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Flatness, Distortion, Nonsense, and the Ordinary in the Novels of Bolaño, O'Brien, and Bernhard

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Flatness, Distortion, Nonsense, and the Ordinary in the Novels of Bolaño, O'Brien, and Bernhard

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Abstract

Character studies have long been shaped by the dominant critical methods arising during different periods of criticism. The structuralists, in the 1970s, transposed character from being understood as psychologically constructed to a mere linguistic effect of the text—an agent controlled by narrative function, event analysis, and syntactical categories. Barthes, together with Todorov and Greimas, proposed that narrative analysis no longer rely on character; character was in fact disposable. Guided by the terms flatness, distortion, nonsense, and the ordinary, this thesis will examine the character's presence as its own thematic aspect of the text rather than as a symptom of it through novels such as Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*, O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, and Bernhard's *The Loser*. Each of these texts plays with representation of the ordinary, sometimes privileging it and sometimes removing it entirely, resulting in a nonsensical narrative. Over 40 characters narrate journal entries in *The Savage Detectives*, each one of them unessential or minimal to the immediate development of the text, per Barthes; yet to throw any one of them away would be to lose or alter the meaning of the novel. That we often take for granted that narratives are unrealistic, exaggerating the richness of "life," indulges in a distortion that, once removed, reveals flatness. The distorted and sometimes fantastical postmodern worlds of these narratives shoulder a purposeful absurdity present in literature that interrogating character lays bare.

Introduction

E.M. Forster's description of the breakfast he was served on an early-morning boat train to London in the 1930s illustrates his propensity for pairing opposites:

> "Porridge or prunes, sir?" That cry still rings in my memory. It is an epitome—not, indeed, of English food, but of the forces that drag it into the dirt. It voices the true spirit of gastronomic joylessness. Porridge fills the Englishman up, prunes clear him out, so their functions are opposed.[1]

In one of the most foundational character studies from 1927, E.M. Forster created two categories of characters, flat and round, that have influenced, angered, and provoked endless commentary in character studies. Round characters, according to Forster, are the "real" ones who undergo development and change. A round character must be "capable of surprising in a convincing way" and must have "the incalculability of life about it—life within the pages of a book" (Forster 4). Here, Forster, linking surprise with "realness," espouses that a mimetic character must be surprising because surprise or "incalculability" is the most recognizable and convincing aspect of human life. He defines round characters in contrast with flat characters, who "in their purest form, […] are constructed round a single idea or quality" and "each can be expressed in a single sentence" (1). When characters cannot easily be contained by a single sentence or factor, "we get the beginning of the curve towards the round" (1). Forster posits several examples of both flat and round characters across works from Proust and Dickens among others, like Mrs. Micawber who "says she won't desert Mr. Micawber, she doesn't, and there she is," (1) (at least under

[1] Barnes, Julian. "I Was Wrong about E.M. Forster." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 2 Dec. 2016, www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/02/julian-barnes-i-was-wrong-about-em-forster.

Forster's analysis), but he also denotes a "test" by which to understand which characters are flat and which are round. A round character must, as previously stated, surprise the reader "in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round" (4). This test moves Forster's theory of character away from character itself and toward a theory of the novel; the very idea of round characters, and their opposite, flat characters, communicates two different journeys that have to do with sustaining narrative rather than just understanding the psychology of the characters themselves. Forster's interpretation puts weight on how we, as readers, interpret characters and how we fictionalize "human beings," in what altered manner they move a narrative forward.

Recent character studies have shifted from the strict dichotomy imposed by Forster and moved toward what Forster's dichotomy implies, that we look to character as a basis for explaining narrative development. *Flat and Round Characters* becomes the basis for critics such as Baruch Hochman in *Character in Literature* (1985) to define characters by a series of scales ranging from transparent to opaque or literalness to the symbolic. Alex Woloch's *The One vs. The Many* describes characters in a matrix of time and space within the novel, arguing that how much space they take up, how much they deserve, and how much pressure these characters put on narrative coherence, regulates the novel. But despite its evolution, Forster's archetypes of flat and round characters continue to pervade character analyses as the means to mark one or the other of these types. Assessing the field of criticism after Forster and in particular, reacting to the claims of New Criticism, Stanley Cavell in "The Avoidance of Love" (*Must We Mean What We Say?* (1967) notes the critical shift away from the study of character as recognizable persons toward the study and emphasis on how the words of characters represent and fix meaning in literary fictions. Why is this so? Critics have become increasingly skeptical that characters are

people, and the fullness of what we know about people cannot be known about characters; consequently, the complexity with which we know people cannot be operative or easily transferred when we examine characters. This shift has resulted in characters often being read as symptoms of or distractions from the "final evidence for a reading of a literary work," which are the words themselves.

The early split in critical consciousness appearing in the first half of the 20th century is paradigmatic today of two broad theoretical approaches: as mimetic theories present, characters are equated with real human persons who are engaging in an intelligibly "human" world, whereas in semiotic theories, under the aegis of action, characters elide into forms and figurations of the text. In the current, postmodern climate, readers turn to literature for answers to increasingly complex questions, often reading with the concept of identification in mind. Yet the experimental novel of today, in turn, moves away from this notion of establishing a correspondence theory of truth through narrative. For instance, in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, readers find themselves in a story told from the perspective of an unnamed narrator who is aware of his anonymity, accompanied by his soul named Joe. The world around him slowly dissolves into nonsense as he interacts with bicycle-humans and policeman playing invisible instruments, which cease to communicate recognizable referents to the world of the reader. Yet, during the text and afterwards, it remains tempting to read the narrator as a "real person." How should critics then handle this character? Does Forster's taxonomy of flat and round characters still pertain? How and why does an inhabitant of a nonsensical world still "feel real?"

This thesis undertakes a study of character in the postmodern novel to attempt to reconcile the difficulty of our emotionally identifying with a character and the necessary distance

we perceive that exists between character and real person. Always holding a character in our mind as "not a real being" changes our reading of a novel significantly. Character studies have long been shaped by these types of questions with dominant critical methods arising during different periods of criticism. Even as far back as 1933 when L.C. Knights launched his infamous attack on A.C. Bradley in *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?*, literary criticism has devalued placing weight on the reality of characters, particularly any attempts to sentimentalize them, instead favoring language, aesthetics, and thematics. The structuralists in the 1970s, transposed the analysis of character from being psychologically constructed to a mere effect of the text—an agent controlled by narrative function, event analysis, and syntactical categories. Barthes, together with Todorov and Greimas, proposed that narrative analysis no longer rely on character; character was in fact disposable. As Blakey Vermeule puts it in her text, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters*, "theorists have long fashioned themselves as crusaders against the pleasures and dangers of literary absorption, reacting suspiciously to the ordinary pleasures people take in fictional characters, replying to fiction's barbaric yawp with a stentorian no!" (Vermeule 16).

Vermeule, who writes mainly about literary gossip in eighteenth-century novels, poses questions like my own. Why care about literary characters, and why are theorists so against our caring? The dominant paradigms of character study are split between a cognitive psychology/ Theory of Mind perspective with authors like Vermeule, as well as Lisa Zunshine and her text *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006), and a narratological perspective, advanced early on by practitioners of poetics. Critics like Zunshine use knowledge of the mind, derived from cognitive psychology, to explain the interactions between reader and text, and how a reader's understanding of real life and real people can alter their understanding of character.

Rimmon-Kenan, a poetics-sympathetic theorist, links character analysis to linguistic structures and reading strategies.

I am most interested in what Vermeule calls the "ordinary pleasures people take in fictional characters," using "ordinary" as a critical term—in the Cavellian sense. But in my opinion these texts are anything but pleasurable, as I find myself agreeing with Lanta Davis who writes of *The Third Policeman*, "Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* seems to relish sending its reader through hell" (Davis 341). Being about half-bicycle humans and boxes that fit inside each other getting infinitely smaller, like matryoshka dolls, O'Brien's hellish landscape certainly challenges a reader trying to grasp any sense of reality. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives'* Garcia Madero narrates an equally hellish story—being chased by murderous pimps and desperately searching for the elusive Cesárea Tinajero who may not exist. Even Thomas Bernhard's *The Loser* is not exempt from producing a psychologically tense, claustrophobic narrative that clearly tortures some readers. Is there a pleasure, then, in reading these texts? A cathartic sense of relief upon the end of the narrative? If there is, character creates both the tension and relief related to the pleasure of these deeply un-pleasurable texts.

Both readers and critics alike take for granted the notion that literature contracts and expands, exaggerates and diminishes, to create coherent narrative. Even the most "realistic" narratives assemble and enlarge aspects of life to which an "ordinary person" would pay no attention. Now, in postmodern literature where realism holds little or no value, rounded characters mean nothing—as flat characters move to the forefront. Ironically, the flat character becomes the "ordinary person," the type whose signifying lively features reappear in a plenitude

of novels. Consider what James Wood writes in *How Fiction Works* as deviating strongly from Forster's ideas about character,

> A great deal of nonsense is written every day about characters in fiction—from the side of those who believe in character too much and from the side of those who believe too little. […] But to repeat, what *is* a character? I am thicketed in qualifications: if I say that a character seems connected to consciousness, to the use of a mind, the many superb examples of characters who seem to think very little, who are rarely seen thinking, bristle up (Gatsby, Captain Ahab, Becky Sharp, Widmerpool, Jean Brodie). If I refine the thought by repeating that character at least has some essential connection to an interior life, to inwardness, is seen "from within," I am presented with the nicely opposing examples of those two adulterers, Anna Karenina and Effi Briest, the first of whom does a lot of reflection, and is seen internally as well as externally, the second of whom, in Theodor Fontane's eponymous novel, is seen almost entirely from the outside, with little space set aside for represented reflection. No one could say that Anna is more vivid that Effi simply because we see Anna doing more thinking. If I try to distinguish between major and minor characters—round and flat characters—and claim that these differ in terms of subtlety, depth, time allowed on the page, I must concede that many so-called flat characters seem more alive to me, and more interesting as human studies, however short-lived, than the round characters they are supposedly subservient to (Wood 95-99).

Wood's preference for so-called flat characters prefigures ideas put forward in Marta Figlerowicz's *Flat Protagonists: A Theory of Novel Character*, that flat characters can appear more alive, more interesting as "human studies."

Marta Figlerowicz, in her text contends that a protagonist may be regarded as flat and defines the term "flat protagonist" as "characters whose represented self-expression and ties to others contract and simplify over the course of a novel […] [tending] asymptotically toward what E.M, Forster describes as "flat" character construction," but are protagonists nonetheless (3). According to Figlerowicz, a flat protagonist is a means by which to represent a sense of personal finitude. What is usually construed as the novel's weakness (an inability to represent the richness of "real life"), she regards as this text's strength, suggesting that this finitude is necessary to communicate the idea that the human experience is equally as unfulfilling as a novel—that one's own interpersonal relationships may be "extremely partial and narrow when one compares them [..] to the diversity and breadth of one's surrounding social networks" (5-6). In her analysis of chosen texts, including Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, she examines the vast indifference of society in which any one character, or person, exists.

Wood seems to be on the verge of suggesting, as Figlerowicz does, that flat characters are like us, like the reader, like the ordinary person. The many examples Wood uses to try and sort through the "nonsense" written about characters in fiction helps to make clear the difficulty in sorting out the parts of character to which a reader or critic must pay attention. Figlerowicz's work follows then by reconciling the notion that flatness and realness are distinctly different factors of character, suggesting instead that the flat character signifies to a reader something about themselves. Flatness, in this context, becomes realness. My own work extends her analysis and seeks to discover under what conditions character functions in narrative, how narrative controls character, and how character controls narrative. The terms which I develop, distortion, nonsense, and the ordinary, all fall under the umbrella term, flatness, but in the sense of Figlerowicz's work—a flatness that undercuts the exaggerated sense of reality that earlier novels

have given us. This thesis will examine the narrators of Thomas Bernhard's *The Loser*, Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, and Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*, novels which I will call postmodern novels and remain relatively untouched by character studies. I attempt to discover what makes a character life-like and what makes character an agent of the text, and ultimately, how these distinctions drive our interpretive understanding of the text.

Figlerowicz, solely focusing on Proust's narrator as the flat protagonist of his own narrative, even though his thoughts about M. Swann in Volume I model the deconstruction of character in literary texts, develops a multi-faceted account of M. Swann. In the text's own voice there was "no doubt" that "the Swann who was known at the same time to so many clubmen was quite different than the one created by my great-aunt," the Swann whom "they had formed for themselves" (Proust 19). Swann, in effect, invites a multi-faceted person explanation, with different layers of identity known to different groups of people. Yet the narrator also says,

> Even with respect to the most insignificant things in life, none of us constitutes a material whole, identical for everyone, which a person has only to go look up as though we were a book of specifications or a last testament; our social personality is a creation of the minds of others. Even the very simple act that we call 'seeing a person we know' is in part an intellectual one. We fill the physical appearance of the individual we see with all the notions we have about him, and of the total picture that we form for ourselves (19).

