantasy acquires a metaphysical dimension when ordinary realities are either transformed through a character's imagination or are given an underlying alternative that is on the verge of becoming manifest. In many cases that alternative to the accepted prior view takes on a kind of frivolous quality, wherein a single simple proposition is carried through to its greater consequences. The effect is one of playful invention or daydreaming from a single point of departure rather than pushing elements out of place within a systematic scheme of elaborate mechanisms and regulations. If it is a game, it is one with a loose set of principles that include the substitution of cultivated foolishness in its outlook on the real.

In one of the first instances of this mutable material, "Vietato introdurre biciclette" (442; 61-2), the text takes up the case of bicycles, which are excluded from Parisian business offices and other locales by signs that forbid their entrance.<sup>67</sup> Building on the image of bicycles as sad creatures categorically excluded, the text plays off the partial statement of rules to pursue the idea of the prohibition to deliberately reductive lengths. These lengths are explored as the text considers what might transpire if other creatures entered an office and reaches the conclusion that even such an exclusion would be less hard, since it would not constitute "una fría maquinación preestablecida [...]"

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<sup>67</sup> The story itself does not acknowledge the strangeness of the signs, which use Italian for the prohibition ('*vietato introdurre*') and French to designate the object of that command ('*biciclette*'). In one way, they create a confusion that operates at cross-purposes with the ban they enforce. The multiple languages and references to authority in social conduct also link it to the story "Inconvenientes en los servicios públicos" (492; "Improprieties in the Public Services" 144-45). There too the insertion of another language (Romanian) into government broadcasts sparks confusion. In this case, bafflement is generated within the story more explicitly, as the use of a language that is rarely spoken in Argentina serves to undermine official authority.

impresa en chapas de bronce o de esmalte, tablas de la ley inexorable que aplastan la sencilla espontaneidad de las bicicletas, seres inocentes” (442; “a coldly pre-established plot, [...] printed on bronze plaques or enamel notices, inexorable tablets of the law which crush the simple spontaneity of bicycles, the innocent creatures” 62).

The basic proposition that bicycles are innocent and spontaneous beings develops out of extending the interpretation of the prohibition and what it could mean in a world where bicycles are not quite anthropomorphized so much as turned into a kind of simple pet that longs only to lap about. However, in the last section, rather than viewing an object as inviting one to re-enforce habit, the narrator contemplates how someday bicycles may rise up against custom (442; 62). That rebellion is envisioned as having dire consequences for the business offices that excluded the once calm creatures. Partially extending the folly it has offered throughout, the last scene presents a transformation of the adorable domestic creatures, which are now a mob of handle-bared monsters.

As a whole, the bicycle text is continually stretching towards allegory. At the same time, it avoids providing a didactic moral other than the broad notion that restrictions on exploratory actions produce the contemplation of extreme measures. The mentions of “plate glass windows” and “insurance companies” do not provide access to a parallel signification out of which allegory might emerge. Instead, the fantastic alternative is played out relative to a world in which signage does not have that consequence. The fantastic alternative that they might be these things presents a playful departure from a set of realistic laws. That maneuver is also at the heart of all the

circumstances that follow—including the transgression of a printed stricture in the final uprising.

Another such imaginative invention is contemplated within “Posibilidades de la abstracción” (444-45; “The Possibilities of Abstraction” 64-66). However, the result of daydreaming within the account is not one of freedom from law, but one of grim consequences presented alongside the daydreaming: an unsettling disconnect from the consequences in the world for the one abstracting. The act of fantasizing that the story of bicycles itself displayed, then, is shown unraveling and leading to its own disaster as an action within a story. That is, the playfulness of the bicycle story proper is placed within the actions of a particular character in a story about abstraction.

The particular culprit of that outcome is a man’s ability within the fiction to imagine, then to see elements in isolation—a kind of selective sight and ability to erase what he doesn’t like and focus on things he prefers. From the outset, he admits: “[a] veces es casi malsana esta facilidad que tengo” (444; “[t]his power that I have, it’s almost unhealthy” 64). The story proceeds along an arc that transforms that “almost” into a certainty for the reader by providing a series of examples that mix instances of puckish adolescent prankishness with a kaleidoscopic vision that re-orientes mundane scenes. In either variety and through their cumulative effect, we are able to observe the narrator trapped within the exercise of abstraction while other needs press themselves.

In the first of the examples of abstraction, he explains that: “[...] si no me gusta un tipo lo borro del mapa con solo decidirlo [...]” (444; “[...] if I don’t like a guy I wipe him [from the map] solely by deciding to do so [...]” 64). Alternately, if there is a lady he likes, he entertains himself adolescently by abstracting her clothes away and “mientras

me habla de lo fría que está la mañana yo me paso largos minutos admirándole el ombligo” (444; “while she talks to me about what a cold morning it is, I’m spending long minutes admiring her little belly button” 64). That initial freedom from tedium is followed by something that might at first suggest a likeminded freedom for him to objectify, but which marks the way he is also not present to the moment in that objectification that focuses on the “ombligo” (“little belly button”). While these abstractions seem to provide a flight from unpleasantness, what he comes to find pleasant (i.e., an escape from the moment’s social interaction) will later become the basis for what is rendered problematic within the story itself.

