In this essay I examine how Raymond Roussel and Fernando Pessoa extract a poetics of nonsense from the limitations of language's signifying potential. From the peculiar self-reflexive rhythm(s) of their work I draw the speculation that meaning and thinking are contagious matters.

Obscurity and the Poetics of Non/Sense in the Writings of Raymond Roussel and Fernando Pessoa

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Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all of their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion, and breakout. The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers. When rats swarm over each other.

—*Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,* A Thousand Plateaus

There is rhythm in writing, rhythm in reading, rhythm in thinking. Rhythm relates all of our acts of speaking, listening, and knowing to a metaphysical dimension that is "sense," which it turns out is an expression of no particular sense—nonsense. For instance, imagine the sound of my voice and hear the intervals of my speech as a series of feints and lunges that articulate words with things, ideas with concepts, and sensations with emotions. What is heard is the movement of sense and the infection of words with the fantasy of meaning and import. "Rhythm" can be understood here as a vector of sense in the way that a mosquito is a vector for the transmission of malaria whose proliferation throughout a population expresses the sense of malaria as an "epidemic." As such, rhythm, which itself has no particular sense but instead transmits a

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pattern of relation that promotes more *and* less remote associations between words and things, generates patterns of significance that can be likened to an epidemiology of sense. The poetics of this "rhythming" is thus a poetics of non/sense.

In this essay I interrogate the poetics of French writer Raymond Roussel to draw out the mechanics of non/sense and show how signification functions like a virus. But Roussel's work emphasizes a particular strain of non/sense that contracts the difference that language traverses. To enrich this poetics and to demonstrate its paradoxical logic, I draw on Fernando Pessoa, a contemporary of Roussel's, to show that language's capacity to endlessly reiterate its finite material can be expressed in contrary modes: whereas Roussel's work can be construed as a convocation of linguistic and ontological excesses, Pessoa's writing shows a tendency in language to multiple difference, to say more about more. Pessoa's appearance in this study should not, however, be taken as a foil to Roussel, whose work occupies the bulk of this essay. Instead, Pessoa's more topically expansive and plurivalent style illustrates the poetics of non/sense's invertibility—its capacity to make too much sense. Lastly, this essay does not attempt an exhaustive account of either author's contribution to the broader aesthetics of modernism, but rather aims to use their writing as a lens, or, depending on how you see it, a ruse by which to obliquely focus on the movement—rhythm—immanent to a reflexive poetics and to extract from this a speculation on the psychological and epistemological consequences of nonsense and obscurity.

Roussel writes a story that begins and ends with the same sentence, or, rather, the same sentence with one letter changed. "Parmi les noirs" ("Among the Blacks"), a short story published in Roussel's posthumous *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres* (*How I Wrote Certain of My Books*), commences *"Les lettres de blanc sur les bandes de vieux billard* [the white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table]" and concludes accordingly: *"les lettres de blanc sur les bandes de vieux pillard* [the white man's letters on the hordes of the old plunderer]" (3). The story is a *mise en abyme* of word puzzles that recounts a party game in which each participant is asked a question, to which he or she must reply in the form of a riddle. When the narrator of the story's turn comes and he is asked the question about what he believes is the most impressive book published that year, he thinks of "Among the Blacks," a work that describes the adventures of a mariner named White who secretly writes letters to his wife after becoming shipwrecked somewhere in Africa and being forced to serve as counsel to a pillaging chieftain named Bootable. The narrator thus fashions his answer/riddle by writing letters in chalk along the perimeter of an old billiard table—THLENBSHDLL; HIERTAOEBTE; ETTSHNFOOA WETOEDTLOB—that when

deciphered read THE. . .WHITE. . .LETTERS. . .ON. . .THE. . .BANDS. . .OF. . . THE. . .OLD. . .BOOLTABLE. The cryptic phrase, which summarizes the story of "Among the Blacks," ends Roussel's story about "Among the Blacks," with the same sentence that began the story: THE WHITE LETTERS ON THE BANDS OF THE OLD POOL TABLE. Hence, the reader starts with a pool table and ends with Booltable: a green-felt object (*billard*) becomes an old plunderer (*pillard*).