What the narrator wrestles with here is parallel to establishing what one means by "flat" and "round" characters. Employing these distinctions permits us to refer directly to the psychological construction of a character—the dimensionality of their mind—or to detect the absence of it, our being occluded from what might not be there. Alternatively, we might view the narrator as

suggesting that all "people" are flat; no person is a "material whole," filled out fully by the signified, but are instead an assemblage of signifiers— his "aquiline nose," the swell of his cheeks, the "sonority of his voice"—that move away from physicality to abstraction (19). The intellectual act in which we engage as the reader/ viewer of another person is to create depth out of singular characteristics—we "form" and "create" depth ourselves. Thus, the Swann known to the narrator and his family is not the same Swann known by gentlemen from the club, and perhaps consequently is not Swann at all. His simple presence makes him "round" because of the composite psychological narrative of those around him**.**

In her chapter on Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, "The Solipsist," Figlerowicz comments on the heightened cultural interest in first-person narrative and of the renewed belief in the value of its representation. Citing James' *The Art of Fiction*, "humanity is immense and reality has a myriad of forms […] experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threats suspended in the chamber of consciousness" (Figlerowicz 130). To James and other authors of this period, writes Figlerowicz, "literature is valuable to the extent that it is able to awe its reader with depictions of this 'immense sensibility,' and to convey it with as much depth and commitment as possible" (130). Proust's narrator most decidedly conveys the richness and depth of first-person "sensations" throughout the novel, but he also interrogates the centrality of these experiences. He discovers, like Figlerowicz suggests, that perhaps the sensations confined to his own mind and body are uninteresting to anyone else (131).

Taking up as much narrative space as he can possibly have, Proust's narrator communicates only the finitude of his own person—as Figerlowicz suggests, "how the seemingly rich, totalizing worlds of feelings and sensations in which he immerses himself might

only be confined to his own mind and body—and, as such, they might be uninteresting to anyone else" (130). Despite what may seem like a wealth of psychological knowledge about the narrator, he remains a "flat protagonist." I would like to retain this idea of the Proust narrator that "none of us constitutes a material whole, identical for everyone, which a person has only to go look up as though we were a book of specifications." The idea of being a "material whole," per Marcel, seems more akin to Forster's definition of "flat" than "round," despite being defined as a "whole." Being "whole" here refers to being fully knowable—found in a "book of specifications."

The idea that something, or someone, can be fully knowable is a great comfort to the reader, for knowing something fully means one can speak about the subject without worry or with the confidence of intimacy, with precision (as Forster does with Mrs. Micawber). The narrators within the novels of Bernhard, O'Brien, and Bolaño fall prey to these same comforts of knowability. They cling to their knowledge with an almost maniacal force, refusing to abandon it for any reason. When these narrators find that they do not know something, the narrative undergoes a shift toward the nonsensical for several reasons. It is possible that the narrator's knowledge is no longer compatible with their narrative environment, as with O'Brien's narrator, or perhaps the narrator believes his knowledge to be somewhat of a secret—applicable only to himself, and not to the rest of the ordinary people in the world, like in *The Loser*. This secret, superior knowledge results in the reader's own feeling of nonsense, suggesting that their ordinary life which Bernhard's narrator so looks down upon may be under assault.

For Forster, the fact that a flat character can be known fully, recognized at once by the reader as a static object of the text, is a necessity in how he experiences literature. His separation of flat and round characters conveys the idea that the whole world cannot be round, some

characters must be incidental—flat—in order to have inflated, round, life-like characters. Bolaño's narrative plays with this notion by inflating a myriad number of characters through interviews in Part II of *The Savage Detectives*, disturbing and upsetting the dichotomy that Forster suggests helps literature cohere. For example, when looking for characters that can be considered flat by Forster's standards in *The Savage Detectives*, we examine Barbara Patterson. Barbara Patterson, the American girlfriend of Rafael Barrios—one of the visceral realists—functions as a paradigmatically "minor" character. Though her name appears in several of Garcia Madero's journal entries, nothing exists of her character. In fact, Garcia Madero writes her full name in every entry she appears in, as though not to forget who he is talking about—or, perhaps for Bolaño, to turn her into the fullness of both names for the reader. Garcia Madero introduces her saying, "Barrios showed up arm in arm with a very nice American girl (she was always smiling) whose name was Barbara Patterson" (94). When Xóchitl wants to smoke weed despite being pregnant, Barbara delivers her only line throughout Part I, "let her smoke if she wants, said Barbara Patterson" (193). Through the eyes of Garcia Madero, Barbara Patterson is an irrelevant player, a nice American girl who smiles often. Despite this apparent perception, in Part II, she is interviewed three times.

> Barbara Patterson, in a room at the Hotel Los Claveles, Avenida Niño Perdido and Juan de Dios Peza, Mexico City DF, September 1976.
>
> Motherfucking hemorrhoid-licking old bastard, I saw the distrust in his pale, bored little monkey eyes right from the start, and I said to myself this asshole will take every chance he gets to spit on me, the motherfucking son of a bitch (181).

From her own testimony, Barbara becomes entangled with the visceral realists after falling in love-at-first-sight with Rafael at a poetry reading, then following the "gang" to their gatherings and various exploits, forming loose friendships with the visceral realists. Here, Barbara speaks about interviewing Manuel Maples Arce with Rafael, Requena, and Belano. Throughout her interview, Barbara calls Maples Arce an "old fart-breath," a "constipated grand old man of Mexican literature," and "Mr. Great Poet of the Pleistocene" (182). Where once Garcia Madero perceived her as quiet and smiling, her words present her as angry. In fact, she says in a later interview (in her home in San Diego in 1982), "I was seething with rage, I really was, absolute fury" (365). Anger, as an overarching identifier, encompasses being foul-mouthed, resentful, and sardonic. These qualities follow Barbara as identifiers throughout her interviews, allowing a reader comfortably to say Barbara can be "summarized" as a character in one sentence, around one idea.

However, the difference between Garcia Madero's Barbara Patterson, and the words attributed to Barbara Patterson, trouble the intuition that she is flat. Perhaps this difference signifies the unreliability of Garcia Madero's narration/ journal entries. His obsession with Belano, Lima, and the rest of the visceral realists blinds him to the character of others. Garcia Madero's Barbara Patterson appears to be the Mrs. Micawber of his story—she is with Rafael and she smiles, that is all. Yet surely one would concede that Garcia Madero's description of Barbara is sorely lacking. Part of the interest in flat characters, part of the way in which we want to claim that they are not "real people," is that we want to be able to claim the character is fully knowable. With Part II in the forefront, we can say we know, from her own testimony, that Barbara Patterson is "always angry" and "always foul-mouthed," but if this were true Garcia Madero would have certainly made note of her abusive language in his mentions of her. By

presenting Barbara Patterson in Part II, along with several other minor characters, some of whom appear in Part I and some of whom only appear in interview form, the narrative breathes life, psychological life, into every character mentioned. They are all the protagonists of their own lives, nearly invisible lives, though they are not all of equal importance to Garcia Madero.

Garcia Madero's unintentional ignorance of Barbara Patterson in his journal entries appears somewhere on a critical continuum that spans the explanations of Forster and Figlerowicz. The interviews of Part II seem to remind the reader that, as Figlerowicz suggests, no one person can represent the richness of life and the breadth of social interaction that can occur in life, nor can one person truly take up as much space in the minds of others as they think they do. For example, even though Barbara Patterson goes on a tirade about the disgusting, old Manuel Maples Arce, and how he will take every chance he can to spit on her, Arce rarely mentions her in his own interview. He notes that she is American and perhaps does not know very well the works of Borges and John Dos Passos. Of course, Arce's mention of Barbara's ignorance can certainly be interpreted as a sort of slight to her intelligence; her interview gives the impression that Arce was attempting to single her out, looking at her distrustfully, "spitting" on her (metaphorically, of course). These two interviews side-by-side extend Figlerowicz analysis even further, in that one's subjectivity influences the way certain events are viewed and subsequently portrayed. For Forster, inflating the perspectives of Barbara and Manuel Maples Arce may push the narrative toward a certain incoherence—too many inflated characters, too much "life."

Ironically, Forster and Figlerowicz perhaps represent two sides of the same coin. She argues that we learn more about ourselves from a character that is flat, which is somehow akin to the learning process that comes to Forster through the round character. Neither critic wants to

give up the notion that we learn from characters. We read literature to be moved by characters, to figure out their complexity, or we read and see characters that lack complexity and therefore remind us of ourselves. Both Forster and Figlerowicz hang their arguments on a sense of imagining, though they imagine two different scenarios as the outcome for studying characters.

The interviews in *The Savage Detectives* and the way they inflate and deflate characters returns to the terms under which this thesis examines character—through distortion, nonsense, and ordinariness. The interviews make clear that time, space, and character can be distorted to make room for other events (as it is with the journals of Garcia Madero), and how this distortion can lead into a nonsensical, incoherent narrative—or at least a narrative that alienates its reader. Ordinary, then, is what these characters really are, as Figlerowicz suggests. The ordinary character is like the reader, their understanding of the world around them cannot possibly communicate the true richness of life, of reality, because their minds focus on what they deem important. What becomes inflated throughout the course of a novel, then, represents the personal finitude of both character and reader, illustrating certain aspects of life that the character views as important rather than a rich picture of life as it is.

Chapter 1: Sense and Nonsense

Traditional readings of *The Savage Detectives* and *The Loser* prefer to search for deeper, social, historical meanings that look outside of these novels for answers. Ordinarily, these readings are reliant on the texts themselves for evidence, yet the meaning of the text is not contained in the meanings of their specific words but instead relies on something about "life," or poetry or music or art, and so forth. My reading redirects our attention to the "obvious," to look for the sense and coherence internal to the words of these texts. I take my methodological cue from John Attridge's reading of *The Third Policeman*, wherein he discusses the approach to nonsense developed in the 1930s and 40s by ordinary language philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, after *Tractatus* (although Cavell would take issue with calling Wittgenstein an ordinary language philosopher), and J.L. Austin because of their pertinence to our understanding of O'Brien's literary nonsense "not only for what it reveals about his literary technique, but also for the light it sheds on his cultural historical positioning as a novelist writing in the immediate aftermath of high modernism" (Attridge 299). I further his argument by applying Gricean conversational logic and mechanics to sketch out a sense of the "nonsensical" phrases and conditions of the novel. My purpose here specifically borrows from H.P Grice's contention that people or characters break the rules or "flout" the social conventions of conversations. Peering into these "flouts" in postmodern and unconventional narratives, we begin to discover the basis of nonsensical speech, not as intentional exploitations but rather as creative fictional distortions of ordinary speech.

When the anonymous narrator of O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* speaks with the dead-not dead Mathers, Mathers only responds to him in the negative—"No," "I will not," "I am not," "I do not" (27-8). The narrator and his soul, Joe, finding that they have cracked the code, ask him

a question in which a negative response will result in an answer; the narrator says, "this answer pleased me. It meant my mind had got to grips with his, that I was now almost arguing with him and that we were behaving like two ordinary human beings. I did not understand all the terrible things that had happened to me but I now began to think that I must be mistaken about them" (O'Brien 28). Feeling that he has begun an "ordinary" conversation with an "ordinary" human, the narrator no longer feels confused and terrified by the strange things that have happened to him.

That the narrator finds solace in the fact that he can converse with Mathers as an "ordinary human being" presents several narrative problems about the concept of the ordinary. What does "ordinary" mean, particularly in the context of conversation and language? According to Attridge, in his article "Nonsense, Ordinary Language Philosophy, and Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*," *The Third Policeman* draws on the same language principles concerning nonsense language surrounding ordinary language philosophy and its counterpart as theorists such as Wittgenstein and Austin (304). The tension between ordinary language and nonsense language seems to be the driving force within O'Brien's narrative, as the narrator searches for "ordinary" human beings with which to converse, yet instead ends up with unnatural beings that communicate in a nonsensical way. What is meant by nonsense here is that, as Attridge puts it, "one feels not so much that sense data and language are misrepresenting reality as that something has gone wrong with the mechanics of perception and assertion respectively, so that what is being posited is not wrong but meaningless" (303).

The idea that words in this narrative world no longer convey meaning decenters an ordinary logic system that would govern conversation. To borrow the words of Grice from his *Logic and Conversation*, there is a general, cooperative principle (CP) understood by participants

in a conversation (making up ordinary conversation), which one may distinguish by four categories: quantity, quality, relation, and matter (Grice 45). If a conversation becomes nonsense, one can assume that one of these categories has been breached, or as Grice calls it, a maxim has been flouted, or exploited—that is, blatantly disregarded by a conversational participant leading the conversation to be meaningless. Nonsense also refers to statements that are nonsensical due to a referent that does not exist. Overall, the nonsense that both O'Brien's narrator and the reader experience can be categorized as that which employs standard discourse, looking and sounding meaningful, but cannot be understood.

An example of such a breach in these principles of cooperative conversation occurs when O'Brien's unnamed narrator arrives at the police station and meets Sergeant Pluck, who asks, "'is it about a bicycle?'" and when the narrator replies, "no," Pluck looks at him "incredulously" (54-5). He is unable to believe that the narrator has not come to ask about a bicycle, and he continues to ask him a series of bicycle-related questions to which the narrator always replies "no." Policeman MacCruiskeen, upon joining Pluck and the narrator at the station, also asks if the narrator has come to inquire about a bicycle. When the narrator finally reveals that he is at the station to report a stolen watch, MacCruiskeen replies, "'That is an astonishing statement […] never in my puff did I hear of any man stealing anything but a bicycle when he was in his sane senses'" (61). Ironically, both conversational participants believe the other has breached the principles of conversation, both rely on a set of nonsensical implications—he says x, no one before has ever said x without asking about bicycles which thus leads to an overall sense of nonsense exchanged among the three of them. MacCruiskeen even suggests that what the narrator refers to is also nonsensical because no man in his "sane senses" (which is perhaps a linguistic redundancy on the part of MacCruiskeen) would steal anything but a bike.

Attridge suggests that *The Third Policeman* underlines the importance of ordinary social intercourse through its absence in the narrative—which imbues the narrator with a sense of alienation (308). Referencing the narrator's conversation with Mathers, where his "mind had got to grips with his," Attridge claims that this conversation "affords him a sense of "ordinariness and humanity" (308); whereas, in the narrator's conversations with the policemen Pluck and MacCruiskeen, his inability to grasp the rules of their language "game," "cuts him off from them and quickens his sense of panicky *Angst*," and thus alienates him (308).[2] The narrator's ability throughout the narrative to find discursive and linguistic "ordinary-ness" among "ordinary" humans quickly breaks down, further suggesting to Attridge that O'Brien's world of nonsense has been created by slowly subtracting the structure of ordinary language, through both the novel's plot and the speech of its characters, thus explaining why the narrator is unable to get any "logical traction" within his new reality (311).