The recreation of abstraction in the ensuing examples provides an account of what UNESCO offices look like if one isolates a single element. The first of these are ears which move all around the office, then, which seem to settle at the cafeteria in great numbers, and which finally fly off on their own (444; 64). The process of isolation builds to an invention and metamorphosis in the associations of shape with something else—as the yellow puffs on Henry VIII’s shoulders previously became marine creatures. Later, when buttons are isolated, we observe a similar transformation of perception: “ojos opacos que se desplazaban horizontalmente, mientras a los lados de cada pequeño batallón horizontal se balanceaban pendularmente dos, tres o cuatro botones” (444; “opaque eyes which crept horizontally, while alongside and somewhat below each little horizontal battalion, two, three, or four cuff buttons swung like pendulums” 65). In like fashion, walking becomes a swinging of threads of buttons while a visit to the elevator dazzles (444; 65).

The first sense of a move away from simple delights appears at the end of this particular exercise in abstraction, when the man observes: “[o]cho botones rojos dibujaban una delicada vertical, y aquí y allá se movían suavemente unos pequeños discos nacarados y secretos. Esa mujer debía ser tan hermosa” (444; “[e]ight red buttons sketched an exquisite vertical, and here and there a few small pearly secret disks moved delicately. She must have been a very beautiful woman” 65). No longer is he able to access the original point of reference and proceed to enact the process of objectification. Instead, he starts already from a world of objects in which the type of body he earlier clamored after is absent. That development presents an internal sign of restriction within the text. Even as we might welcome the particular harness, the story sets up a contrast in the man’s ability between the later wistful sight of “unos pequeños discos nacarados y secretos” (“a few small pearly secret disks”) and the earlier focus on a similarly diminutive belly button that he opted to see in isolation. Between the two moments, we may discern a process of ever more impoverished daydreaming.

That sense of restriction and loss is completed in the final scene, when the man returns to his office, learns he has been fired and fails to respond to the turbulence around him. Instead, he focuses on the tears of his secretary and sees “diminutive crystalline fountains which appeared in the air” and now concludes that “[l]a vida está llena de hermosuras así” (445; “[l]ife is full of such fair sights as these” 66). That conclusion acquires an awkward bitter taste as a horrifying faculty of abstraction moves from adolescent entertainments, to kaleidoscopic visions and finally the horror of his follies.

*Cronopic Folly*

In the last section, “Historias de cronopios y de famas” (469-501; “Cronopios and Famas” 107-61), Cortázar turns to let folly loose within plot and character elements of a fantastic narrative. The instructions challenged habit by making discourse susceptible to re-alignment and collapse (new associations re-align while the hindrance of former associations creates a collapse in the order that sustained a bind e.g., in the logic of melancholy). “Historias de cronopios y de famas,” on the other hand, cultivates humor and the unraveling of order through a figure of folly and the effect and relation of that disordering on others.

Specifically, folly surrounds the way cronopios act in relation to two other groups (famas and esperanzas) that live in a fantastic and sometimes allegorical parallel world. Beyond the fantasy of new creatures itself, then, one finds the cronopios repeatedly embracing folly and provoking bafflement or outrage around them. Interspersed in other small narratives and statements about the ways of cronopios, famas, and esperanzas, then, we find several kinds of settings in which folly comes to the fore. The first two settings place an emphasis on an oppositional arrangement between cronopios as figures of folly and the world that avoids or cannot reconcile that break from reason. The third setting, in turn, undoes that bind to a degree. Let us look at how folly plays out and takes up a series of orderings at these three turns: defining the cronopio, the folly of the cronopio in conflict, and re-thinking the relation of cronopic folly to the world.

*Defining the figure of folly: 'Cronopio cronopio'*

In the first defining portraits of the cronopio, the text establishes contrasts by listing the way different groups tend to act in a given predicament. In “Costumbres de los famas” (“Normal Behavior of the Famas”), the text relates that after one fama dances in a way that it is fond of doing, angered esperanzas attack (473; 112). Afterward, cronopios come out from where they were hiding to console the fama by saying: “– Cronopio cronopio cronopio” (473; 112). The fama, for its part, understands and finds loneliness less bitter.

In the episode, then, we find the cronopio speaking in a way marked as different. That utterance is semantically nonsensical but comprehensible in interaction. That split suggests the difference between semantic coherence and the world of the reader versus contextual sensibility in the world on display before the reader. In the folly of that staging there is a gap. Since the cronopio is understood by the fama, but not by us, it is less the cronopio that is excluded in that marked difference, than it is the audience. In this respect, the episode introduces something that will occur at other instances, namely the cronopio speaking by saying ‘cronopio’ and the import of the utterance being understood by the one to whom the cronopio speaks.