"Parmi les noirs" is paradigmatic of Raymond Roussel's work, which encompasses both prose and verse; however, the words of this story were drawn neither from a sensitivity to style nor from a linguistic eloquence. In fact, Roussel would always write twice, the same thing over again, until his words were forced to cede their usual sense and confess a hidden excess. It is this practice of writing twice that gives expression to the interval between the iterations of writing and can be seen as an instrument of rhythm that exposes language's secret and hollow nature. In *Death and the Labyrinth,* Michel Foucault argues precisely this, that Roussel's compositional technique exposes and exploits the monstrous and ambivalent identity of words. He writes that words are two-sided, being both insolvent and excessive: "The simple, fundamental fact of language, that there are fewer terms of designation than there are things to designate" (14). This lack/excess burdens words with a semantic weight/levity that when repeated—vail. . .vale. . .veil, or, more strikingly, Buffalo (a city). . .buffalo (a wild ox). . . buffalo (to intimidate)—exposes a vacancy in language. Roussel's *procédé*, through homographic-homophonic turns, animates this void that Foucault characterizes as the tropological space of language, a space in which the sense of words can pivot on their materiality in order to signify more than one thing. This is, however, nothing new: what kind of "bark" does a dog have?. . .And a pine tree? These particular homophones and homographs are only small fissures in the system of language that make for only an occasional stutter. But imagine if the whole of language, every written and every spoken word, was like this. Imagine that every word was like "bark" or "rose" or "sow." In that case everything would have to be said/written at least twice—"bark" or "rose" or "sow"—and each time risk the chance that *everything* will have changed in the meantime, such that every *thing* will always be out of joint with itself.

A shipwreck leaves a motley crew of European travellers stranded in the territory of an unknown African nation. Greeted and detained by the emissary Seil Kor, the passengers are delivered to the kindly Emperor Talou VII, whereupon each is instructed to write home and demand a redemptive sum in return for their freedom. Of course the delivery of these letters to their recipients takes time and therefore the shipwrecked are made to wait. In anticipation of Seil Kor's return, and in order to

endure the wait, the assembly of hostages, at the behest of one Julliard the Historian, establish "a kind of elite association or unusual club, in which each member would have to distinguish himself through either an original work or a fabulous demonstration" (Roussel, *Impressions* 179). From an assembly of individual absurdities is born the "Incomparables Club," whose members, in anticipation of Seil Kor's homecoming, stage a gala exhibition of their collective "talents"—fantastical feats, strange machines, and sideshow recitals.

A typical scene: the musical performance given by the Hungarian Skariofszky's pet worm. The worm plays a zither via an elaborate trough-like contraption filled with a peculiar heavy liquid. Stretching itself along a narrow horizontal gap at the bottom of a trough, the worm contorts its body in different ways to allow a certain passage of the liquid to rain down upon the strings of the zither below it. Roussel's description of the episode is markedly detailed and sets the fantastical nature of this scene as a simple and entertaining matter of fact. Nearly the whole of *Impressions of Africa* comprises such episodic recounting of one bizarre event, performance, or operation of a contraption after another. How Roussel creates this compilation of strange tellings is revealed in his semi-confessional and posthumously published work *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres,* wherein he elaborates upon what he calls his "special method"—the *procédé*.

In essence, Roussel's *procédé* is a kind of "rhythming," an exercise in cryptographic metonymy that palpates the finitude of language to make connections between the most disparate elements of the reality its propositions express. In *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres,* Roussel describes the two ways of employing the *procédé* that generated the imagery in *Impressions of Africa* as well as a number of his other compositions (*Locus Solus, L'Étoile au front,* and *La Poussière de soleils*). The first application of the *procédé* that he describes is the one depicted above with respect to his story "Parmi les noirs," a homographic-homophonic manoeuvre that has the effect of turning each word of an initial sentence—for example, *"les lettres de blanc sur les bandes de vieux billard"*—toward an alternative meaning in order to derive a second sentence with no necessary semantic connection to the first. Clarifying this method of derivation, Roussel writes, "Firstly, *lettres* in the sense of lettering, *blanc* in the sense of a cube of chalk, *bandes* in the sense of cushions; secondly, *lettres* in the sense of missives, *blanc* as in white man, *bandes* as in hordes" (*How* 3). While the first sentence yields, "The white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table," the derivation produces, "The white man's letters on the hordes of the old plunderer." Extending this process even further, Roussel enfolds the homonymic "rhythming" into a movement that sidles metonymically to a related word. For example, *billard* borrows to *queue* (pool

table: billiard cue). But *queue* also possesses its own homonymic rhythm—*queue* as billiard cue is turned toward *queue* as tail. And another extension: *chiffre* metonymically links to billiard cue as monogram (often inscribed on the cue) and homonymically links to *chiffre* as numeral. It is this dopplering of metonymic beats that generates the various scenes in *Impressions of Africa,* such as the scene in which Talou, the plunderer king from "Parmi les noirs," dressed in a gown with the numeric monogram "472" stitched on the back, is followed by his retinue (*queue*) from one event to another.