On the other hand, Attridge does not touch upon what it means for the general organizing principle of a narrative to be nonsense when the "ordinary" suddenly becomes strange, and nonsense language speaks into existence a material nonsense, as well. The policemen find the narrator's story to be unbelievable, not on the basis that he is lying, but because it is not about a bicycle. Their astonishment at his statement seems to suggest that it is the narrator who is unnatural and unfamiliar, and perhaps Attridge's concept of alienation applies because the narrator is alone, unable to conform to the "ordinary" standard of the policemen. I mean to suggest that, within a novel such as *The Third Policeman* that is governed by a principle of

[2] To finish the quotation, Attridge adds, "in accordance with Wittgenstein's axiom that a language game is a form of life" (309). The use of "*Angst,"* italicized and capitalized, is because Attridge is drawing on the German "angst," translating to fear and using it more in an Heideggerean sense. I will follow up on the notion of "language games" in Chapter 2.

nonsense, the terms ordinary and nonsensical experience a reversal. That which is originally deemed as ordinary suddenly becomes nonsensical when the referent of the ordinary narratively disappears.

Thus, to interrogate not what the nonsense tries to mean but how it functions in relation to the narrative is the first order of study. The narrator has pursued his entire life the study of the philosopher called de Selby compiling a codex of his works. He is not just studying de Selby but in fact living *for* him, as he says "it was for de Selby I committed my first serious sin. It was for him that I committed my greatest sin" (O'Brien 9). We might note that this same sentiment of cause—extreme devotion to a divine-like being is what triggers Thomas Bernhard's narrator's lament in *The Loser*—his unworldly obligation to Glenn Gould. Ironically, O'Brien's narrator claims that for "most of de Selby's theories, the ultimate outcome is inconclusive. It is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated […] while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena" (52). We can draw from this statement that the narrator has spent most of his life trying to make meaning out of nonsense, specifically de Selby's nonsense, all the while recognizing that it is an enigma. However, de Selby's work focuses on questioning the most obvious realities of life, which raises the question: why does the narrator not question the realities of the nonsensical world into which he has been thrown?

If we ascribe to Attridge's critical explanation, it is because the narrative realm of *The Third Policeman* no longer affords the narrator logical traction to question reality because his basis for formulating language and thoughts has been pulled out from under him and replaced with nonsense principles instead. To take this explanation one step further, we must examine several nonsensical aspects of the text and how they create a material nonsensicality, which then

instead makes the "ordinary" nonsense. The narrator finds the police-barracks he had been searching for and says that "the appearance of the house was the greatest surprise I had encountered" (53).

> As I approached, the house seemed to change its appearance. At first, it did nothing to reconcile itself with the shape of an ordinary house but it became uncertain in outline like a thing glimpsed under ruffled water. Then it became clear again and I saw that it began to have some back to it, some spall space for rooms behind the frontage. I gathered this from the fact that I seemed to see the front and the back of the 'building' simultaneously from my position approaching what should have been the side. As there was no side that I could see I thought the house must be triangular with its apex pointing towards me but when I was only fifteen yards away I saw a small window apparently facing me and I knew from that that there must be *some* side to it. […] It seemed ordinary enough at close quarters except that it was very white and still. It was momentous and frightening; the whole morning and the whole world seemed to have no purpose at all save to frame it and give it some magnitude and position so that I could find it with my simple senses and pretend to myself that I understood it (52).

This house, the police-barracks, is the first instance of material (physical) nonsense experienced by the narrator. Rather than trying to understand the house, he waits for it to "reconcile itself" with ordinary reality, thus giving strange agency to the house. Further, the narrator's worldly position upon seeing the house becomes questionable. If he sees the front and back of the house "simultaneously," this suggests that he is viewing the house from above despite the fact that he has been walking toward it from the road. This, then, implies that the house is two-dimensional, within a three-dimensional world. Again, the narrator's grasp of what is "ordinary" about the

house only turns up with something rather unnatural. The agency of the house returns at the end of the narrator's description literally altering the "purpose" of the world around him. Here, Attridge's sense of "nonsense" applies in that the narrator experiences something that looks meaningful (the house) but remains to him is unintelligible—meaningless.

Creating agency for the nonsensical house to turn the world on its head enacts the reversal of ordinary and nonsensical. The narrator only has his "simple senses" and must "pretend" to understand the house, whereas the rest of reality, "the whole world," conforms, seems to understand the "meaning," the sense of this house ("the whole world seemed to have no other purpose at all") except to give "magnitude" and "position" to the house. The house obeys the nonsensical principles of the nonsensical world, leaving the narrator as the sole one who does not understand the meaning of the house. And being that he is the only one not to understand, then it follows that he must be the one who is nonsensical, unordinary. The very construction of this reality undoes him, alienates him.

Thomas Bernhard's narrator from *The Loser* similarly allows his reality to alienate him, clinging to his own personal principles like O'Brien's narrator. In the case of *The Loser*, however, Bernhard's narrator views "ordinary life" as nonsensical. The narrator refuses to be ordinary on the basis that all life is meaningless unless it is marked by genius, something so extraordinary that it can barely be called human. If it is not, then one might as well die—which sounds something like what the tricky Michael Finnucane says to O'Brien's narrator: "'is it life? […] I would rather be without it, […] for there is a queer small utility in it. […] It is a great mistake and a thing better done without, like bed-jars and foreign bacon. […] It is a queer contraption, very dangerous, a certain death-trap" (O'Brien 45). *The Loser* has many other narrative peculiarities created by its narrator which I will return to in Chapter 3, however I will

focus here on his thoughts about life, death, and ordinariness as they function toward the narrative.

The novel opens with the narrator considering life and death, the first line being, "*suicide calculated well in advance, I thought, no spontaneous act of desperation*" (Bernhard 3). But this first line only makes sense when we learn, anecdotally, that his friend Wertheimer has just committed suicide. The narrator, knowing this, still begins his narrative by talking about Glenn Gould, "the most important piano virtuoso of the century," who "didn't kill himself like Wertheimer, but died, as they say, a *natural death*" (3). Glenn Gould's position in the narrator's mind as "the most important piano virtuoso of the century" ensures that he will speak about him first, rather than Wertheimer. He does not explain the nature of Wertheimer's suicide for several more pages. Instead, the narrator thinks about Gould and how he died of lung disease. Yet,

> Glenn didn't die from this lung disease, I thought. He was killed by the impasse he had *played* himself into for almost forty years, I thought. He never gave up the piano, I thought, of course not, whereas Wertheimer and I gave up the piano because we never attained the inhuman state that Glenn attained, who by the way never escaped this inhuman state, who didn't even want to escape this inhuman state. Wertheimer had his *Bösendorfer* grand piano auctioned off in the Dorotheum, I gave away my *Steinway* one day to the nine-year-old daughter of a schoolteacher in Neukirchen near Altmünster so as not to be tortured by it any longer. (6)

The narrator, fluctuating back and forth on his explanation as to why Gould died, concerning his opinion about artistry, believes, and by extension believes of Wertheimer, that there is no reason to continue to play piano unless he is the best, unless he attains the "inhuman

state" of Gould—not just a mere virtuoso but an inhumanly excellent piano player. "Excellent" falters in my description, simply because the narrator would never have used it in this context, and explains another one of the reasons that this narrator falls flat. Instead, what he says: "I gave up the piano because we never attained the inhuman state that Glenn attained, who by the way never escaped this inhuman state, who didn't even want to escape this inhuman state," divides Wertheimer and the narrator's escape from being ordinary pianists from Gould choosing never to escape. Bernhard's narrator lives, perhaps, an inverse life to that of Garcia Madero. He is no longer searching viciously for belonging and art, but is recovering in the aftermath of it. Still the reason the narrator quits the piano echoes Garcia Madero's feelings about the poetry course he takes—nothing was happening. Rather than wait for something to happen, as Garcia Madero does (perhaps because he is young), the narrator gives up both playing the piano and the physical object, his prized Steinway, such that nothing will ever happen again (in terms of his art)

There is an almost parallel relationship between O'Brien's narrator and Bernhard's narrator in terms of their guiding principles. O'Brien's narrator gave up living an "ordinary" life (running the farm his family left for him) in pursuit of creating a complete codex of de Selby's works. He was forced to commit murder in order to come up with the funds to continue his de Selby research uninterrupted, and as a result, was killed by a bomb set up by Divney—losing the opportunity to live any life at all. Bernhard's narrator felt compelled to desert his study of music because he already knew he would never be the best (this would be akin to if O'Brien's narrator knew there was already a complete codex of de Selby's works). Thus, Bernhard's narrator deserted his music for philosophical studies because to continue while knowing he will never be the best is equivalent to death—in fact, according to Bernhard's narrator, death would be better.

Both O'Brien's narrator and Bernhard's narrators are imbued with a sense of fear in different ways. O'Brien's narrator's fear stems from the nonsensical world around him, he "felt afraid" as he walked up to the hosue and finds its appearance to be extremely "frightening" (53). On the other hand, Bernhard's narrator's fears melt into paranoia, as he reconsiders every decision he has made in his life, how his decisions affected himself, Wertheimer, and Glenn Gould, as well as fears that he is currently wasting his life away even though he has given up the piano. Though not specifically stated by O'Brien's narrator, fear emerging from alienation and trapped in a reality that is unknowable only to the narrator characterizes the narrative's sense of paranoia. The idea that the narrator's reality is shifting, perhaps even conspiring against him, to communicate meaning that is understood by everyone except him, is certainly paranoia's description. Does this mean, then, that there is a natural link between nonsense and paranoia? *The Loser*'s narrator who espouses, like any Poe character, paranoid symptoms across the running monologue of the novel, lapses into near nonsensical palaver.

But for the moment, consider the paranoia present in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49,* if only to recognize that paranoia and Pynchon go hand-in-hand. *Lot 49*'s Oedipa Maas experiences persistent paranoia as she tries to uncover a conspiracy about a secret postal system called Trystero. However, her inability to understand the landscape of Pynchon's Southern California is where most her paranoia most closely resembles the O'Brien narrator. Driving to find a motel in San Narciso, she meditates on Southern California and the nature of radios, "there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate" (Pynchon 24). Again, this merely foreshadows the intense paranoia Oedipa will experience in her search for "concealed meaning" in signs of a muted post horn, for a secret society embroiled in an age-old conspiracy, to understand "words she couldn't hear" (27), but as she looks out onto

the city of San Narciso, “she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency […] words were being spoken” (25).

Like O’Brien’s narrator, Oedipa believes that the world around her hides a “concealed meaning”; it is “hieroglyphic,” and she has no way to understand it. It poses, consequently, the same type of nonsense that characterizes *The Third Policeman*. As the world speaks and communicates meaning to others, she believes, not that she is misrepresenting reality, but that her perception, her understanding of reality, falters before this meaning. To her, the sounds of the landscape are meaningless despite their “intent to communicate.” Again, the tension between ordinary language and nonsense swells and thus reverses itself in this moment. The language spoken by Oedipa’s surroundings is nonsensical and in paranoid-like building manner communicates to everyone but her. She then, is the one who is nonsensical, unordinary, an outsider looking in, and endures the same position as the unnamed narrator of *The Third Policeman*, alienated from this world, its sounds are meaningless to her.

When MacCruiskeen shows O’Brien’s unnamed narrator hundreds of identical boxes that decrease in size so much so that they become invisible, he is “reminded […] forcibly, strange and foolish it may seem, of something I did not understand and had never even heard of” (O’Brien 72). Like Oedipa, he accepts that the nonsense is not nonsense but meaning that he cannot understand or grasp. Even further, as Pluck and Gilhaney take the narrator on an expedition to find a stolen bicycle, and Pluck reveals that he stole and hid the parts of the bicycle himself, the narrator replies, “I find it is a great strain for me to believe what I see, and I am becoming afraid occasionally to look at some things in case they would have to be believed” (82). The narrator willfully exposes a skepticism that he attempts to restrain when made to look in on the nonsensical world that he fears, unable to believe the very nonsense even as it occurs

before his eyes. His own ordinariness, naturalness, becomes meaningless, nonsensical, and he too is alone in the narrative of this world.

Why, then, if *Lot 49*'s Oedipa experiences the same alienation and paranoia before nonsense as *The Third Policeman*'s narrator is *The Crying of Lot 49* never described as nonsense language? One the one hand, the paranoia and alienation experienced by the *The Third Policeman*'s narrator encompasses the reader. But Oedipa's paranoia, on the other hand, derives from a set of clues that undermine her already existing sense of reality (albeit a reality that parodies that of the reader's), and alienation or paranoia in *The Third Policeman* does not. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying *The Crying of Lot 49*, its genre as mystery novel or detective novel confirms that finding Trystero, and what it signifies, is Oedipa's task, which she goes about accomplishing by digging up more and more "clues," endless clues, about the muted post horn. O'Brien's narrator neither has a set of clues to follow nor does he have a goal in mind other than getting the box of money he was on his way to retrieve before he died. Even this goal, his mission, is muddied by the nonsensical world around him. For example, the narrator decides he will tell the police that he has had his American gold watch stolen to avoid revealing that he is looking for money that *he* stole. As he walks to find the police-barracks he notes, "it was still early morning, perhaps. If I had not lost my American gold watch it would be possible for me to tell the time," to which Joe responds, "*you have no American gold watch*" (O'Brien 52). In an attempt to align himself with the principles of this nonsense world, the narrator changed his "goal" through a cover story. However, he comes to believe his own lie and has to be reminded by Joe that he is not really looking for his watch. Oedipa never attempts to align herself with the principles of Trystero, nor does she have to. Instead, she desires, rather simply to translate the

hieroglyphic meaning communicated by the symbol of the muted post horn, thereby unlocking its secrets.