The end of the episode also presents the only physical description of a cronopio, as a wet green thing (473; 112). That description marks the cronopio again, now as a fantastic anthropomorphic creature. However, the description itself also raises questions. Is this the way this particular cronopio looks, or the way all look? Are they generally moist and green? Such questions arise because of an ambiguity in the way the episode

presents a general portrait that sometimes moves into anecdotal particularity. As such, we are right to wonder whether a) the events or parties portrayed relate in this way with regularity; b) it is a particular but expressively representative occurrence; or c) what started as a general portrait at some point became the relation of a one-off occurrence. The result is a degree of tenuousness in the portrait, leaving it open to doubt even as it gestures toward definition.

Another episode that depicts the cronopio in child-like terms provides a similarly ambivalent gesture of definition. In “Alegría del cronopio” (“Gayety of the Cronopio”), a fama and a cronopio meet in a store and have another nonsensical conversation (475; 114-5). Once more, a cronopio and fama interact, while esperanzas ominously linger nearby. As in the preceding instance of comprehensible nonsense, the interaction creates meaning around what started as an incoherent exchange for the reader. Worried that an esperanza will hear it, the fama weighs its words. While the fama thinks, the cronopio speaks, noticing it is raining outside. The fama, then, tells the cronopio not to worry and invites it to ride in the fama’s car so that the cronopio can protect the threads. Seeing no esperanza in the air, the fama exhales with relief.<sup>68</sup> Inside the car, the story concludes by noting how the fama takes satisfaction watching the cronopio’s joy as it holds the two threads to its chest, one of them blue.

The story itself has a certain facile quality. Yet, in that simplicity it conveys a series of impressions about these types and their relation to each other. There is clearly something puerile to the cronopio who trades in nonsense but elicits a certain invitation to share in the satisfaction of that experience from the fama’s perspective. While the fama

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<sup>68</sup> *Historias* 473. “Y mira el aire, pero no ve ninguna esperanza [...]” In Spanish, this could also mean no ‘hope’ in the air, a pun that alludes to the glum weather.



shows worries and concerns, and displays awkwardness in its interaction, the cronopio seems to act within a different world. Where famas hesitate, cronopios speak and live in the moment. Likewise, when the fama exhales with relief, this too signals a different experience of reality and the distance between the outlook of the fama and the cronopio, who can experience no such relief from the vantage point of a certain carefree perspective.

Two more episodes portray a more marked contrast between the cronopio's facile folly and the world that runs counter to it in which famas and esperanzas live. The first of these contrasts the way famas travel to how cronopios do so (479; 121-22), while the other describes the way cronopios sing and the response all around them (486; 134). In "Viajes" (479; "Travel" 121-22), the famas prepare and organize diligently and close out their day with a circular dance in a town square followed by an *aperitivo* at a nearby café. Meanwhile, the cronopios travel without preparing and have all manner of misfortune: full hotels, missed trains, and drenching rain. However, they do not become dispirited since they believe these occurrences happen to everyone.

One thing that is notable in the happiness of the unprepared cronopio's folly is how it establishes a difference between it, on the one hand, and the narrator and the audience envisioned by that narration on the other. For in what cronopios do not know, the text creates an ironic distance at the moment when it says that they are happy because they believe these events befall everyone. Since we know this is not the case, we also do not experience reality in the way of cronopios. Ironic distance is not necessarily derisive or satirical relative to the cronopio. Rather, there is a value to that fool's perspective, since it affords an ability to take something different from travel related disasters.

This setting apart of the cronopio and its seeming capacity to wear the fool's cap relative to the world appears once more in another portrait that adds something of the ecstatic to that picture. In "El canto de los cronopios" (486; "Song of the Cronopios" 134), we learn that when cronopios sing their favorite songs they become so enthusiastic that they drop what they are doing, lose what they carry in their bags and all sense of the days. Noteworthy, is not that this is a basic everyday occurrence, but that the cronopio is capable of such abandon and immersion in an experience not reflected in the world around it. This, of course, contrasts with the *famas* and *esperanzas* around cronopios who listen but do not understand much and generally become scandalized.

The song of the cronopio is accompanied by a performance in dance at the end when the cronopio lifts its little arms to the sky as though it is Salomé undressed and holding the sun up to the sky as though the former is the head of John the Baptist and the latter the plate on which it rests. Mouths agape, the audience nonetheless applauds good-naturedly waking the cronopio from its ecstatic performance. Believing that it itself is in the audience of a performance by someone else, the cronopio proceeds to applaud too.

The dance creates a series of disorientating inversions in the course of arriving at that moment of endearing clowning at the end when the cronopio applauds not knowing it claps for itself. First, the account shifts from the general to the particular, once more raising the issue of ambiguity observed before (i.e., what it means when the text moves from how cronopios act to the actions of a particular cronopio). Next, the narrator either compares or reveals the comparison of someone in the scene who makes the cronopio's dance into that of another scene/performance. In that similitude it proposes—one can barely latch onto the compared scene, since no other circumstance adheres to that

association between the dancer and Salomé. There is no King for whom the cronopio dances and the plate and head held up are in the sky and thereby inverted upside down floating above or with the dancer dangling over from the ground.