The second operation of the *procédé* is slightly more cryptic than the first but epitomizes the rhythming of language. Using what he describes as "anything at hand," Roussel exploits the disjuncture between the graphic and phonic dimensions of language. For example, beginning with the first line of a song, *"J'ai du bon tabac dans ma tabatière"* (I have good tobacco in my snuffbox), he redistributes the spacing that differentiates written language by shifting the accents and changing the rhythm of the *spoken* language to extract a new set of words from the original phrase. *"J'ai du bon tabac dans ma tabatière"* becomes "*jade tube onde aubade en mat a basse tierce* [Jade tube water aubade in mat (mat object) third bass]" (9). The *procédé* in this case expresses the interval between written and spoken language by drawing a new rhythm from the difference that it embodies, a rhythm that expresses something monstrous and fantastical from *within* or beneath the flowing melody of the original line. The asyndetonic pulse of the derivation is a genetic aberration that testifies to an immanent difference, which the rhythm of language cannot but obscure as it expresses it. Roussel's writing is thus a form of interdiction in the sense that it draws out the mutant rhythms that its regular syntax remainders. One could suggest that Roussel's writing is a disease that infects language and forces it to make nonsense: a pedestrian prose stricken by its own capacity to disregard the material forces and orders of its sundry referents so that there might be a Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella.[1] It is more productive, however, to regard Roussel as struggling to make language stumble or, as the philosopher Gilles Deleuze states, "to place it in a state of perpetual disequilibrium" ("He" 27).

Arguably, language strives for equilibrium. The homonyms (among other expressions) contaminate language with an ambiguity that keeps the latter's capacity to organize the relations between its referents—for example, things, actions, ideas—unstable. As the history of any language's usage shows, the more one attempts to stabilize the signifying processes of a language so that meaning might, so to speak, stand still, the more one generates artefacts that defy regularity and control. The rules of language are, by virtue of a finitude that its expressions continually reiterate, governed

by variation. If it is to mean anything at all, language cannot be entirely regulated. An element of irreducible difference must circulate throughout its system in order to keep it open to new combinations and repetitions, to maximize the variations that give one moment and the next its significance. Ordinarily, the speed of this infinite variation is slowed through the force of ideologies that impress specific modes of representation and expression upon its potential. That is, ideological constraints, such as those of "liberty" and a particular view of democracy that the United States uses to justify its endless war on terror, shackle language with a particular rhythming that restricts the sense of its expressions so that there is less room for ambiguity in a particular discourse, and thus less room for negotiation. It is the ideological regulation of language, more than its grammatical standard—which is itself arguably a reflection of an underlying ideology (the difficulties surrounding the selection of pronouns are case in point)—that gives language's signifying potential the impression of equilibrium. But, in fact, the opposite is true: the more formally restricted and constrained a language is, the more unusual its expressions become and the more surreal its significations are, as is evident by the kinds of constraints that Roussel's *procédé* places on language.[2]

As "Parmi les noirs" and *Impressions of Africa* show, the usual vectors of sense—the meaning of words—are disturbed when language is made to speak *exclusively* through such narrow constraints as homonyms and puns. These shackles, though simple and discreet, impose an alien measure upon the usual rhythm of referrals that pattern the common sense of a language. Writing on Roussel's work, Deleuze suggests that the new meter introduced into the French language by the *procédé's* punning creates what he describes as "a ramified variation of the language system" ("He" 27) that operates by "disjunctions or selection of similars; connection or sequel of combinables" (26). Although Roussel's language still signifies when constrained, it does so under a new rule of selection. The *procédé*, like any shackle, be it ideological or formal, such as George Perec's 1969 novel *La Disparition,* which is written without the letter "e," does not render language nonsensical so much as it enforces alternative significations and referrals that express the sense of a foreign measure. In the case of the metonymic logic that underpins the *procédé*, a new syntax, a new "rhythming" derived from the fugitive movements of the pun and other forms of word play, emphasizes language's capacity to signify by association in a way that exceeds and obscures the typically arbitrary conventions of signification to which language dances. Or, as Deleuze puts it, the *procédé* "gives birth to a foreign language within language and a grammar of disequilibrium" (27).

A disquiet haunts Roussel's writing. This disquiet, however, is not a matter of style. Roussel's bid for the literary is staked on an excessively mundane description of the marvellous that, unfortunately, relies on stereotypes of an "other" to ferry the reader to fantastic shores. As the inheritor of a modest fortune, Roussel took himself many times to various "exotic" destinations around the world. Yet, he very rarely sought to educate himself and nuance his impression of the people and cultures that he encountered, preferring instead to remain isolated in what might be considered a prototype of the Winnebago.[3] And this is reflected in his rather crude and simplistic representation of Talou, the African chief of "Parmi les noirs" and *Impressions of Africa,* as a savage plunderer-figure of the "dark continent."