William Bywater in "The Paranoia of Postmodernism," drawing on David Shapiro and Stanley Fish to discuss paranoia and the idea of clues in postmodern novels, writes,

> The suspiciousness of postmodernism certainly leads to a search for clues within the text which eventually are used to undermine the authority of the text. These clues are marshalled into an argument designed to show that the text cannot provide rules or norms for its own interpretation. The postmodernist critic is then in a position to assert authority over the text in, for example, a reader response approach to criticism in which, to quote Fish, "the reader's response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning" (Bywater 80).

Likewise, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Brian Nicol explores many aspects of postmodernism and its subgenres, one of which is "postmodern detective fiction," which becomes synonymous with the "anti-detective" story. Acknowledged as a particularly postmodern phenomenon, postmodern detective fiction frustrates the "modernist fantasy of control and order" and instead "parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closer and the detective's role as surrogate reader—with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot"[3] (Nicol 172).

In effect, postmodern detective fiction frustrates both reader and critic. This is true of *The Crying of Lot 49,* particularly in terms of frustration—and is perhaps the key difference between

[3] Nicol quoting Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney from their text *Detecting Texts*.
Merivale, Patricia and Sweeney, Susan Elizabeth (1999) 'The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story'. In Merivale, and Sweeney, eds. *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1–24

O'Brien and Pynchon's novels, why one develops nonsense and the other paranoia. Of course, the reader of *The Crying of Lot 49* is frustrated when they come to the end of the novel only to discover that the title, "the crying of lot 49," is simply another loose end, the Marquise remained pensive just like Oedipa continuing her search for Trystero. As Nicol suggests, the effect of this postmodern detective fiction is to ask questions about mysteries of being and knowing, to transcend the idea that a detective novel will solve its mystery by the end. However, the ordinary reading remains frustrated—and wants to know, beyond the rules of genre, what Oedipa will find at the auction. We want to know the truth behind Trystero, and we only decide to decipher these transcendent meanings upon a re-examination of the various clues in the novel. *The Third Policeman* obviously does not meet the conditions of a postmodern detective fiction; there is no organizing generic principle by which we can define it, which is part of what makes it so difficult to understand.

Even so, the un-understandable meaning of the language within the novel keeps progressing. When MacCruiskeen pierces the narrator with a spear whose end is so sharp and thin that it is nearly invisible, the narrator asks, "'and what is this inch that is left?'" to which MacCruiskeen replies, "'that is the real point'" (O'Brien 68). MacCruiskeen further explains that the point of the spear is "so thin that maybe it does not exist at all and you could spend half an hour trying to think about it and you could put no thought around it in the end" (68-9). Thus, as the narrator racks his brain, he still "made no progress at all as regards to the question of the points" (69). Not unlike the reader's experience with the novel, the narrative seems to become self-conscious as it tells both reader and narrator that "the real point" is invisible, unknowable.

What exactly is the reader meant to extract from this nonsense world? Something about bicycles? About death? If the narrative itself claims that the real point is invisible, how can we

give the novel meaning? Even as the narrator makes no progress in giving meaning to the "invisible point," the policemen continue to push forth their nonsense, showing the narrator hundreds of identical boxes, and claiming that people are at least half, if not more, bicycle. The policemen speak in idiomatic expressions for which the reader cannot find a referent, such as "that will make you think, unless I am an old Dutchman by profession and nationality" (67). The reader, like the narrator, has no way to identify any part of the nonsense language as common social discourse. The reader, unable to ascribe meaning to any of these interactions, perhaps becomes alienated from the text—ordinary language has been stripped away so that nonsense instead becomes "ordinary," and, like the narrator, the reader has lost their footing.

Why, then, is O'Brien's narrative so offending, to the point that it would be called nonsense, meaningless? Is it exactly the nonsensical properties of the narrative that create this effect? When faced with tensions between sense and nonsense in *The Third Policeman*, the fear and alienation caused by the nonsense world impacts the reader. Because its world is nonsensical, a logical reason to explain why the narrator would have a disembodied soul with his own name cannot be found or even understood. Since no reason can be found within the text, the burden of reasoning falls on the reader to wrestle with implications. By their own wits, then, they create their own logic as to why a leprechaun-man finds life to be meaningless, and why a soul would have more agency than the person to whom it belongs. What drives O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* is more concrete than a willful ambiguity, so far as meaninglessness can be called concrete. It is the principles of nonsense, shifting the meaning of "ordinary" and consequently making the narrator feel nonsensical that advances the narrative. The text poses questions about souls, the meaning of life, and even asks what the "point" is—going so far as to suggest that it invisible and unknowable—slowly, purposely alienating the reader, imbuing them with fear and

distrust in the narrative. The meaning of this meaninglessness is, perhaps, to dispel the notion of the "ordinary." Holding on to it, as evidenced by the narrator, only further closes the narrative off from understanding.

As the novel ends, the narrator finds himself walking back toward the police-barracks, and looking upon them as if for the first time. Walking backward, in fact, is a thematic idea that also touches *The Savage Detectives* as Lima and Belano reveal that one of the central principles of visceral realism is to walk "'backward, gazing at a point in the distance, but moving away from it, walking straight toward the unknown'" (Bolaño 7). O'Brien's narrator re-experiences the shift of reality to give purpose to the house so that he could, once again, "find it with my simple senses and pretend to myself that I understood it" (199). Again, he comes upon a policeman who seems strange and unnatural, and in the last line of the novel, the policeman asks: "is it about a bicycle" (199)? This repetition, the ironically cyclical nature of the narrative, demands a rereading. That nonsense governs the diegesis, though it does not convey meaning by itself, can be given meaning only by the reader, only if they question their acceptance of the ordinary. The nonsense of *The Third Policeman*, this type of overall nonsense, is a very extreme example of nonsensical narrative—the most disruptive example of all three novels I've chosen. I began with O'Brien's novel to 1) explain the framework of my understanding of ordinary and nonsense, and 2) to demonstrate what a complete reversal of ordinary and nonsense principles implies and 3) how, sometimes, we crave the ordinary even when the narrative tells us to reject it.

How, then, do these readings of nonsense and ordinariness apply to the argument of this thesis? These ideas, I claim, reappear in character analysis, through what I will refer to as character-driven distortion. O'Brien's narrator is imperative to the nonsensical nature of his novel because, although we interpret the overarching narrative as nonsensical, the

meaninglessness of the narrative depends on the narrator's inability to understand. Consider, for example, when the narrator goes with Gilhaney and the Sergeant to find Gilhaney's stolen bicycle. The search lasts a very short time, as the Sergeant takes them directly to the location of the bicycle and tells them where to look. The narrator says,

> 'there is one puzzle […] that is hurting the back of my head and causing me a lot of curiosity. It is about the bicycle. I have never heard of detective-work as good as that being done before. Not only did you find the lost bicycle but you found all the clues as well. […] What is the secret of your constabulary virtuosity?' (O'Brien 82).

The Sergeant replies, "'it was an easy thing. […] Even without the clues I could have succeeded in ultimately finding the bicycle'" because it was the Sergeant who stole the bicycle in the first place, and he already knew its location (82). Before the narrator asks about this success, the reader, most likely, has the same question—how could the Sergeant have found the stolen bicycle immediately upon looking for it? If the perspective of the Sergeant was the perspective of the novel, or any of the other policemen, the novel would lapse in being nonsensical. There would be nothing odd about the Sergeant finding the bicycle right away because we might already know that he stole it, the way a Faulkner or a McEwan plot line might develop. We would also not be faced with the reality-defying house that is the police-barracks because of the change in agency: the Sergeant and the other policemen do not see it as reality-defying. Every problem would always be about a bicycle, and the eternity chamber where hair never grows and drinks never get drunk and time never passes would be a staple of ordinary life rather than a nonsensical existence. The disarming incredulity of the narrator serves as our meter for the ordinary, and he points out for us all the nonsensical aspects of the narrative world.

In *The Loser*, the nonsense becomes apparent through the narrator's principles, as well, but in a different way. The narrator does not just give up playing because he is not good enough, but because he is not as good as Glenn Gould, who reached an inhuman state by which he escaped the dullness of life, the torturous state of being human—of living. For Wertheimer, the narrator thinks, he believed "man is unhappiness […] to be born is to be unhappy, he said, and as long as we live we reproduce this unhappiness" (63). For the narrator, however, man is not simply unhappy. To live is to fail, even artistic achievement means nothing if the artist remains, sadly, human like himself and Wertheimer. Glenn may have been unhappy, but certainly his unhappiness was not that of other people. His unhappiness was that of man who had become the object himself, who had become one with art, who had become inhuman—shedding the sense of failure of other men (the fact that the novel has only men and not people or women is a telling, organizational idea of Berhard). Glenn played himself to death, whereas the narrator ensured his own destruction by giving his Steinway to a child.

Bitterly, the narrator reveals how he gave away the Steinway to the country piano teacher,

> The teacher accepted my gift *immediately*, I thought as I entered the inn. I hadn't believed in his daughter's talent for a minute; the children of country schoolteachers are always touted as having talent, above all musical talent, but in truth, they're not talented in anything, all these children are always completely without talent and even if one of them can blow into a flute or pluck a zither or bang on a piano, that's no proof of talent. I knew I was giving up my expensive instrument to an absolutely worthless individual and precisely for that reason I had it delivered to the teacher. The teacher's daughter took my instrument, one of the very best, one of the rarest and therefore most sought after and

therefore also most expensive pianos in the world, and in the shortest period imaginable destroyed it, rendered it worthless (7).

Of course, the failure of achievement haunts the narrator, steeps him in inescapable misery, but much more than that, it causes him to envision a torturous outcome, the destruction of his Steinway—the ignorance and willingness to allow a child to ruin achievement, greatness, that he succumbs to by insuring that the future destruction will be carried out. Though it is possible to imagine that the narrator's expensive, rare, sought after Steinway being destroyed by the child in the manner that children destroy all things—treating it with disrespect, letting it fall into a state of disrepair, touching it with sticky hands, covering it with stickers, drawings, smudges. But the narrator's Steinway in fact was not destroyed in this manner; rather, it was destroyed by a lack of talent, by the worthlessness and incompetency of being touched by anyone less than a virtuoso. He picks on a child's incompetency in order to lament what is unacceptable about being human, about being ordinary. The narrator uses a mode of discourse that not only inverts any thoughts of innocence and the unknowing child, it strikes a means of bitter complaint as the mode of expression. The child is not innocent but implicit in the torturous destruction of art, like the town of Salzburg, "disgusting" and "antagonistic to everything of value in a human being" (11). Ironically, the narrator thinks that the only thing of value in a human being is how close that human is to escaping the condition of being human. This bitterness, this distress at the state of life is a form of narrative distortion controlled by the narrator and his views on life.

Chapter 2: Meaninglessness and the Distorted Narrative

Many forms of narrative distortion, some being distortion of time, distortion of reality, distortion of character, frequent postmodern and experimental novels of the twentieth century. What do we intend when we introduce and isolate distortion as an analytical term that might apply to these three novels? Consider first visual distortion, since it is an easier form to image mentally, perhaps recalling expressionist and modernist painting of distorted faces. Let us be specific and imagine Chaim Soutine's "Le pâtissier de Cagnes," a portrait of Remi Zochetto, a pastry chef Soutine met in Céret (and one of Soutine's only portraits where the subject's name is known). The image because of costume is easily recognizable as a chef—the subject wears a white toque and coat and sits in what is most certainly a chair. However, the portrait gives the impression of being looked at underwater—the water distorting Zochetto's true image. His head, incredibly shrunken, depicts ears half the size of his face, his shoulders both droop and protrude in ways humanly impossible. The viewer knows now that this is a portrait of a real person, but distorted such that we recognize a person but not a "real" person—not something that mimics real life. We can also think of the better-known image of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, even less recognizable as a real depiction and an actual landscape, but signifying nonetheless, or Francis Bacon's agonizing, bloodied abstract faces in motion, or De Kooning's exaggerated, enlarged, broad stroke portraits. All these examples work distortion to visually inform, and being visually provoking, how far, we might ask, can this distortion extend before the distortion is no longer signing distortion? Is it approaching an idea of nothingness, at least in regard to the depiction of human form? Of course, the meaning of the art and the history behind it can always be distorted, but the image itself we recognize as a distortion of "real life."

How can narrative, where the "image" remains only in the reader's mind, undertake such experiments in distortion? There is the simple answer that all literature is a distortion—even realism. We too often take for granted that narratives are unrealistic because they assemble prominent aspects of life that are not normative. That is to say, narratives exaggerate. We unconsciously forget when reading, as is practice, that no matter how convincing, the protagonist is not a real person. Of course, literature must distort even the most realistic of narratives. Authors have no choice but to exaggerate simply because real life, for most of us, is boring, perhaps un-recordable with the exception perhaps of Flaubert's experiment in *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. So why is it crucial in literature, then, to distort? Because literature is commercial, and we must have interest in order to have readers? To sell books? John Barth writes in 1967 an essay called "The Literature of Exhaustion," by which he means the literature of "exhausted possibility." For Barth, many modes of representation and even possibilities for representation have been "used up," and have been, therefore, exhausted, particularly regarding realism. Does this mean we have no choice now but to distort?