The comparison does not so much create insight as confusion. Did the cronopio seek the sun and use its dance to separate it from its body? What is the sun's body? None of these questions matter, which is the point. Like the lists in the instructions section, a simple link disorders by preventing access to a vantage point of comprehensive coherence. The simple link suggests two principal things: ecstasies and the explosion of rationality in dance. The disorientation created by the scandalous scene parallels a disruption and disordering of the cronopio's ecstasy in general and so seems quite fitting to the dance. Nevertheless, it generates a contagious chaos in the moment that is concluded with the return to a sense of the cronopio in a certain puerile distance where it is endearing by being unaware. Thus, a moniker of "pobrecito" ("poor fellow") continues the earlier affection toward the cronopio as fool when it lifted up its little arms (474; 134).<sup>69</sup>

### *Cronopic Disruption and Conflict*

A second series of episodes shift from providing emblematic contrastive portraits to placing the cronopio in a particular circumstance in which the creature's folly produces a series of disruptions that prompt an opposing response from the productivity and

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<sup>69</sup> In Spanish this sense of affection is more obvious both in "pobrecito" as well as when the cronopio's arms are described as "bracitos" rather than just 'brazos' or 'brazos pequeños' (474).

orderliness of the world their folly partially unravels. In particular, we witness a more elaborated chain of events in two instances. The first of these instances depicts what transpires at a factory when cronopios opt to pursue other activities than the work their fama employers have assigned them (“Comercio,” 484-85; “Business,” 128-29). The second includes one of the few intimations of political violence and describes how a cronopio minister generates anger from famas by altering the broadcast language of all government bulletins to Romanian (“Inconvenientes en los servicios públicos,” 492; “Improprieties in the Public Services,” 144-45).<sup>70</sup> Both episodes challenge certain expectations that they seem to be on the verge of fulfilling. Rather than complete the path they set out, they bend away at crucial moments and shake loose the formulaic way of viewing the basic situation they describe.

Consider the first situation of the factory. In “Comercio,” a group of famas opens a factory and employs numerous cronopios in the manufacture of color hoses. The cronopios proceed to distribute the colorful hoses around the city. Upon meeting a child, the cronopio workers give her a piece of blue hose. She uses the hose to skip and puts herself in a bubble made by the motion of the hose. When parents attempt to take the hose and use it to water their garden, they discover the tubes are rigged with holes such that water leaks out.

While facile in its way of describing events that seem to flow easily without conflict or disruption in a kind of fantasy of tubing—the scenario also plays on notions of productivity, labor, and the logic of the frivolous as witnessed in the actions of the cronopio workers. Initially, one could expect the story of factory rebellion to take on a

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<sup>70</sup> While inconvenience ensues from an official impropriety, the title in Spanish does not expressly refer to improprieties.

political struggle that might transpose the economic roles of owners and the workers to famas and cronopios. Instead, the perspective that informs the idea of a struggle becomes comically redefined in the playful world of color hoses. The result of that influence is less a struggle than it is a surreptitious folly that creates a defiance of the serious productivity sought by famas or parents. The factory, of course, goes to pieces, but not in conflict so much as in a transformation of something that is created and inverted in improvisational play rather than manufactured.

It is noteworthy that the scenario ends with discontent but not reactive or contesting famas. Greater conflict emerges in “Inconvenientes en los servicios públicos.” Here too, however, the political undertow pulls in a different direction than the narrative at first suggests it might. “Inconvenientes” begins: “[v]ea lo que pasa cuando se confía en los cronopios” (492; “[s]ee what happens when you trust the cronopios” 144). The statement could suggest either a weary indulgence of cronopios or even a certain annoyance, but in neither case does it immediately signal the violent reaction that follows and the last twist in the unusual legacy that then follows that violence.

First, then, what happens? A cronopio minister translates all radio broadcasts into Romanian and proceeds to resituate the regular program with the new broadcast script. When famas complain in telephone calls, a woman is given a script for responding in Romanian. The cronopio minister’s folly produces a harsh response in official quarters and he is sentenced to a firing squad. By this point, there is an undertone of politics and historical struggles over language. However, curiously, the language introduced is not a minority or marginalized language, but one that is not comprehended. Thus, what seemed to tally with an allegory of political repression of cultures and languages is

instead a repression of that folly in the mad idea that one might alter reality as it is experienced linguistically.

Humor continues to adjoin violence and discontent, as the first firing squad consists of cronopios that have been conscripted, and the group proceeds to misfire deliberately into the assembled crowd gathered to witness the execution. The dark humor in that act of folly is fortified with the chaos in the violence it suggests—both in the firings and in the conscription of one group to exercise the will of more powerful parties. When a second firing squad ends the misadventure by executing the ministers, the grim quality in the episode seems well established. We should see this turn of events in connection with the endearing portrait of cronopio antics elsewhere. For in that context, there is particular poignancy not only in its allegorical link to political violence beyond the text, but within it, relative to the network of meanings created in defining cronopios as good natured even when they annoy. The text shapes a sense of the cronopio as a lovable fool, rather than the wild force that famas might take to require restrictions and control.