But herein lies the *procédé's* power to exploit the fugitive movements of language. As naïve and offensive as Roussel's initial depictions are of Talou, they are ultimately made more problematic and complex by the *procédé*. By using his *procédé* to compose the impressions of *Impressions of Africa,* Roussel reconfigures the rhythms of language to induce connections between remote realities that transform how Talou is depicted and thus what Talou "is." Though Roussel himself may have envisioned Talou as a savage chieftain, under the rules of the *procédé* a more problematic and in fact more sophisticated subject appears. For example, when we meet Talou, he is the patriarchal representative of his nation, fully in command of his subjects, his land, and his power. Over the course of the Incomparables' gala performance, however, we learn that Talou insists upon taking to the stage in order to perform a French vocal composition. The narrator tells us that Talou does not simply sing the song, but performs it in a high falsetto while dressed in drag. This image of Talou as a transvestite does not reflect Roussel's imaginative prowess or psychological ambivalence about his own sexuality, but is an effect of the *procédé*, whose linguistic constraints force unlikely semantic alliances. By uniting difference through the same (homonymic compaction), the *procédé* demonstrates that language itself cannot maintain the regularity of discourse, which in the case of nineteenth-century Europe would otherwise reiterate the racist formulae inscribed in white men's writing about other white men's fortuitous encounters in Africa. The *procédé* reveals not only how language constructs its categories of identity using discursively engendered grammatical/syntactic—rhythmic—constraints, but also how easily these constructs can be reconfigured and reimagined by changing meters so as to express a "ramified variation of the language system."

By pressing language into the service of his *procédé*, Roussel cannot help but move his characters further away from prefigured forms of subjectivity. It was never Roussel's intention to overcome racist discourse, however; it was the inevitability of a language constrained. A constrained language, if it is to move at all, makes twisted

sense, for the shackles force words to signify obscurely. Subject to constraints, language signifies through a restricted range of relays and correspondences that cannot but generate misshapen rhetoric and thus express more obscure ways of being. A language shackled by the *procédé* is, though restricted in expressive possibilities, exempted from those rhythms that function as common sense. Paradoxically, then, language is liberated by constraints. Shackled rhythms *in*-volve rather than evolve sense because the signifying scheme of a constrained language extracts a maximum difference from the repetition of its own finitude.

From this perspective, Roussel's constrained writing invents a fugitive vector of sense by opening language to a space of unfamiliar disjunctions, intervals, and pivots that articulate alternative relationships between familiar things. The modes of being represented in *Impressions of Africa* are continually involved by this fugitive sense and express what might be understood as a sensical alterity. The more language is constrained, the more remote its connections, and thus the more intertextual—mixed, impure—its expressions become. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that the *procédé* does not negate common sense so much as reinvent it. To the *procédé*, words are contagia and are not themselves meaningful. Words are nodes that relay an orientation between elements and as such serve as vehicles whose iteration embodies the pulse of a particular grammar. In a way, the *procédé* shows how sense, insofar as it is immanent to the grammar of a language—rhythm—spreads across the distribution of words and is akin to a contamination.

Sense contaminates. It is what plays across the variations of language's finitude as a condition of possibility to relate what is in excess of it. A plunderer can as easily become a billiard table as a pastry becomes a palm tree if one word has to stand for both. Here, nonsense begins to show its coexistence with sense, where "mobile" (moʊbəl) becomes a "mobile" (məʊbaɪl) becomes "mobile" (məʊbil). Common sense dissembles the inherent nonsense that is expressed in the series of "mobile" by keeping the things that it names as different from one another as possible. This means keeping the variations that expose the limits of language sufficiently apart from one another, either through context, which, for instance, separates your "I" from my "I," or through the spacing of syntax that keeps this "that" from the "that" which follows it. But it also means that common sense must move language from a more to a less differentiated field, and this is what ideologies do: they constrain the expressive range of language, which has the effect of constraining the expressive range of the subjects that their discourses produce.

So what, if anything, is at stake in shackling language with even more narrow constraints, as Roussel does? Does this not reduce the expressive range of the subject

even further? The *procédé* gave Roussel, perhaps isolated by his sexuality and wealth, a way to access the world of rich variation that he otherwise denied himself. If he could not bring himself to discover the variety of the world, then he would invent a variety within his own narrow world. Expressing this hermetic variety with his *procédé*, Roussel shows us that at its fundamental level—namely, grapheme, morpheme, phoneme—language is radically open, empty, so open, in fact, as to be nonsensical, to be without any particular direction or sense. Shackling language with extreme constraints, then, has the effect of showing language making *too much* sense, of making language speak in tongues—glossolalia. Thus, what is at stake in constraining language is the good health of sense and, by extension, knowledge.