Narrative distortion plays a clever trick on its reader's main desire to know. All literature is about knowing; how much can we know about a certain novel and its author, what can the text tell us, what can the history tell us, what can the social context tell us? Consider the detective novel, whose main purpose is to uncover a mystery—or to have its character and reader uncover a mystery simultaneously, like Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" the foundational detective text. Or perhaps Balzac's *Sarrasine*, wherein the partygoers desire to know where the de Lanty fortune has come from, and Mme de Rochefide desires to hear the story of La Zambinella. This is, of course, not a "detective text," but it is a text about "knowing," or what Barthes calls "enigma." After hearing the story of Sarrasine and La Zambinella, Mme de Rochefide turns on

the narrator, banishing him from her sight once she hears the end of the story, but "the marquise remained pensive." She has heard the full story but remains pensive, still thinking, or as Barthes writes in *S/Z*, "pensive, the Marquise can think of many of the things that have happened or that will happen, but about which we shall never know anything: the infinite openness of the pensive (and this is precisely its structural function) removes this final lexia from any classification" (216). The detective text, then, represents a practice in how long a narrative can put off the "knowing," the tension it creates being its distortion—which Barthes of course writes about extensively. However, this condition of "remaining pensive" is much more relevant to these novels and to the concept of narrative distortion.

In the spirit of Bolaño's childhood obsession, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," suggests the same sense of "unknowability" as the marquise remaining pensive. The unnamed narrator begins, "True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (Poe 3). The narrative interpolates the reader into the narrator's crimes, into his own desire to know, "why will *you* say that I am mad," he asks (emphasis my own). The narrative here begins in medias res, a distortion of its own, accompanied by this monotonous yet stilted, maniacal speech; he begs the listener, but here us, the readers, to "observe how healthily—how calmly" he tells of the murder of the old man. He insists he is sane, that he should not be called mad, for how could a mad person have enacted the crime with such calm and precision. The reader must decide, then, how to interpret the narrative—whether or not they will "observe" the narrator's perspective of events or if they will find him mad. Even at the end of the narrative, the reader will remain, like the marquise, pensive. This comes across as quite a narrative anomaly, as the narrator insists to us, "now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses?" (6). Yet we refuse to trust him because he is

violating our understanding of ordinary narrative speech. Though he is also relaying the story of a murder, that is not the subject of his madness—not the subject by which the narrator wishes to be assessed, anyways. The narrator gives the reason for the murder, that the old man's singular pale-blue eye was a haunting, grating presence, which seems a rather weak reason for murder. Yet the narrator knows this and he says, "now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution— with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!" (3). The murder, for the narrator, is another thing entirely. What he insists is that the murder is not madness because of the way he went about it, with caution, foresight, and dissimulation, coupled with his "knowledge"—because "madmen know nothing."

This is a challenging voice, challenging the reader to believe the narrator; but we resist. Do we resist belief because we automatically assume the murder makes him a madman? Do we resist because he keeps insisting that he is not mad? I believe it is the latter. His insistence, his challenges to our thoughts/ what we imply from his narrative, again violates our understanding of ordinary language. As David Lewis writes in *Languages and Language*, "it is a platitude—something only a philosopher would dream of denying—that there are conventions of language, although we do not find it easy to say what those conventions are" (Lewis 7). Although Gricean conversation logic guides the first part of this thesis, and remains relevant throughout, I fear, for ultimately not being a philosopher, the risk of oversimplifying the logic of language and conversation, the generally accepted principles of speech to which we all conform. When one does not conform, we notice. Consistent nonconformity to these principles forms a recognizable pattern, which induces discomfort in us. This type of nonconformity, or the flouting of conversational maxims, as Grice calls them, acts as distortion in "The Tell-Tale Heart." The

narrator's aggressive insistence that he is not mad, that what he says is true, causes for the reader perhaps even more discomfort than the fact that he tells us about a murder. The murder certainly disturbs the reader, but the madness of the "murderer," who is in this case the narrator, is no longer implied. Because the narrator calls out to the reader, "why will you say that I am mad," we are almost certain that he is mad.

In an email interview with Carmen Boullosa in 2001, Bolaño writes, "as a teenager, I went through a phase when I only read Poe" (*Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview)*. With a title like *The Savage Detectives*, even without knowing of Bolaño's teenage Poe obsession, the genre of detective fiction would spark in any reader interested in uncovering the novel's enigma. Perhaps upon opening *The Savage Detectives*, a reader expects a Dupin-like character to uncover the concealed meaning of the text, but instead they are faced with Juan Garcia Madero. In Peter Baker's text, "Is *The Savage Detectives* a Detective Story?" he claims that Garcia Madero functions as the "naif, what Wallace Stevens called the "ephebe" or the "idiot questioner," representing a failed version of the modernist detective side-kick (Baker 29). However, I would argue that Poe's influence on the text is not found in the detective nature, but the narrative peculiarities. Garcia Madero, as narrator, breaks similar conversational principles through his narratives. We find Garcia Madero to be unreliable, just as we find Poe's narrator unreliable, because of his narrative peculiarities—the way he "speaks" to his reader (though not so directly as Poe's narrator). Although both narrator's (Poe's narrator and Garcia Madero) distort their narratives in more ways than one, for now I will focus on their "speech" and will return to the distortion of character, faces, and bodies, as I noted through the paintings, as well as the distortion of time, which I have left untouched as of now.

Garcia Madero begins his journal entries with:

NOVEMBER 2

I've been cordially invited to join the visceral realists. I accepted, of course. There was no initiation ceremony. It was better that way.

NOVEMBER 3

I'm not really sure what visceral realism is (Bolaño 3).

His first journal entry, immediately contradicted by the second where he admits knowing nothing of visceral realism, comes across like a joke. However, as his journals continue, it becomes clear that if there is a joke, Garcia Madero is its butt. Explaining how he came to be part of the visceral realist group, Garcia Madero describes the poetry workshop he visits weekly. Guest speakers Belano and Lima immediately begin criticizing the professor, Julio César Àlamo, and Garcia Madero, attempting to side with the guest speakers, accuses Àlamo of not knowing the definition of specific literary terms, in this case a rispetto.[4] Already knowing his professor is ignorant of the definitions, and perhaps even unaware of the existence of these literary terms, Garcia Madero deems him not much of a critic (4). However, when Belano and Lima admit they also do not know what a rispetto is, Garcia Madero describes it as "noble," "nobly, the visceral realists admitted that they didn't know either but my observation struck them as pertinent" (6). Ironically, he prefaces this story by saying,

I don't know what I was thinking. The only Mexican poet who knows things like that by heart is Octavio Paz (our great enemy), the others are clueless, or at least that was what

[4] If you find yourself like Professor Àlamo, "a rispetto, professor, is a kind of lyrical verse, romantic to be precise, similar to the strambotto, with six or eight hendecasyllabic lines, the first four in the form of a serventesio and the following composed in rhyming couplets" (Bolaño 5).

> Ulises Lima told me minutes after I joined the visceral realists and they embraced me as one of their own" (4).[5]

Here, Garcia Madero has already aligned himself with the visceral realists, even before telling us how he came to be part of their group. His use of the word "noble" stems from a sense of respect or admiration for his newly found companions, the same feeling which causes him to "accept, of course" their invitation.

When Garcia Madero leaves the poetry workshop with Belano and Lima, they go to a bar to further discuss "poetry" and visceral realism late into the night. Even while reflecting on all this, Garcia Madero still does not "really get it. In one sense, the name of the group is a joke. At the same time, it's completely in earnest" (7). Again, Garcia Madero seems one step behind the rest of his new companions. Though at the moment he writes about them he has fully embraced the name (visceral realist) and the people, the meaning of the movement still escapes him. This confusion isn't clarified by the visceral realists, however, since when asked by Garcia Madero about visceral realism's meaning, Ulises Lima only asserts a mysterious claim:

> According to him [Lima], the present-day visceral realists walked backward. What do you mean, backward? I asked.
>
> 'Backward, gazing at a point in the distance, but moving away from it, walking straight toward the unknown.'

[5] I will discuss the irony of Garcia Madero behaving like Octavio Paz, the great enemy of visceral realism, later in this chapter.

> I said I thought this sounded like the perfect way to walk. The truth was I had no idea what he was talking about. If you stop and think about it, it's no way to walk at all" (7).

Garcia Madero explains to the reader the path he is about to take. He does not understand in the slightest what it could mean to "walk backward" as the visceral realists do, but he desires it nonetheless. Garcia Madero's new "gang" seemingly subscribes to an absurd metaphor which, to him, is inscrutable and unrealizable. His personal narrative constantly doubles over on itself, first confident and self-assured, then undermining his own thought. However, Garcia Madero does not do this as a means to weaken the visceral realist movement, or the guiding principles of his new friends, as he says, "I'd obviously never heard of the group, but my ignorance in literary matters is to blame for that (every book in the world is out there waiting to be read by me)" (7). Instead this undermining self-consciousness reveals that the character, Garcia Madero, is ashamed. He is deeply troubled by his own ignorance surrounding literary matters, despite his insistence on criticizing his professor of ignorance regarding the definition of literary terms. He undermines his writing, his personal narrative, through unintentional avoidance of concrete statements, tying his character to fear and nervousness, as well.

These feelings of fear, shame, and insecurity make Garcia Madero a unique player in his own tale, so unlike the bold, self-assured visceral realists with whom he spends his time. Perhaps this doubling over on his words, his self-undermining, means that Garcia Madero is an unreliable narrator. However, unreliability is not a proper analytic term here. For Garcia Madero to provide unreliable narration, we must assume that the purpose of his character is to trick the reader, lead them astray. What conclusion would he be leading the reader toward, then? That visceral realism is good? That it is bad? These are such black and white conclusions, and to say Garcia Madero

"leads" a reader to any conclusion imbues him with a huge amount of power that his character seems not to possess.

Garcia Madero begins his journals on November 2nd, 1975, with his invitation to join the visceral realists, which he "accepted, of course" (Bolaño 3). On the next day of his journal, he writes his introduction, telling his reader who he is: "I'm seventeen years old, my name is Juan García Madero, and I'm in my first semester of law school. I wanted to study literature, not law, but my uncle insisted, and in the end I gave in" (3). Garcia Madero's self-introduction suggests the authorial intent of his journals. If the journals were for his own private reading, or for cataloguing his days, why would he introduce himself in this way? Garcia Madero, then, with this sense of public awareness, like Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, writes himself into his own "novel" about the hunt for Belano, Lima, and visceral realism itself. But Garcia Madero's introduction explains only so much about himself as the details of interest lie not in his self-introduction but in his self-sabotaging narration.

He describes how he met the visceral realists much like how he describes his acceptance of their invitation—first with surety, perhaps even a sense of superiority since he "accepted, of course" their invitation, and then with doubt, as he tells us he has no idea what visceral realism is. Garcia Madero met Belano and Lima at a poetry workshop he signed up for at his university as an act of devotion to literature, a way of staying true to his desires. He writes,

> I had attended the workshop four times and nothing ever happened, though only in a manner of speaking, of course, since naturally something always happened: we read poems, and Álamo praised them or tore them to pieces, depending on his mood; one

> person would read, Álamo would critique, another person would read, Álamo would critique, somebody else would read, Álamo would critique (3).

He describes this workshop as being led by a poetry-dictator who tears apart their work and destroys any chance of friendship between members, as they are so often pitted against each other. Álamo, their flighty professor, changing his opinion on poems based on his mood, prevents "anything" from ever happening. In Garcia Madero's opinion, Álamo is not much of a critic, and just enjoys talking for the sake of talking because "he didn't know what pentapody was (a line of five feet in classical meter, as everybody knows), and he didn't know what a nicharchean was either (a line something like the phalaecean), or what a tetrastich was (a four-line stanza)" (4). However, Garcia Madero later reveals that his classmates make fun of him, calling him "pedantic" and "an academicist," for his "literary opinion," and he himself even comments on his "ignorance in literary matters" (7). What Garcia Madero perceives as "nothing" happening in his poetry workshop may simply be "things" happening that he cannot or simply does not understand. Even knowing this, Garcia Madero consistently derives a sense of confidence in knowing, or having some state of knowledge, however false that confidence may be. His fears and insecurities, then, are the fears of not understanding, or not belonging (due to lack of knowledge).

Consider, again, the discussion between Mathers and the narrator of *The Third Policeman*, wherein Mathers only responds in the negative. Joe, the narrator's soul asks, "*do you notice anything?*" to which the narrator replies, "no […] nothing beyond the eeriness of this house and the man who owns it. He is by no means the best conversationalist I have ever met" (O'Brien 27). The narrator cannot notice anything that falls beyond his ordinary domain of understanding—particularly as it manifests in conversations. Joe prompts him further, "*do you*

not see that every reply is in the negative? No matter what you ask him he says No" (27). When the narrator still does not understand how to proceed in conversation, Joe insists, "*use your imagination*" (27). Joe functions here as the "voice of reason," yet as a reader we want to resist this claim. How can Joe's voice, the voice of a disembodied consciousness, signal some sense of reason when the narrative dispels notions of ordinariness and sense? Even the narrator's imagination cannot help him understand this discursive moment, suggesting again something that seems meaningful yet comes to the narrator in an unintelligible form.