Thus, the perception the text cultivates elsewhere runs against that interpretation upheld within the frames of the political violence in the story. Where officials see madness and danger, we have been brought to see a puerile folly. That lighter sense of fool's play is re-affirmed one last time. At the end, the cronopio minister's action has the result of making people cease to listen to the official radio broadcasts and sparks an interest in the study of Romanian among the fama population. A new reality is produced by the chain of events that follow on that experience of folly provided by the cronopic prank.

*Re-thinking Exclusion*

That strange note of optimism about the effect of folly is picked up in a third setting. While the first setting defined cronopios (variously contrasting them to famas, esperanzas, the narrator, and the audience) and the second setting presented the conflicts and disordering chaos that arose in an oppositional understanding of folly, a third setting touches upon the complementary folly provided by the differences that mark the cronopio's unreason. In the process, the roles of famas and the serious or non-playful world are reconsidered in a more subtle and uncertain light.

Such is the case in "Filantropía" ("Philanthropy"), when the altruism of famas is described by remarking upon their great capacity for acts of generosity (485; 130-31). The statement runs counter to the impression created in the conflict of "Inconvenientes," where little generosity is shown toward the mischief of the minister. Nevertheless, to be capable of generosity is certainly different from exercising it. The remainder of the piece proceeds beyond that limited qualification to suggest not only that they are capable, but that they are in actuality also more generous than cronopios, who often pass by suffering when they see it.

One consequence of this alignment is to suggest a blurring of any categories wherein cronopios are fun and innocent while famas are no fun and sometimes autocratically uncaring. The typology established at other turns is partially shaken loose when the piece portrays cronopios as not being "generosos por principio" (485; "generous on principle" 130), and famas as helping those they see in trouble. The text

creates a different shade for each from that implied in other instances, proposing a complementary role in the process. In this view, it is fortunate the famas can be generous since others are unable to act that way and often are themselves in need of that generosity.

Another instance inverts the simple notion of cronopios as good and famas as sometimes hard hearted. In “Pegue la estampilla en el ángulo superior derecho del sobre” (498; “Place the Stamp in the Upper Right-hand Corner of the Envelope,” 155-56), a cronopio instigates a confrontation at a post office after taking offense at the idea of attaching stamps with a repugnant image to a letter sent to his wife who is travelling with the wife of a fama friend who has also gone to post a letter. After the cronopio is kicked out of the post office, the fama consoles the cronopio by telling him that in his letter he told his wife his friend was fine, so she will tell the other’s wife.

Here the cronopio no longer seems the happy fool, but more the out of control figure who loses his head, though hardly in the ecstatic way of the song and dancing observed before. The consoling roles are reversed from earlier too, when there was the hint of a complement in the way the cronopio consoled the dancing fama after being beaten by esperanzas. The interaction also avoids providing a difference that will furnish easy judgments about cronopios or famas. That is, it is not clear whether either acts in a more estimable fashion, but it is fortunate that they do since one will at least be able to relay news.



#### 4.4 Conclusion: Exercises in Folly

What is significant about the way *Historias* unravels rationality at so many turns? It presents a method concerned with generating folly and abandoning habit. Frequently, the ground that it disturbs is that of the everyday but there is more at issue. The simplest understanding of its folly, then, is to view its consequence as forcing a series of encounters with a set of experiences located in the moment.

Does it attempt only to redefine those particular experiences? That level of specificity would seem ill suited to serve as the only level of encounter, since not everyone will sing, work at those factories or find themselves discussing a portrait of Henry VIII. We only begin to get a sense of what is significant when we frame the text not as providing insights on the particular subject it appears to address, but as exercises that taken together cultivate an unreasonable approach that takes shape in an aesthetic context. That is, abandoning habit not simply in a series of activities but in a range of conditions that impact on a single activity: reading and the perception of sense-making in the context of productive seriousness.

In cronopic folly, such an exercise develops first in the ruptures wrought upon the real by a definition of a fantastic creature that follows a principle of deviation from famous sobrieties. Eventually, that definition itself finds its certainties intruded upon by a class of episodes that present an alternative to the boundaries created even in that opposition. Even in its unconventionality, *Historias* proceeds to surprise and defy efforts to take it seriously.

In the instructions section we observe this facet of the way the text plays upon reading habits, first in appealing to and alternately in undermining the posture of instructive discourse. The idea of instruction itself entails a model of serious learning that is undone by fractured and comic absurdity. The absurdity it enacts is not only relative to the range of individual situations presented in the instructions themselves, but to the way reading understands or grapples with coherence. So, for example, while it is true that the list of things that provoke fear make one consider how fear may arise at surprising intervals, that list also breaks with the coherence suggested in reading a list. The folly of this play resides in how the text breaks from the order in which it seems to promise ready significations.