Like any kind of open system, of which our own body is an example, language is vulnerable to infection. Roussel's *procédé* can be understood to infect language with the sense of its own nonsense. By piggybacking on the connotative level of its signs, the *procédé* hijacks language's desire to differentiate, the desire to signify, to make sense. The sense of more sense that it generates has the effect of attenuating the conventional bind between a signifier and its signified and so functionally imperils the semiotic potential of the "host" sign. In a way, the *procédé* treats writing as a kind of teratology in that it treats signs as multicephalus aberrations.[4] The terms and, by extension, the meanings inflicted upon a language by the *procédé*'s "viral poetic" are made to continually reproduce the conditions of their becoming, not as a reinscription of how they are conventionally understood, but as the generation of the very process that permits significance itself. Thus a viral poetic creates more sense but less meaning, more difference but less identity. To tease out the consequences and sharpen our understanding of this poetic, we should examine another of its expressions whose converse operation produces similar non/sense.

Roussel's work introduces us to the metonymic sidle that expresses difference from the side of the Same. But another expression of difference is possible from the side of the Other. Fernando Pessoa, a Portuguese poet of the early twentieth century, is Roussel's "Other" in that where the latter extracts difference from the same name—the homonym—the former draws difference from the other name—the *heteronym*. Throughout his career as a writer of poetry, prose, plays, social commentary, and criticism, Pessoa employed a number of alter egos to author his work, the most important of which were Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos, as well as Pessoa himself. The term "pseudonym," despite its literary tradition, does not capture the sense of difference that Pessoa sought to capture with his multiple identities. As David Jackson notes, Pessoa early on "differentiated between a conscious self and its ideas

and experiences" (6), such that the latter components could not be said to belong to only one person. For Pessoa, not only do the myriad ideas and experiences that pass through his mind not belong to "him" alone, but no one author is capable of expressing the multiple and often contrary perspectives that are available to be thought. The heteronyms thereby profile a virtual multiplicity of ideas and experiences that, despite their proliferation (Richard Zenith, Pessoa's primary English translator, counts at least seventy-two distinct heteronyms),[5] they too cannot grasp everything, for a virtual multiplicity of ideas and experiences passes through *their* mind(s) too, effectively fractalizing the "otherness" for which they initially were to stand. Thus Pessoa's writing entangles language in "an oscillating rhythm, or alternating current, that flows between the occult author of a whole dramatic literature and the insufficiency of any one of its heteronymic authors [others] or works to explain or represent that whole" (9).

One can only guess how much psychic space these heteronyms occupied in Pessoa's mind, for Pessoa, a loner by choice, never directly wrote about his heteronyms, instead addressing them from the position of other heteronyms, among which "Pessoa" was included. For example, in Álvaro de Campos's work "Notes for the Memory of my Master Caeiro," which is the heteronym "de Campos" writing about the profound influence that "Alberto Caeiro" (another heteronym) has had on his own writing as well as on the writing of Ricardo Reis, António Mora (more heteronyms), and Fernando Pessoa, Campos describes Pessoa's reaction to hearing Caeiro recite one of his own works:

> After hearing [Caeiro] recite *The Keeper of Sheep,* he [Pessoa] went home in a fever (the one he was born with) and wrote the six poems of "Slanting Rain" in one go [. . .]. Fernando Pessoa would never have been able to extract those extraordinary poems from his inner world without having met Caeiro [. . .]. Not only that, he will never produce anything that's more genuinely Fernando Pessoa, more intimately Fernando Pessoa. What could better express his relentlessly intellectualized sensibility, his inattentively keen attention, and that ardent subtlety of his cold self-analysis than these poetic intersections in which the narrator's state of mind is simultaneously two states, in which the subjective and objective join together while remaining separate, and in which the real and the unreal merge in order to remain distinct. (*Selected* 49-50)

Speaking through Campos, Pessoa describes himself through the description of a poem that in turn describes the sense of schizonoia about which he feels compelled to write. The degree of distress or pleasure that this echo chamber of voices gave Pessoa need not concern us here. However, what should be gathered is that the heteronyms, which in a way preface Roland Barthes's "death of the author,"[6] articulate the contours of an intensive space in which "selves" are folded within pleats of ideas and experiences.

Both Roussel and Pessoa had literary pretensions that aimed for singular aesthetic results, and both write in a way that took advantage of language's disequilibrium. However, whereas Roussel sought to surmount the limits of his own imagination by exaggerating language's finitude and forcing it to repeat its limits, Pessoa "created and entered a labyrinth" wherein language's propensity for "infinitizing of otherness" (Perrone-Moisés qtd. in Jackson 8) could be given voice. The viral poetic that we see operating in Roussel's work, one which exploits language's finitude to make the same difference (homonym) speak, is inverted by Pessoa, whose heteronymic formula makes many voices speak the same difference. That is, where the homonym's rhythming serializes difference by repeating it, the heteronym implodes difference by displacing and scattering the sense of sameness that accumulates into the style of a central and singular subject/author.