The narrator's "nothing" is similar to Garcia Madero's "nothing," then– an accidental ignorance caused by the displacement of ordinary epistemic methods. For both narrators, nothing is happening, but O'Brien's narrator has the benefit of a Joe pushing him to notice the nonsensical principles that drive this narrative world. Once O'Brien's narrator accepts Joe's suggestion, the narrator begins to understand the "game" at play. In acknowledgement, he asks, "'will you answer a straight question?'" to which Mathers, of course, replies no, but then the narrator asks, "'will you refuse to answer a straight question?'" (28). Mathers still replies in the negative, but in this case a negative reply yields a "positive" answer. Since Mathers "will not" refuse to answer a straight question, it follows that he will begin to speak "normally." This pleases the narrator because "it meant my mind had got to grips with his, […] I did not understand all the terrible things that had happened to me but I now began to think that I must be mistaken about them" (28). Where previously the narrator could not look past the "eeriness of this house and the man who owns it," understanding the flow of conversation was all the "knowledge" it took for the narrator to regain his confidence. His fears, which I argue derive from the loss of ordinary language and thus result in nonsense, are appeased by this pivotal moment of understanding. Mathers violates conversational maxims by opting out of "the

operation of both the maxim and of the CP; he may say, indicate, or allow it to become plain that he is unwilling to cooperate in the way the maxim requires," which clarifies why the narrator cannot grasp the reason for Mathers' behavior (Grice 49). Once Mathers is forced to cooperate with the Conversational Principle through trickery, the narrator has reentered his known, familiar game. The Gricean maxims of conversation are those of "ordinary language," the type of conversation understood by the narrator, as I have previously described. But what this really suggests is the notion of organizing principles, or what I have called ordinary methods of understanding.

In the conversation between Mathers and O'Brien's narrator, the narrator receives external[6] help from Joe in the rearranging of his thoughts such that he can understand the flow of conversation. Garcia Madero, however, does not have this same help during his poetry class. Until he met the visceral realists, Garcia Madero developed a system of understanding poetry predicated on the very principles that opposed visceral realism. He evaluates the course, and the professor, based on his idea of what is pertinent to the understanding of poetry—for Garcia Madero, the form and formal elements are what matter (rispetto, pentapody, nicharchean, phalaecean). He even reveals later, while playing the language guessing-game in the car with Belano, Lima, and Lupe, that he memorized all the definitions (Bolaño 593). The categorical memorization of these poetic jargons guide Garcia Madero's understanding of poetry and bolster his confidence; after all, how can Garcia Madero know less than these self-professed poets who barely know what a phalacean is? Reinforced by this "knowledge," Garcia Madero feels confident to make claims about his poetry course, like nothing ever happens and his professor is not much of a critic.

[6] Being the narrator's own soul, it seems imprecise to call Joe's interjections "external," however, we have no choice but to separate the two since they are seemingly existing as separate entities within the same body.

Garcia Madero's accuses his professor of not knowing what a rispetto is twice: once at the beginning of his course, and once during Belano and Lima's visit to the class. The first time he asks his professor what a rispetto is, the professor admonishes him: "Álamo thought that I was demanding respect for my poems, and he went off on a tirade about objective criticism (for a change), a minefield that every young poet must cross" (5).[7] A rispetto is as Garcia Madero says, an Italian form of lyrical verse, and in the context of formal poetic criticism he would be correct. However, the word for "respect" in Spanish is "respeto," which sounds quite like rispetto, and is perhaps why Álamo misinterprets Garcia Madero's question.[8] "Rispetto" also translates to "respect" from Italian. Garcia Madero is so enmeshed in his own naïve notion of what poetry means that he refuses to think about the ordinary linguistic assumptions underlying their conversation.

It may be true that Álamo does not know what a rispetto is, but in the context of his poetry course, talking about a poetic form like a rispetto is unnecessary (we can assume this based on Garcia Madero's exhaustive list of terms unknown to his class and professor, as well as the fact that Álamo says "don't give me that crap" and his classmates call him pedantic). It is Garcia Madero, then, who violates the norms of ordinary conversation by assuming his professor will know he means "rispetto" the poetic form and not "respeto" (respect). Garcia Madero denigrates Álamo for this mistake, cutting him off and then, putting "the question to him again, this time enunciating as clearly as possible" (4). Garcia Madero assumes his manner of understanding poetry to be correct—at least more genuine than the way Álamo conducts his course and critiques his students. That Garcia Madero does not notice—or does not note in his

[7] I will include the original Spanish here: "Álamo pensó que yo le exigía *respeto* para mis poesías y se largó a hablar de la crítica objetiva (para variar), que es un campo de minas por donde debe transitar todo joven poeta" (Bolaño 14).

[8] This may be irrelevant to say, as the fact that "rispetto" and "respeto" sound similar is much more evident in the original Spanish (as evidenced in the previous footnote), but I find it important nonetheless.

journals—the possibility of this linguistic blunder and focuses only on asking his question again coincidentally mimics the behavior of O'Brien's narrator. His insistence that his categorical knowledge of these poetry terms is the correct way to interpret poetry means that the meaning of the poetry course escapes him, or comes to him in unintelligible terms ("nothing ever happened").

Like O'Brien's narrator, Garcia Madero does not notice anything strange about his behavior in the poetry workshop until the visceral realists point it out to him after the fact (much like Joe for the narrator of *The Third Policeman*). Ulises Lima tells him that "the only Mexican poet who knows things like that by heart is Octavio Paz (our great enemy)" moments after joining the visceral realists, which is chronologically after he has the argument with Álamo at the poetry workshop where Belano and Lima are present (Bolaño 4). Because Garcia Madero reveals this mistake before he tells the story of his argument with Álamo during the workshop, he feels confident to write the story in his journal; despite the fact that he made a fatal mistake at the time of the argument (in terms of the visceral realists, his new group), Garcia Madero already has knowledge of the visceral realist principles when he writes the story. His lack of knowledge in that moment does not reflect his "current" understanding. He has been corrected by Lima (perhaps the Joe of the moment). However, Garcia Madero does not truly take these principles to heart—the idea that Octavio Paz is their great enemy does not resonate with him, as he does not really know what that means other than that he made a mistake by assuming that the understanding of poetry is predicated on form. He even writes, quite confusingly, "poetry (real poetry) is like that: you can sense it, you can feel it in the air, the way they say certain highly attuned animals (snakes, worms, rats, and some birds) can detect an earthquake" (5).

So, despite Garcia Madero's earlier insistence to Álamo, and to his readers, that real poetry is comprised of pentapody, nicharchean, phalaecean, and the knowing of those terms, he now says that "real poetry" can be felt. And when Ulises Lima reads his poem to the workshop, Garcia Madero writes, "I heard his voice, reading the best poem I had ever heard" (7). He does not reveal whether the formal elements he had previously lauded could be found in Ulises' poem, nor does he find the poem to be lacking because Ulises had revealed to him that he did not know the term rispetto. Instead, he *feels* that the poem is the best poem he's ever heard, like a snake, worm, rat, or bird might—demonstrating again with the list of animals a categorical type of knowledge on which to predicate his claims. After the events of the poetry workshop, writes Jonathan Beck Monroe in "Dismantling Narrative Drive" in Part Three of his text *Framing Roberto Bolaño*,

> Garcia Madero finds himself configured among three options: 1) the formalist leanings he initially brought to the workshop, which succeeded in enraging the workshop's professor and prompted Garcia Madero's peers to reject him as "pedantic" and "academicist" ("me acusaron de pedante (uno dijo que yo era un academicista"); 2) the work of Octavio Paz, the "only Mexican poet," according to Lima, who shares the kind of formal, technical knowledge Garcia Madero prizes, who is yet visceral realism's "great enemy," and 3) Belano's and Lima's favored visceral realists, "a Mexican avant-garde group … active in the twenties or maybe the thirties" represented by Tinajero (Monroe 111).

He chooses, of course, option three because his other two options resulted in isolation from poetry, when studying literature is his greatest desire. He also finds belonging among these visceral realists, who are themselves isolated from the Mexican poetic tradition of the time. Yet, as I mentioned, the principles of visceral realism do not mean anything to Garcia Madero beyond

his desire to ascribe to them so he can be a part of the group. Consider his reading of "The Vampire" ("El Vampiro") by the poet "Efrén Rebolledo (1877-1929)" which they "never said anything about […] in any of our literature classes," of which he copies the poem out entirely into his journal (12). To borrow Monroe's analysis of this moment,

> The distance between the verse poems García Madero mentions and the prose-poetic journal entries of his fragmented narrative is the distance between the naïve aspiring apprentice and the mature, visceral realist, prose-poetic, still poetry-obsessed Bolaño. […] Unsurprisingly, for a seventeen-year-old poet about to embark on his first sexual adventures, "El vampiro" exemplifies, in Bolaño's deployment of it as exhibit, the appeal of a more conventional poetics associated with love and traditional verse forms. Recalling Poe's constrained investments in such forms, García Madero's literal reproduction of Rebolledo's appropriation and variation of Baudelaire's identically titled, six-quatrain poem, "Le Vampire," echoing Poe's "The Raven" and other gothic-erotic poems, figures poetry itself as "Vampire" verse, as fetishized object, pure product, pure genre, pure kitsch. In stark contrast to Poe's radical dismantling of the poetry/prose binary in "The Poetic Principle" and "The Philosophy of Composition" and experimental, genre-defining, genre-expanding range as a writer of prose fiction, with all its proto-visceral realist qualities, García Madero's enthusiasm for "The Vampire" suggests his identification with poetry as an adolescent genre, as the genre of adolescence as such.

Recalling the ostentatious, precocious-yet-naïve references to traditional verse forms and ancient sources García Madero's workshop peers found "pedantic," García Madero's enthusiasm for Rebolledo's gothic conventionality suggests the gap between

the visceral realist ambitions of Bolaño's doppelgänger and namesake, Belano, to 'change Latin American poetry' (Monroe 111-112).

What Monroe fails to mention, however, is that "The Vampire" is a poem by Octavio Paz, translated by Samuel Beckett from *Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (1970)—an anthology compiled by Paz himself. As Monroe says, the fetishizing of poem as object through Garcia Madero's reading of "The Vampire" (which launches him into a masturbatory episode) suggests the gap between the "visceral realist ambitions" and Garcia Madero's own "naïve" (mis)understanding of poetry. Even the masturbation that occurs after reading the poem, but before his written analysis of it, signals Garcia Madero's adolescence—his youthful, exploratory, and naïve nature. If all poetry is "'Vampire' verse'," as Monroe suggests, then Garcia Madero can never escape his preconceived ideas about the meaning of poetry. His organizing principles of understanding, which he was lightly scolded for by Ulises, remain with him throughout the novel—as he returns to his formalistic memorization for the language game with Ulises and Belano in the Sonora Desert. This is not to say that they remain unaltered altogether (although that may be what Monroe is suggesting), but that one's own system of understanding is not so easily forgotten—or the narrator of *The Third Policeman* would have had more success in his nonsense world with the help of Joe.

O'Brien's narrator's organizing principles extend beyond just ordinary language and ordinary conversational principles. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the narrator has lived his life by and for a philosopher called de Selby whose works focus on questioning "the most obvious realities" resulting in an inconclusive outcome (O'Brien 52). I also asked the question: if the narrator has spent all his life studying the works of de Selby, why does the narrator not question the realities of the nonsensical world he has been thrown in to? I will explore another symbiotic

answer to this question here. Before the narrator meets Sergeant Pluck, Policeman MacCruiskeen, and Mr. Gilhaney in the police barracks, he describes the walk he makes to find them after talking to Mathers,

> Of all the many striking statements made by de Selby, I do not think that any of them can rival his assertion that 'a journey is an hallucination'. […] His theory, insofar as I can understand it, seems to discount the testimony of human experience and is at variance with everything I have learnt myself on many a country walk. Human existence de Selby has defined as 'a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief', a conception which he is thought to have arrived at from examining some old cinematograph films which belonged to his nephew. [9] From this premise he discounts the reality or truth of any progression or serialism in life, denies that time can pass as such in the accepted sense and attributes to hallucinations the commonly experienced sensation of progression as, for instance, in journeying from one place to another or even 'living'. […] Of my own journey to the police-barracks I need only say that it was no hallucination (50, 52).

Despite the existence of Joe, the narrator's voice of reason, he still clings to the works of de Selby to describe his experiences, or compare his experiences against. Here the narrator discusses the idea that a journey is a hallucination, but footnotes that de Selby said these things because he did not properly understand the "cinematograph." Even in his description of de Selby's ideas, the narrator notes that de Selby's theory goes against his own experiences on

[9] The narrator adds a footnote within his discussion of de Selby's theories here: "these are evidently the same films which he mentions in *Golden Hours* (p. 155) as having 'a strong repetitive element' and as being 'tedious'. Apparently he had examined them patiently picture by picture and imagined that they would be screened in the same way, failing at that time to grasp the principle of the cinematograph" (O'Brien 50). The narrator diligently cites de Selby's works throughout the novel, as well as other "books" written about de Selby. I will discuss further the difficulty in understanding whether the narrator's narration is coming to us as a written type of journal (like Garcia Madero's), and this insistence that de Selby is "real" in Chapter 3.

"many a country walk." Nonetheless, the narrator uses de Selby to measure yet another country walk to the police-barracks, which he claims is certainly not a hallucination of the de Selbian variety. Ironically, on this walk to find the barracks the narrator meets Martin Finnucane, the leprechaun-like man who speaks in riddles and has tricky eyes—a "droll customer," as Joe calls him—and comes across the reality-defying house that is the police station. If these events were a hallucination they would be easier to understand, but de Selby's "hallucination" stems from the idea that "motion is an illusion," and the narrator is certain that he is in motion (52). The narrator's deep understanding of de Selby's nonsensical works allows him to continue his journey because he can compare aspects of his experience with the aspects that de Selby has covered in his works and be confident in his knowing that those theories are an enigma; therefore, the world before him now does not scare him away entirely because it is not nonsensical through the lens of his own organizing principles.

This distortion of organizing principles creates meaninglessness and nonsense within the narrative, along with the abandonment of ordinary language and conversational principles. Yet, this distortion is of the organizing principles of the narrators with which we align ourselves (or attempt to) upon beginning a novel. The narrative itself, outside of the narrator's perspective also distorts a reader's understanding of the text. Throughout this chapter I have intentionally read Garcia Madero away from the critical explanations on which Monroe depends, that he is an expositor of the poetry, that his poetic disposition links him to that of Lima and Belano's and underlies the novel's entire effort to create the novel as poetic form. Instead, I have willfully read Garcia Madero as an O'Brien-like narrator who is continually self-destructing under the rigid nonsensical logic by which he reads the world. De Selby and Belano and Lima, their

authoritative dominance, is not only being mocked, but wreaking havoc on the narrative functioning of these two Poe-like I personas.