Here we turn to an insight at the end of Castro-Klarén's discussion when she credits the success of Cortázar's efforts with making it no longer possible to take art seriously. Despite the earlier emphasis on seriousness, Castro-Klarén allows that one of the strengths of Cortázar's writing may be that it takes "the philosophy of surrealism and the imperturbability of 'pataphysics further than ever before" and that the "belief in the seriousness of art is also rendered untenable" (235-6). In this unraveling of reading with a strategy of *folie*, *Historias* also compels a certain self-consciousness about its own condition of reception and the possibilities of undermining aesthetic convention. Even in its literary form, *Historias* pursues an alternative to serious aesthetic demands in defying convention that classifies accepted or rebellious approaches to genre. It is neither a genre of the past, nor an experimental riff that points to and re-interprets that past for another age. In this regard, the work partially extricates itself from the knot of value and short-circuits some of the aesthetic justifications that tempt criticism to give a work serious

purpose and a place within a new tradition that builds on the past. This is what makes the folly of this text so interesting and distinct from Cortázar's more coherent forms.

However boldly other works may strike against convention, they risk taking convention for granted—albeit in a subtle way—and so refrain from a certain foolishness relative to that legacy.

Cultivating folly is crucial to the way *Historias* presents an alternative in which seriousness is not yet established as a concern of the first order. The critic may yet harden the brick, but faced with folly, the text opens a new vertigo that momentarily blocks the attempt to exercise a certain familiar institutional reckoning with the world the text presents. It is that exploration of an alternative that most recalls the *folie* that Foucault describes—for in it we may witness an unraveling that does not undo order *per se*, but rather something that offers a network of significations that break from a prevailing orthodoxy.

In this regard, Cortázar's predicament of countering order could in time constitute its own order, in need of a response that attempts to shake loose sedimented seriousness with the play of new follies—new frivolities of play. Here too, as we observed in the follies explored by Borges and Cabrera Infante, wisdom is re-defined by a folly that holds its own sense of an alternative sagacity. Yet, that very alternative is rendered more porous and susceptible to folly by its acceptance of a tone of frivolity. One of the features of *Historias*, however, seems to be a certain acceptance of that provisional status.

As a text, the folly *Historias* pursues is not necessarily something grand that the critic can argue is its lasting contribution. Instead, what is so notable about the work is the way it displays an ephemeral gap—a space that is unraveled in a moment and which

may vanish as we reestablish conceptual order. Regardless of whether we ultimately reject it, linger a bit longer in the pause, or establish a ground in the new arrangement that *folie* has furnished, for a moment, the text is ready to press us to become more conscious of its force.

In this respect, we may also return to note that there is a consequence for how we understand the experimental context that Castro-Klarén described relative to Cortázar's playfulness. While a new modulation of the way we approach reality may be in the offing—that alternative unfolds in an intricately intertwined way with the system of meaning that precedes and defines it as folly. The success in that labor depends not on inherent properties of the work, but in the way we are able to conceive of situating ourselves relative to these pressures. The appeal to *folie* may open up the range of that conceptualization, but it provides only an invitation to incoherence.

## Conclusion: The Play of Folly

What does it mean for a writer to play at folly? It means teasing loose something that a given moment and setting have made it difficult for us to embrace. Studying that folly, provides insight on the way in which a text breaks from a particular way of defining what is wise. While that folly could be in the disorder that rationality attempts to exclude or define as insignificant, it may also mean locating laughter in the ephemeral experience of the body and making the grotesque a place of nostalgic remembrance. To play at folly may also mean unraveling the comfort of ironic alliances, by emptying appearance of the ground that could define intention for some. However, whether for Cortázar in his disordering of conceptual frames in the play of *Historias de cronopios y de famas*, or for Cabrera Infante in his unseating of cultural ideals in the immediacy of the body in *Tres tristes tigres*, or for Borges in his emptying of appearance in spectral follies, we are faced with a bend away from play that garners ready acceptance.

This is the problem out of which frivolity arises in literary play—as a characterization of certain practices. It is also the chief point of interest about such play. Frivolous play elicits a display of a system's characterization while appealing to some manner of invitation or engagement. That appeal may be alarming, but it is also useful for making fiction a place for confronting or even refining the judgments through which we reckon with experience. In not accepting a given position, folly may belabor and frustrate a point that we already accept. However, it may also allow for a second or third encounter with aspects of experience we had distanced ourselves from what looked to be settled concepts.

For the purposes of the present discussion, I have examined a part of play that serious discourse has in one manner or another deemed imprudent. While the tendency within play criticism to emphasize a series of sobering instances of play was one cause for this investigation, the first chapter examined the basis of the rhetoric of serious play in aesthetic and theoretical efforts to privilege what could be construed to hold value relative to the seemingly contrasting spheres of art and work. Both the ideals of beauty in art and of productivity in work, however, ran counter to frivolous play. Thus, not only do Kant and Schiller create a hierarchy of play, so too do Ehrmann and Sutton-Smith.