Pessoa's technique of accumulating language to complicate and expose the multiple voices that it hides within itself not only anticipates Walter Benjamin's observation that "language only communicates itself in itself" (109), but also the basic poststructuralist principle that one can never privilege the presence of a single speaker or writer. The assorted heteronymic voices circumjacent to Pessoa, or rather to "Pessoa," express the intensive dimension of sense that allows multiple and contrary propositions to co-exist within the same field of enunciation. Quite literally, Pessoa's writing speaks the sense of another person(a), which, oddly, makes "Pessoa" something of a homonym for the heteronymic others. For example, Pessoa, who is known primarily as one of Portugal's greatest poets of the twentieth century, claims when writing as "Bernardo Soares" in the non-book *The Book of Disquiet* that he prefers prose to poetry and, furthermore, that he lacks the ability to write in verse. In this passage, Pessoa not only contradicts the sense of his identity as a poet, but he (as "Soares") goes on to argue that poetry's obedience to musical elements makes it inferior to prose's more catholic rhythming: "I consider poetry to be an intermediate stage between music and prose. Like music, poetry is bound to rhythmic laws, and even when they are not strict laws of metre, they still exist as checks, constraints, automatic mechanisms of repression and censure" (197-98). To express the sense of an argument that undermines his work as a poet, Pessoa hands the writing off to "Soares," and in so doing is able to say something that the affirmative corollary of his writing poetry cannot—its own negation. This heteronymic polyphony personifies Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "heteroglot," a virtual field composed of multiple voices that are in constant conversation with each other, each speaking at the same time from different social, formal, and historical registers. Individually, each voice enunciates a line or "style" that is the sense of a massive nonsensical counterpoint of voices. In this

respect, Pessoa's writing can be taken as a transcription of the virtual multiplicity of sense-styles that every utterance convokes.

Compared to Roussel's fractalization of the difference that inheres within the Same of language (homonyms) and which gives his language its claustrophobic pitch, the argument between Pessoa's heteronyms has a much more oceanic tone. Though ostensibly pontificating on the merits or short-comings of such topics as neopaganism or developing critiques of fabricated literary movements (Sensationism and Intersectionism), the heteronyms are more concerned with communicating the internal difference that escorts and cleaves to every utterance and every thought. In this sense, the heteronyms virtually "embody" Deleuze's "world of crowned anarchies and nomadic distribution" (*Logic* 263) by traversing the variegated terrain of opinion and fact, faith and skepticism, dialogue and argument. Pessoa's work is in a way representative of a proper "anti-style" in that its tangled "rhythming" has no one style but is an assembly of contradictions and negations, a congress of lyrical and prosaic fragments whose implied totality is never averred. But the accretion of stylistic fragments is not itself a finished figure, for much of Pessoa's writing is incomplete and elliptical and so embodies the same deficiency represented by the multiplication of his fragmented personae. This is not to say, however, that Pessoa's anti-style is without its own effects. The tessellation of fragments is, in a way, the flip side of a stuttering: language pretends to say everything by saying only part of everything. By framing its stuttering, language can *imply* a totality that it never has to actually say. But this, of course, has the side effect of exposing the fundamental insolvency of language and burdening it with a plenary hope, a hope that is parasitic on its own capacity to combine and recombine, to repeat its limits and to mask its finitude.

Before proceeding to the next section, it is important to clarify the difference between "style" and "poetics." "Poetics" should be understood as *poiesis*, as a generic potential to become expressive, an abstract dynamic. "Style," on the other hand, is the individuation of a poetics, the way a poetic steals its potential into being expressive. In this sense, style is a variation on a poetics, or, as Deleuze writes, "Style is a set of variations in language, a modulation, and a straining of one's whole language toward something outside it" (*Negotiations* 140). Here "style" refers to the infinite variations of language itself, an arche-poetics, to differentiate innumerable expressions of sense. At a smaller scale, style denotes the expressive precincts, syntactical habits, and regional morphologies that develop within a language. But a poetics and style are in a constant state of change, as is language itself, so that what Deleuze identifies in Roussel's writing as a "syntax in the process of becoming" ("He" 27) is in fact the inherent stutter of all events of expression.

Yet, in locating this stutter, Deleuze does not aim correctly when likening this "language within a language" to the musical "minorizing" of a "major" dynamic system.[7] Syntax is not another language within a language. Syntax is more like a linguistic virus in that alone it lacks the differential structure and referential metabolism to sustain and reproduce itself as anything more than, say, something like cant or slang. Like a virus, which hijacks the reproductive machinery of a cell to reproduce its genomic material,[8] syntax appropriates and uses the cellular apparatus of language to reproduce multiple copies of its particular sequence, as is evident when a child begins to produce sentence-*like* utterances that are not based on a grammar but on the pulsation, the rhythm, of enunciation. Syntax approaches the condition of being a language in a language only when the intensity of its stuttering obscures the rhythming of the host language. And when this happens, as it does here,

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe
> All mimsy were the borogoves
> And the mome raths outgrabe (Carroll 1-4)

as Lacan notes, it "serves purposes that are altogether different from that of communication" (138). Call it poetry.