Chapter 3: Distortion as Discursive Mode

Part 1"Mexicans Lost in Mexico (1975)" of Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* begins in Mexico City where a 17-year-old Juan Garcia Madero narrates through daily journal entries the events of his admittance into the visceral realist (*realismo visceral)* movement. Invited to join by the two founders of the movement, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, Garcia Madero drops out of University to write poetry full-time and engage with other members of the movement. Despite being invited to join by Belano and Lima, the two founders remain absent figures throughout most of Part I, fueling Garcia Madero's obsession with Belano, Lima, and visceral realism as a whole. Part III "The Sonora Desert (1976)" picks up Garcia Madero's narrative journal entries where Part I ended, with Garcia Madero, Belano, Lima, and the prostitute Lupe escaping Mexico City—running from Lupe's pimp and a corrupt Mexican police officer named Alberto. Part II "The Savage Detectives (1976-1996)," however, disrupts the chronology of Garcia Madero's narration. Consisting of over 80 different character's narratives, which I and many other critics interpret as "interviews," a cast of some minor characters, as well as characters that played a larger role in Garcia Madero's earlier journal entries, share stories related to Belano and Lima—things that the two told them, how they met, various exploits they shared. What remains particularly disruptive about these interviews is that, if they are interviews, we as readers do not know what questions are being asked. For example, Joaquin Vásquez Amaral, walking on a university campus in the American Midwest, in February of 1977 begins his answer with, "no, no, no, of course not. That boy Belano was an extremely nice person" (Bolaño 209).

The novel's second part, "The Savage Detectives (1976-1996)" proceeds much like Garcia Madero's journal entries. They are dated, but they date the moment of interview, not the

moment at which the story the interviewee is relaying happens. Further, interviews with the same person are not always continuous. For instance, Amadeo Salvatierra's interviews in 1976 are interspersed across all twenty-six chapters, disrupted by other interviews taking place from 1977-1996. The rest of the interviews proceed by date, even when it is the same person being interviewed, like Joaquín Font who is interviewed several times between 1976 and 1996. The placement of Part II also successfully escapes text-time without explanation to the reader because of the way both a novel's and a reader's concept of time function. Although Part II is dated 1976-1996, and Part III happens chronologically prior to these interviews, the text places it after Part II—the labels of I, II, and III, with their veneer of organization, contribute to this misapprehension as well. The desire to read from I-III in the order they are written underlines our implicit acceptance of time as linear and that is the deceit upon which the narrative plays to meet the reader's desire to follow a linear story. The fact that we read *The Savage Detectives* from textual beginning to end because neither the narrative nor the author tells us otherwise at any point suggests that there is something absurd about the unconscious way we read literature.

Allow me, then, to fixate on time and this novel. We know that the interviews that compose Part II "The Savage Detectives (1976-1996)" disrupt Garcia Madero's journalistic narrative that make up parts I and III, despite taking place chronologically after Part III ends. Time as it relates to narrative text, writes Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan following Gérard Genette, constructs itself through order, duration, and frequency of events—order being chronology. Text-time "is bound to be one-directional and irreversible, because language prescribes a linear figuration of signs and hence a linear presentation of information about things. […] There are some modern attempts to liberate narrative fiction from these constraints, but the liberation is never complete because a complete one, if possible, will destroy intelligibility" (Rimmon-Kenan

45). Beckett's *Watt* and Cortázar's *Hopscotch* as examples she uses illustrate narrative attempts to escape the linearity prescribed by language through the former's reorganizing of words in sentences or the latter's variable order of chapters. However, she notes, these attempts must always be explained first to the reader, either by the narrator of the text or the author himself (as with Cortázar). "Text-time is thus inescapably linear," she writes (45).

Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* tricks its reader by this very concept concerning the reader's intuitive understanding of time as linear and irreversible. Of course, as Rimmon-Kenan also points out, readers also have an intuitive understanding of analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis (flash-forward), since it is part of a reader's every-day conversational life, and *The Savage Detectives* takes advantage of that, as well. All three parts of the novel give the impression of linearity, in fact they insist on chronology, through Garcia Madero's dated journal entries in Part I and Part III and the meticulously dated interviews in Part II. However, closer inspection of the reader's initial perception of the "order of events" within the novel prove to be anything but linear. For example, Garcia Madero begins his journal entry on November 2nd, 1975 with "I've been cordially invited to join the visceral realists." Yet on November 3rd, he writes of all the events of his poetry course leading up to the moment that the visceral realists invited him to join the movement. He writes, "this was the fifth session of Álamo's workshop that I'd attended (but it might just as well have been the eighth or the ninth, since lately I've been noticing that time can expand or contract at will)" (Bolaño 5). Garcia Madero's telling of the story is always-already out of order in ways in which he, ironically, points out to the reader. He begins his tale with his invitation to the group and then writes about his poetry group which he says takes place before his invitation to join the visceral realists, since they did not join the poetry group until the fifth (or eighth or even ninth) session.

That Garcia Madero intentionally distorts the moment mimics the way that Realist narratives distort and exaggerate their capability of reducing literary complexity to singular answers. Garcia Madero, of course, does not describe every meeting of the poetry workshop because "nothing ever happened," nor does he describe how he gets out of bed in the morning, how he leaves his house, how he gets to the workshop, how he enters the room in which the workshop is held, how he interacts with his classmates, or any other mundane activity that consists of "doing something." Because that "something" is irrelevant, boring, or known to be completed by inference, and narratives must omit the boring to make room for the narration that compels attention. They must highlight, as Garcia Madero seems to have done, the "important" or decisive moments of life, and Garcia Madero calls special attention to this claim, as he says that nothing happens in the poetry workshop "though only in a manner of speaking, of course, since naturally something always happened" (3). *The Savage Detectives* intentionally and successfully distorts narrative time without prior explanation by playing on the reader's preconceived understanding of reality. Garcia Madero does not need to point out that even when he says nothing happened, something always happened, even though he does, which mildly associates him with the narrator of *The Third Policeman*. Even the most realistic of narratives, those that dread a lack or a pause in the authenticity of presenting reality, do not point this out. Why should they? As Garcia Madero says, time does expand and contract at will, the way time ordinarily passes for us, marked simply by events which we hold as more important/significant than others (other events being the boring ones, like opening doors, walking places, taking a shower—unless you are Ulises Lima and happen to take a book with you into the shower).

In Amadeo Salvatierra's interview on Calle República de Venezuela, near the Palacio de la Inquisición, Mexico City DF, January 1976, the absurdity of literature returns, with the absurd

idea that literature means anything deeper than what we think, that it drives us anywhere. Amadeo finally finds what "the boys" were looking for, Cesárea's poem; "they said gee, Amadeo, is this the only thing of hers you have? is this her only published poem? and I said, or maybe I whispered: why yes, boys, that's all there is. And I added, as if to gauge what they really felt: disappointing, isn't it?" (397). Amadeo does not give the "boys" in his narrative names, but we assume that they are Belano and Lima, or as Amadeo describes them "the Chilean" and "the Mexican." They have reached a turning point in their work as detectives searching for Cesárea; though they have not yet found the person herself, they have found the first and only of her published works. While Belano and Lima inspect the poem, Amadeo daydreams about his past with friends and with Cesárea, seemingly unaware of the vigorous and hearty search the boys have gone through to find Cesárea's poem. The language of the above quotation, its colloquial lower case speech, its continuous narrative entanglement, its adolescent projection deflates the momentous moment. The fact that Amadeo does not immediately reveal the contents of the poem reinforces his narrative perspective, and when he further asks the boys if they are disappointed, the boys do not reply. But it remains unclear what Amadeo is asking about—perhaps they are disappointed by the fact that there is only one poem, one published example of her work.

However, later, after Amadeo reveals the poem to the reader and revisits it himself, we discover that the poem itself is the disappointment in Amadeo's eyes. Finally, one of the boys disrupts Amadeo's daydream by saying that he had seen Cesárea's poem in a dream when he was young. Amadeo replies,

> Cesárea Tinajero's poem? Had he seen it when he was seven years old? And did he understand it? Did he know what it meant? Because it had to mean something, didn't it?

> And the boys looked at me and said no, Amadeo, a poem doesn't necessarily have to mean anything, except that it's a poem, although this one, Cesárea's, might not even be that (397).

Here the indecision as to whether the poem is a poem or not a poem—its high seriousness of tone—recalls the indecision of the narrator in *The Third Policeman.* But later, the weight of the moment is uncertain, quizzical, and nearly comic by making certainty come under so heavy a set of picking out the ordinary in the world. Here in *The Savage Detectives* it potentially undermines the holy grail-like search for that singular ur-poem, casting doubt that what is before them is even poetry.

Just as Part II functions as a delay, delaying the continuation of Garcia Madero's story, Amadeo's narrative delays the revelation of the climactic poem. Amadeo is interviewed at least once, if not more times, across each chapter of Part II. The "boys," as he so affectionately calls them, have come to him to learn about his connection to Cesárea—they know he has "something" to show them. After waiting through each of Amadeo's continuous interview snippets, the boys finally come across the poem, but the reader still does not. He gives them the poem and he

> stopped watching them and I stopped talking and I stretched, *crack, crack*, and one of them lifted his gaze at the sound and looked at me as if to make sure I hadn't fallen to pieces, and then he went back to Cesárea, and I yawned or sighed and for a second, distant images passed before my eyes of Cesárea and her friends walking down a street in the north of Mexico City (397).

Amadeo's narrative relies heavily on "and," or "and then," lengthening the sentence, delaying the outcome with the sound of his cracking joints, his yawn, his sigh, his daydreams. Even the boys' reply taunts the reader as he says it "might not even be [a poem]." Finally, after almost begging the boys to tell him the meaning of the poem, it appears before us in the text—a sort of pictogram consisting of different lines and shapes, titled "Síon."

The revelation of the poem results in both an ending and a beginning. For Belano and Lima, the poem furthers their desire to find Cesárea; for Amadeo, it is the end of poetry as he knows it. We may say that three things occur here, not just one beginning and one ending. The revelation of the poem does signal a beginning for Belano, Lima, and even Garcia Madero—they are pushed forward on their journey to find Garcia Madero. On the other hand, Amadeo is disappointed, and his knowledge of poetry and art is dead. This is an ending for the reader, as well. We do not close the book upon discovering Cesárea's poem—there are many pages left, so of course we do not, for that would be improper reading etiquette. However, it seems we read on because we must, not because we want to.

The revelation of Cesárea's poem is a great disappointment to us, as well (it certainly was for me) because it is so bland, so heavily understated. It also comes across as nonsensical. Why should this depiction of different squiggly lines be considered the pinnacle of all visceral realism? Why should we care about a poem that is really a joke, according to Belano and Lima? The reader is like Amadeo, asking "what does it mean?" Amadeo says to Belano and Lima,

> And I asked the boys, I said, boys, what do you make of this poem? I said, boys, I've been looking at it for more than forty years and I've never understood a goddamn thing.

> Really. I might as well tell you the truth. And they said: it's a joke, Amadeo, the poem is a joke covering up something more serious. But what does it mean? I said (398).

Amadeo has spent the better part of his life trying to figure out the meaning of the poem, only to have a couple of strange, dirty young men tell him the poem is a joke. They also told him beforehand that a poem does not necessarily have a meaning, "except that it's a poem." Yet he keeps asking them. He asks the boys when they arrive what the poem means, he asks them as they look at the poem, and he asks them again after they have had some time to think about it, "I said, what's the mystery" (399)? The boys reply, "there is no mystery, Amadeo," and this statement ends the chapter. The reader must wait another twenty-five pages for the boys to explain to Amadeo the "joke" of the poem, the lack of mystery behind it. The holy grail here, Cesárea's ur-poem, is purposely pulled out from under the reader's feet—an example of the continuous and invested debunking that creates the ever-delaying narrative. Perhaps cynicism, rather than investment in feeling holds together Amadeo's role in *The Savage Detectives.*[10]

Gabriele Guercio and Christopher S. Wood, in the text "What did the Savage Detectives Find?", write,

> To judge from the effect it has on the detectives, there is quite a bit more to Cesárea's poem than this. The poem "Sión" rejects an academic-elitistic view of poetry and creativity, renouncing any hope of legitimation from the outside based on interaction with a codifed network of conventions that supposedly sustain poetical traditions in human history. It is as if this poem offered a banal, ludic clue to what a poetry that tried to reach back behind language would be like. Such a poem would guide us back into the shared,

[10] I discuss later in this chapter more about Amadeo's cynicism, and how this same idea holds together Bernhard's *The Loser*—through a deep investment in cynicism rather than art.

> pre-predicative *Lebenswelt*, a realm of uncoded signs where we proceed not by interpretation but by recognition. In an interview of 1999, Bolaño said that "literature is not made of words alone;" in other words, it can be translated without a disqualifying loss of meaning (Guercio, Wood 273).