In contrast to such a view of the folly of certain brands of play needing to be cast aside, stood a series of theoretical perspectives of the value of play. Nietzsche's pursuit of the surface as a place of privilege that determined essence provided the first of three portraits of folly considered in this light. In addition to Nietzsche's 'follies of appearance,' then, I turned to Bakhtin's description of non-satirical laughter and the follies of the body in his discussion of Rabelais. Bakhtin's follies were notable, because they proposed an alternative to the serious frames of satirical laughter. In the third account of folly, I considered how Foucault provided a sense of the shared ground between the fool and the mad. Eventually, I argued that Foucault's theorization of *folie* allows us to see a continuity between frivolity and the more alarming folly of madness. Disorder is both the fool's currency and that of the mad, while the interpretation of that folly comes to define its status differently over time.

These three preliminary theoretical accounts of folly formed the basis in the subsequent chapters for an exploration of the follies of a series of works by three authors. Thus, chapter two considered 'follies of appearance' in a series of short stories by

Borges, while chapters three and four examined the ‘corporeal follies’ of Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres* and the ‘follies of frivolity and madness’ in Cortázar’s *Historias*. While the theoretical accounts served to describe preliminary parameters for a particular folly relative to works by each author, in each case, I also particularized a given folly relative to the setting at hand and considered how Borges, Cabrera Infante, and Cortázar draw on their own sense of such folly toward particular concerns.

These concerns included, for Borges, a sense of folly not only in reversing the privilege of appearance over essence, but also in introducing something more to the folly he offered. Now also emptied out, these follies created a drift where reality was only tentatively generated by the fiction’s appearance. Specters of appearance were always threatening to come apart in the follies his text’s offered.

For Cabrera Infante, folly meant not only recovering a sense of laughter that Bakhtin describes, but also adapting laughter to the project of literary recovery and remembrance. The folly Cabrera Infante offered was not only shaped by pursuing an alternative to non-satirical laughter but in applying bodily follies to a setting of the tragic and the nostalgic that seriousness suggested should be approached without the fullness of such laughter or its indulgence in the grotesque.

In Cortázar’s case, particularizing *folie* meant relating the concept to the way frivolity and alarm unfolded in an interplay that drew on different ways of experiencing disorder in a text. The occurrence of this process involving frivolity alongside seemingly more menacing disorder challenged the view that success in such an endeavor meant getting serious about play.

*Gender and Folly*

While the tradition of folly entails exploring an element of experience and judgments that have been marginalized, it is surprising in some ways that all these follies have not embraced a more clearly femininely gendered or cross-gendered perspective. Erasmus, after all, places his *Praise of Folly* in the voice of Folly when he attempts to redefine masculine wisdom:

As for those wise men who teach that it is very foolish and improper for anyone to extol himself, I do not care this much for their opinion. Even granting that it is as foolish as they claim, they cannot deny that it is in keeping with the principle of decorum. For what could be more fitting than that Folly herself should ‘pat herself on the back’ and ‘*blow her own horn*’? Who can describe me better than myself? (11)

Folly speaks of herself, in contrast to the practice of “wise men who teach that it is very foolish and improper for anyone to extol himself”.<sup>71</sup>

In the current case, however, the follies we have examined have touched on gendered interaction in other ways and primarily in a series of stories by Borges and Cabrera Infante’s novel. In the stories by Borges, gendered desire is itself susceptible to the emptying of appearance, the place of longing. This is particularly notable in the last cycle of these follies, in “Los espejos velados,” “El Zahir,” and “El Aleph.” In all three, a male narrator relates his own increasingly spectral interaction with a woman. By contrast, male to male gendered interaction enters into “Tlön” at the start in the collaboration between the narrator and his friend Bioy Casares. Desire, in this case, is not mediated by photographs but refracted through the pursuit not of each other but a

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<sup>71</sup> That re-definition presents a complicated example of the way folly and wisdom can be applied pejoratively or in a complementary fashion depending upon the strategies of the speaker, Folly.



quote about copulation. A parallel but comic version of such interaction is also present in “El Aleph,” where Borges’ beloved Beatriz is replaced unfavorably by intrusions and the bad poetry of her first cousin Daneri. Daneri’s hands resemble Beatriz’s, but in other respects he becomes a comic figure that continually falls short in facilitating the narrator’s desire for maintaining a cherished image of the past.

In the case of the corporeal follies provided by Cabrera Infante, the gendering of folly is suggested in the midst of misadventure and in the figure of La Estrella. However, both settings of folly are marked by a male narrator’s perspective. In one way, misadventure ensures that more distant ideals of romantic gender interaction go unexpressed. La Estrella, in like fashion, continually recalls the grotesquely cherished world. However, in both cases, folly responds to and prevents one notion of gendered interaction by maintain another with its own downside. Thus, grotesque laughter derides one set of ideals (e.g., Hollywood stories, pin-up magazines, the singer as startlet), even as it makes more tangible a material world that does not entirely do away with some of what remains problematic about that relation (e.g, stories designed to amuse the narrator or his friends, visions of shrinking pin-ups, and La Estrella).