Returning to Roussel's work, which draws a maximum difference out of a homonymic stutter, we see the vivid expression of nonsense, as "miner" becomes "minor" becomes "mynah," or, radically, "Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo."[9] The syntactic "infection" of language by the *procédé* does not tend toward the limit of grammar, but *is* the limit of grammar, a limit that marks a desire in language not to communicate or represent but to replicate and perpetuate the process—the rhythming—of signification itself. And Pessoa's writing is similarly infectious; however, in his case it is not the signifying potential of language itself that his heteronyms hijack, but the rhythms of genres. As Jackson notes, Pessoa "is aware that he is not creating anything new [. . .] he is inventing 'a new way of using an already old practice'" (17). The heteronyms de/re-rhythmize the characteristic beat of genre: "Pessoa's heteronyms alter the gesture and syntax of the genres in which they write, while relying both on norms and the standard expectation of readers" (21). Rather than negating genre, as mainstream modernist theory would posit, the heteronyms reconstitute the differential force of genre by estranging its conventional content to make it speak differently, so differently as to threaten nonsense.

As was stated earlier, the meanings generated by a viral poetic are the by-product of folding language's desire to reproduce the conditions of its differential urge back into itself. Restrictions such as those which Roussel's *procédé* introduce appropriate language's principle of arbitrariness and force it to signify while in the service of a rule that causes it to stutter. In a sense, the viral-like poetic of nonsense makes language speak in tongues: it makes a pseudo-language where familiar terms are made to say things differently, to say different things, to differently thingify sayings.

The continuous movement toward increasingly obscure expressions in the course of constrained sign formation (Roussel), or adverse genre construction (Pessoa), both weakens and expands linguistic semiosis by promising nothing but more vectors of sense. What this production of sense donates, as it spreads an obscurity across semiotic domains, can never be anything but a violence to meaning, for the multiplication of sense is a paradoxical instance in which its excesses are immediately expressed as what it is/is not—nonsense. Or, to put it another way, the immediate expression of sense and nonsense, which is most evidently manifest in what Deleuze (borrowing from Levi-Strauss) calls a "floating signifier," is an expression wherein "what is given by the signifier without being thereby known" (*Logic* 49). A "thing-a-ma-jig," a "snark," for example: obscure placeholders whose elemental nonsense allows thought to move, to space out, and to make sense.

Because this poetics makes only experimental and provisional connections between ideas and experiences, connections that are expressive rather than causal, its goal is to turn all of language into a "thing-a-ma-jig." Obscurity here is not measured against clarity, but against language's passion for sense, a passion expressed by the circulation of more and more singularities (thing-a-ma-jigs) in an effort to make more and more sense. Promising nothing but "otherwise," this notion of obscurity names what Brian Massumi calls "the conditions for a contagion of becoming-other" (101). The obscurity of too much sense is not a murky matter so much as "a cascade of differentiations, with bodies moving in all directions of capture and escape that only increase the chance of collision and mutation" (101). In short, obscurity of nonsense replicates the thing-a-ma-jigging of language.

But obscurity also puts the power of language's schizophrenic tendencies to work in such a way that it births a kind of internally elaborated *détournement*. That is, a poetics of nonsense makes sense, but it makes sense make alternative or eccentric meanings from an otherwise more common sense. This power to make sense make sense differently is indicative of obscurity's duplicitous nature, a duplicity that shows up in language as a *poetics* that disassembles sense and an *aesthetic* that reassembles it. As obscurity promotes a failure of common sense, it makes a spectacle of signification

itself. Language (as I suggest below) to a register wherein words and expressions subsist uncoupled from their ordinary relays and the force of referral is made to work for the intensity of signification rather than communication, as for instance when an overly repeated word ceases to have meaning and instead starts to become a vibrating object in one's mouth. Obscurity in this sense poeticizes language, which is to say that it intensifies its potential to be what it is from moment to moment by making utterance potentially singular. But because this intensity is itself undefined and partial, the expressive singularities can only be satisfied—make sense—by an *aesthetics of obscurity* that takes up their nonsense as an affective spell or enchantment.

I want to conclude this essay with a speculative note on the psychology of non/sense and the consequences it has for the reality of knowledge. If the excessive multiplication of sense means that its subsequent obscurity manifests the intensity of nonsense, then it might be that to think obscurely is to think virally. An extreme example of this can be illustrated by Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. The individual who suffers this disorder is literally contaminated by what are called "ego-dystonic" thoughts, thoughts that are intensely felt to be at variance with the aims of the ego. For a person with OCD, ego-dystonic thoughts do not simply pass through the mind. Whether they derive from a line of association, plucked from a fleeting comment, a suggestion, or a reading, particular thoughts have a way of infecting his or her belief system (the ego) with a powerful and irrational doubt that reflects something of the floated significance of thought—thought's "thing-a-ma-jig-ness." This "infection" of the belief system provokes an affective response in which the individual seeks to make sense of his/her malconceived thoughts and to reduce the anxiously valenced intensity of them by performing an elaborate set of cognitive and/or behavioural rituals. However, because the inferential chain of thinking that buoys the obsessive-compulsive's dystonia continually draws upon the neurotically stained force of its psychic neighbour-come-host, it continually reduplicates the non/sense of the preceding thought, and with it the doubt that contaminates it. Doubt dopplers as thought passes through a series of sensical and nonsensical expressions that connect increasingly disparate realities. And this accretion of doubt gives thought a hypervalent potential, which Deleuze and Guattari depict through the figure of the rhizome: "The rhizome connects any point to any other point, its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature. It brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign states" (21).

But Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome is theorized through the lens of schizophrenia, which is a condition defined by an ignorance shown toward the disjunctive correspondences between certain thoughts.[10] The obsessive-compulsive, however, is

aware of the irrationality and discordance of his/her thoughts and behaviour, but s/he is nevertheless swept along, rhizomatically though it may be, by them to increasingly obscure beliefs whose connections to reality are sustained by a fear-infected logic. Whereas the schizophrenic (supposedly) delights in the way words and things pass in and out of each other to share a fluid and sensuous reality, the obsessive-compulsive is swept along, against his/her will, by an impulse or a rhythm that makes thinking contagious.

Although Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is an extreme example, it points to how thinking is not wholly driven by logical processes but by patterns of infection, by the way every thought is a veritable host for the reproduction of an originary nonsensical impulse that, when seriated, produces relational tensions—psychic pulsations, the syncopation of ego and id. What this means is that thought itself maybe a kind of virus and, if thinking as such expresses a "viral becoming," then "knowledge" is less a matter of reason than an affliction, an infectious groove that hijacks the ideational mechanisms to rhythmize its own non/sense.

NOTES

1/ This of course is the famous line from the Comte de Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869. Paris: Gallimard, 1973. Print).

2/ The 1960s French group of writers known as OuLiPo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) and, more recently, conceptual poets such as Christian Bök, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Craig Dworkin, inspired by the way Roussel's *procédé* dislocates language use from its ordinary trajectory of meaning, employ similarly constrained writing techniques to generate formally extraordinary and imagistically fantastic works. For a discussion of OuLiPo and the nature of writing constraints, see Jacques Jouet, "With (and Without) Constraints" (*SubStance* 30.3 [2001]: 4-16. Print).

3/ Mark Ford's *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000. Print) details much of Roussel's eccentric life habits, yet it is also an excellent account of his work and compositional approach.

4/ This appears to suggest the concept of polysemy; however, what must be distinguished is the level of the text from the level of the sign, and the operation of the poetic from the effect of the aesthetic. The sign is subject to the desire of the poetic and is thus rendered multivalent. The aesthetic, however, participates in the textuality of the work. Stated analogously, the virus operates upon the individual cell while its effects are experienced by the entire organism. Meaning is put to work through an architectonic process of signs clustered according to the codes of a certain syntax. Polysemy applies then to the aesthetic dimension affected by the subtending poetic.

5/ See Richard Zenith's introduction to *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa* (New York: Grove P, 2002. xi-xxi. Print).

6/ See Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author" (*Image-Music-Text.* Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. 142-48. Print).

7/ For elaboration on the relationship between music and minority, see Ronald Bogue, "Minority, Territory, Music" (*Introduction to the Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.* Ed. Jean Khalfa. London: Continuum, 2003. 114-32. Print).

8/ For an extended study of how Deleuze and Guattari see evolution proceeding by viral operations, see Mark Hansen, "Internal Resonance, or Three Steps Towards a Non-Viral Becoming" (*Culture Machine* 3 [2001]. Web. 5 Nov. 2005).

9/ This is a grammatically correct sentence with an utterly peculiar rhythming and was first concocted by William J. Rapaport in 1972. When parsed, the sentence reads that Buffalo (the animal) from the city of Buffalo (New York) who are buffaloed (intimidated) by Buffalo (city) buffalo (animal) buffalo (intimidate) other Buffalo (city) buffalo (animal). See *A History of the Sentence "Buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo"* (*Department of Computer Science and Engineering, State University of New York at Buffalo.* 4 May 2008. Web. 11 Jan. 2011).

10/ Louis Sass has proposed a peculiar and compelling theory that demonstrates the homological relationship between the metaphorics of schizophrenia and modernism. Sass does not treat schizophrenia as an emancipatory mode of thought, however, but as a volatile state of mind that expresses the paradoxes of reflexivity. See *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1992. Print).

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