### *Locating Folly*

Rather than argue that each author or the totality of each author’s work should be re-appraised as the play of folly, with the works in question, we gain an introduction into an alternate sensibility of frivolity along particular lines. Thus, Borges’ follies of appearance respond to the notion that the author provides a masterful game of depth and

purpose, by highlighting how a series of his stories cultivate a degree of superficiality that prevents aesthetic reverie. In these follies, the appearance of things unfolds in a play of surfaces that empties grave topics of their weight. In Cabrera Infante's corporeal follies, by contrast, the laughter of the body attempts to fill out what is missing: a place of life in the past. The follies he offers in his novel respond to the expectation that nostalgia or recovery of the past entails sentiment without frivolity. Finally, in Cortázar's follies of frivolity and madness we are faced with a practice that defies the idea that the author advances a questioning of order and conceptual coherence solely through serious means. As a result we are better able to highlight how a work like *Historias de cronopios y de famas* even as it is sometimes dismissed for its lack of seriousness, may yet become a place for exposing the operations of reason—not because of a secret seriousness that would make us ignore the operations of frivolity, but precisely because it advances disorder in an interplay of fooling and madness. In this way, each author forges a practice that locates folly differently. Borges, places it in the fold of appearance, while Cabrera Infante, situates it in endearing and grotesque experiences of the flesh, and Cortázar collocates it in the playfulness of the mind that embraces foolish or mad outlooks on familiar concepts.

While the place of folly varies, one of the common issues that arises in each case is the matter not only of a response to seriousness but the re-definition of wisdom. This dimension of folly was already apparent in the first chapter's discussion of Nietzsche's rhetorical strategy with prudence. However, it is also something that I believe distinguishes folly itself. For in the midst of making a practice susceptible to laughter, folly offers an alternative that may come to supplant that former wisdom. Folly's aim,

then, is not necessarily the continual disruption of accepted truths, but the effort to offer an alternative way of understanding itself as providing something worthy of acceptance.

As an abstract rhetorical strategy folly may always remain available as a response, even to itself. However, in practice, folly provides a particular text with a relative tactic located in a moment. This means that while Borges' follies of appearance confront an aesthetics of depth and purpose, they themselves can convey a sense of what should matter (e.g., the play of provisional moments of experience). This could be observed in a more patently problematic fashion in Cabrera Infante's case. For in *Tres tristes tigres*, we saw that a folly of the body entailed endearing certain corporeal experiences and laughing in the midst of grotesque explorations begun in the company of a group of men. While this remained a folly, it also seemed to attempt to establish a sense of what should be cherished and given a place of prominence in memory. The laughter it initiates has the potential to unseat the posture of a folly that is wiser than the former wisdom of remote cultural ideals. However, it was also important to acknowledge the presence of such an operation in play, lest the perspective establish itself.

Ultimately, this last concern brings us to an important point about play and one that is too easy to forget until we begin associating it with things that seem less valuable to our own critical, theoretical, or aesthetic discourses. There is nothing to say that play is good, or that finding it in a text will lead us toward something that should make us value the work all the more. While this should be an obvious point, it also seems far too easy to believe that what we derive enjoyment from has a greater value. In that slip, we risk losing sight of how, in the hands of others, what is still play may lead down paths we would not wish to follow.

Despite all the defenses of play, from the way Ehrmann and Edwards argue we need to associate play with work and seriousness to protect it from easy frivolity, to Schiller's imagined objection to play, it seems sometimes that to speak of play is very often to proceed in praise of a feature we value. Yet, this is the usefulness of folly. For in the frivolity it offers, folly highlights how in play there may also be an alternative to splendor that is no less important to understand in its operation.

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**CONFERENCE PAPERS**

Ashbaugh, K. (2009, March) "The Challenge of Theorizing Eruptive Laughter Amid the Tragic." American Comparative Literature Association, Annual Conference, Harvard, Cambridge, Mass.

Ashbaugh, K. (2007, July) "In Pursuit of Folly: Playfulness and the Problem of Seriousness in Play Theory." British Comparative Literature Association, Annual Conference, Goldsmiths College, London.

Ashbaugh, K. (2006, March) "Becoming Fictions: The Aesthetic Humanizing of Being in Cabrera Infante and Nietzsche." American Comparative Literature Association, Annual Conference, Princeton University.

**PROFESSIONAL APPOINTMENTS**

Postdoctoral Researcher, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Fall 2010  
 Bildner Dissertation Fellow, Rutgers University, Fall 2006-Spring 2007  
 Part-Time Lecturer, Rutgers University, Fall 2003  
 Teaching Assistant, Rutgers University, Fall 2001-Spring 2003  
 Minority Academic Career Fellow, Rutgers University, Fall 1999-Spring 2001  
 Research Assistant, Colgate University, Spring 1999  
 Reader and Cataloger, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Summer 1997