If this were the end of their reading, I would agree. Cesárea's poem mimics the pictographic games Garcia Madero plays with Belano, Lima, and Lupe on their car ride through the Sonora Desert (Bolaño 609-613). They begin the game by Garcia Madero quizzing Belano, Lima, and Lupe on literary terms, most of which they cannot seem to answer. Getting tired of this, Belano, Lima, and Lupe quiz the passengers on slang terms—relating to marijuana and prostitutes, among other things. Finally, Garcia Madero draws pictograms consisting mainly of circles, asking his passengers to guess the meaning—to which the answers are things like, "a Mexican smoking a pipe," "five Mexicans peeing in a urinal," and "a Mexican on a tricycle" (610). The first two games they played were language games, and during these games the differences among the passengers became clear. Garcia Madero could not answer any of the slang-related questions posed by Belano, Lima, and Lupe, while the others could not decipher Garcia Madero's literary terms. In both language games played by Garcia Madero and Belano and Lima, the definition of the term, once revealed, still means nothing to the guesser. The pictograph game suggests to all that there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer, but that the answer—the meaning of the pictograph—is open to their desires, to whatever they want it to be. None of the guessers can say with certainty that the circles Garcia Madero drew "mean" five Mexicans peeing in a urinal, but the picture, once "translated" into the idea of five Mexicans peeing in a urinal, does not need to go any farther.

However, Guercio and Wood do not end their interpretation there, but argue instead that there *is* more to Cesárea's poem than whatever Belano and Lima have come up with—the un-mysterious joke of the poem. They insist that Cesárea's "very name is a crucial clue. For the surname Tinajero, again, means 'the one who makes large earthenware jugs'" (Guercio, Wood 273). Their analysis, then, becomes inextricably linked to pottery, and the meaning of Cesárea's name. The reason as to why Bolaño the author makes Cesárea's only surviving work a pictogram is because, "pottery moves almost directly from formless earth to formed pot. Thus does Bolaño, through his character's name, suggest the possibility of operating creatively by uncovering discrete gaps between materials and forms, form and content, continuity in nature and changes in culture" (274). Perhaps these sentiments about pottery hold true for the pictogram—it only gains "form" or "meaning" through its shaping by others. In fact, this does seem to be true of Garcia Madero's pictograph game.

But what I find unconvincing is their presumption that Cesárea's name gives the reader a "crucial clue" as to the meaning of the "poem." The visceral realists, the fictional beings stepping outside their fiction, would laugh if someone suggested to them that the meaning of Cesárea's poem had anything to do with the "meaning" of her name, or for that matter, pottery. Monroe, in his book *Framing Roberto Bolaño*, interprets Cesárea's name in a different way, through Spanish words that echo "Tinajero": "'tejer' and 'tejido,' 'tejedor' and 'tejo,' Tinajero's last name suggests the shaping and fracturing, weaving and unweaving, raveling and unraveling of plots" (Monroe 108). As Monroe says, these words all translate to terms surrounding weaving, in that Cesárea's presence/absence is at once weaving together and unraveling the so-called plot of the novel. Monroe makes no mention of pottery or "large earthenware jugs."

Despite both authors focusing on the "deeper meaning" of Cesárea's name as crucial to the novel, they do not agree about what her name means. But is this not the joke Belano and Lima are talking about? The idea that Cesárea's pictographic poem—her last surviving work (or her only work)—means anything deeper than what it looks like is the punchline. A poem, as Belano and Lima have pointed out, does not have to mean anything, "except that it is a poem." Why, then, do critics of Bolaño's work insist on parsing its meaning? It is tempting to agree with these authors, to believe that dissecting the text, the words, the root of Cesárea's name, will tell us what the novel means. Nonetheless, the Cesárea within the world of the text is not a weaver, nor is she a potter. Monroe's interpretation that her present-absence engages in an unfolding and unraveling of the narrative "drive," as he calls it, is more convincing than Guercio and Wood's argument but still relies on "the text and nothing but the text"—and by text I mean the analysis of the "literal" Roland Barthes point us to in *S/Z*, the words on the page, the tyranny of literal as a system of interpretation.[11] Is this not the absurdity of literature, the nonsensical space of skepticism, that Belano and Lima, and by proxy the novel, mean to point out? That even after being told a poem does not have to mean anything, Amadeo still insists that the boys tell him what the meaning is?

After the twenty-five-page delay, Amadeo continues his quest for the meaning of Cesárea's poem,

> What do you mean there's no mystery to it? I said. There's no mystery to it, Amadeo, they said. And then they asked: what does the poem mean to you? Nothing, I said, it

[11] "*'The text and nothing but the text'*: this proposition has little meaning except intimidation: the literality of the text is a system like any other: the literal in Balzac is, after all, nothing but the 'transcription' of another literality, that of the symbol: euphemism is a language. In fact, the meaning of a text can be nothing but the plurality of its systems, its infinite (circular) 'transcribability'" (Barthes 120).

> doesn't mean a thing. So why do you say it's a poem? Well, because Cesárea said so, I remembered. That's the only reason why, because I had Cesárea's word for it (Bolaño 421).

Amadeo insists constantly that the poem is a mystery, even though the boys tell him over and over that there is no mystery, there are only the lines on the page and the "joke" behind it. If it is a joke, why do Belano and Lima not reveal the humor right away? Well, because the humor of Cesárea's last poem is there before us, the readers taking the role of Belano and Lima in this situation. From the perspective of Amadeo, the poem *must* have meaning, yet when the boys ask him why he considers the lines on the page a poem, Amadeo's only answer is because Cesárea told him it was a poem. The boys then tell Amadeo about Piero Manzoni, an artist who "canned his own shit," to which Amadeo replies, "well, what do you know. Art has gone crazy boys, I said, and they said: it's always been crazy" (421). The comparison between Cesárea's only poem and Manzoni's canned shit is the joke the boys mean to point out. Art is only art if you believe it to be so, and it means whatever the viewer wills it to mean—nothing more, nothing less (a very postmodern view, that takes great liberties with the belief in the high seriousness of art).

Amadeo's reaction to Manzoni, that art has gone crazy, reveals the absurdity of art, poetry, literature, and everything that demands definitiveness, containment. Amadeo is like Garcia Madero, insisting that there must be a deeper level to every poem, and if there is not then it is not a poem worth looking at. The boys play another "game" with Amadeo, beginning with the title, "Síon," and asking him what it means, "Zion, Mount Zion in Jerusalem, I said promptly, also the Swiss city of Sion, Sitten in German, in the canton of Valais" (422). Amadeo's thought process mimics the analysis of our previous critics, Guercio, Wood, and Monroe, as he cannot see that the poem is like the canned shit—a joke, signaling the absurdity of art that takes itself

too seriously, willfully inflates its power. The boys go on to break the poem down for him, line by line[12], so to speak, ending with their same assertion that the poem is a joke. They suggest to him that "Síon" is short for navigation ("navegación"), and the poem depicts a boat upon the sea. Of course, the poem may not mean anything of the sort that Belano and Lima suggest, and the title may not be short for navigation; but, because the boys tell Amadeo the poem depicts a boat upon the sea, then it does.

Amadeo's disappointment, and his inability to grasp what the poem means, exposes the absurdity of a sense of erudition regarding literary works—an erudition which ties together all three novels. Literature ironically privileges certain kinds of discourse, employed by all the narrators of each text, to their great detriment. We can return to O'Brien's narrator's obsession with the philosopher de Selby, for whom he "committed [his] greatest sin" (O'Brien 9). At the age of sixteen, on March seventh, the narrator has his first experience with the works of de Selby—a date, he confesses, that he remembers with more clarity than his own birthday (9). The narrator, aware of the enigmatic nature of de Selby's works, continues to spend the rest of his life in pursuit of an all-encompassing knowledge of de Selby. Even after his death (although he does not yet know that he is dead) he continues to cling to de Selby's theories ("not unnaturally my thoughts were never very far from de Selby" (O'Brien 92)). In Chapter 1, I detailed several of de Selby's theories, including that all journeys are hallucinations, but de Selby also posited that the earth is not a sphere but "is 'sausage-shaped'" (92) and that "darkness was simply an accretion of 'black air'" and that "sleep was simply a succession of fainting-fits brought on by semi-asphyxiation" due to this black air (116). A wealth of lengthy footnotes supplements each mention of de Selby's theories within the narrative, wherein the narrator cites other scholars of

[12] Another humorous element, given that the poem is made entirely of lines and no words.

de Selby's works (Hatchjaw and Basset being the most popular), as well as the discussions and arguments surrounding de Selby's many absurd theories, citing each of those texts, as well. In effect, the narrator's discussions of de Selby resemble any academic paper one might read today about a real philosopher, and goes to great lengths insisting on the real-ness of de Selby, constructing and deconstructing many of his ideas. Yet de Selby's ideas are of no help to the narrator in the world of the policemen. In fact, it may have benefitted O'Brien's narrator to spend less time thinking about de Selby and more time considering the strange and nonsensical world before him. But this would perhaps improve practical matters for the narrator and ruin fiction for the reader.

The narrator's mimicry of academic and scholarly research signals the very discourse that literature privileges. It suggests a type of intelligence that can only derive from a deep involvement in academia, not common-sense intelligence. Clinging to this type of discourse, and the necessity of complete and categorical knowledge of a subject, isolates the narrator (and the reader, since we can neither understand de Selby nor the world of the policemen). For example, when MacCruiskeen and the Sergeant take the narrator to "eternity" (which, hilariously, turns out to be right down the road from the police-barracks), the narrator finds it impossible to understand:

'Is this eternity?' I asked. 'Why do you call it eternity?'

'Feel my chin,' MacCruiskeen said, smiling enigmatically.

'We call it that,' the Sergeant explained, 'because you don't grow old here. When you leave here you will be the same age as you were coming in and the same stature and latitude. There is an eight-day clock here with patent balanced action but it never goes.'

'How can you be sure you don't grow old here?'

'Feel my chin,' MacCruiskeen said again (O'Brien 133).

Here the narrator's conversation with MacCruiskeen and the Sergeant mimics the conversation between Amadeo and Belano and Lima, with MacCruiskeen's insistence for the narrator to "feel his chin" being the same as Belano and Lima insisting that Cesárea's poem is a joke. For the policemen, the fact that hair does not grow in this place is enough to make it "eternity." The narrator resists this explanation, asking "how can you be sure?" The reader gets the impression that the narrator desires a more well-researched answer, one with discussions both for and against the idea that this place could be eternity. But all the narrator must do is accept the information that is before him to "be sure" that eternity exists; he must accept the obvious explanation by feeling MacCruiskeen's chin.

The privileging of an academically-motivated type of knowledge is strikingly similar in the narrative of Bolaño and O'Brien with Bernhard's *The Loser* which draws out its erudition in another direction—though it holds to the same values. Bernhard's narrator has already revealed to us his opinions on artistry; if one is not an inhuman genius, a virtuoso to the highest degree, then they are not an artist whatsoever. He describes that his last teacher before Horowitz[13] (the teacher who had bonded Wertheimer, Glenn, and the narrator) had been

> one of those teachers who suffocate a pupil with their own mediocrity, not to mention the teachers who finished their degrees earlier and who all have brilliant careers, as they say, performing at every moment in world cities and occupying highly paid chairs at our famous music conservatories, but they're nothing but piano-playing executioners without

[13] It is worth mentioning that, like Glenn Gould, there is also a real-world Vladimir Horowitz.

> the faintest understanding of the concept of music, I thought. These music teachers are playing and sitting everywhere and ruining thousands and hundreds of thousands of music students, as if it were their life's mission to suffocate the exceptional talent of our musical youth before it's developed (13).

For Bernhard's narrator, the mediocrity of the masses is contagious. It seeps through the walls of Salzburg apartments and stretches its cretinous aura toward unsuspecting musicians, it spreads from teacher to student and suffocates her. Mediocrity is more than a mishap, it is a disease—the killer of true art. The truest of art, per the narrator, consists of complete, if not exhaustive, knowledge in an area of study—an idea which seems to resonate with the formalistic memorizations of Garcia Madero. The narrator describes how he and Wertheimer came to end their piano careers, Wertheimer

> thought himself capable of becoming a piano virtuoso. By the way he played better than the majority of our piano virtuosos with public careers, but in the end he wasn't satisfied with being (in the best of cases!) another piano virtuoso like all the others in Europe, and he gave it all up […]. I myself played, I believe, better than Wertheimer, but I would never have been able to play better than Glenn and for that reason (hence for the same reasons as Wertheimer!) I gave up the piano from one moment to the next. I would have had to play better than Glenn, and that wasn't possible, was out of the question, and therefore I gave up playing the piano. […] When we meet the very best, we have to give up, I thought (8-9).

Like Garcia Madero (and Amadeo Salvatierra), the narrator believes that art has a true goal, a true meaning, encased in formal perfection and virtuosic technicality, achieved by inhuman

dedication (consider Glenn Gould's endless hours playing The Goldberg Variations). However, Bernhard's narrator takes this idea one step further, for art is also a competition. When he realized that he would never play as well as Glenn, the narrator had, in his opinion, no other choice but to give up. It was "a necessary part of my deterioration process, I thought while entering the inn. We try out all possible avenues and then abandon them, abruptly throw decades of work in the garbage can" (14). Anything less than perfection deteriorates the world of true art, therefore one must give up their music upon meeting the very best in the field. Ironically, this sense of intellectual superiority becomes isolating for these narrators—even O'Brien's narrator.

Bernhard's narrator reflects on his and Wertheimer's careers retrospectively, from the position that he already knows the true meaning of art, and that meaning is Glenn Gould. His cynical sentiments toward developing art, then, echo the words of Amadeo—"art has gone crazy." To Bernhard's narrator, all music that is not at the level of Glenn Gould is like Manzoni's canned shit. Even his own musical abilities began to deteriorate upon meeting Glenn Gould ("the very best"), such that he had to give away his very rare piano to an ungifted child. As a result, the narrator isolates himself from experiencing, understanding, and even taking joy from any other forms of art. Art is not joyous or exploratory, but rigid, precise, and inaccessible to but a select few people. Privileging a specific type of intellectual discourse in literature, and in poetry isolates Amadeo in the same way, like when the boys finally reveal to Amadeo that Cesárea's poem is a joke, "that's all Amadeo, it's as simple as that, nothing else to it, said the boys and I would have liked to say that they had taken a weight off my mind, that's what I would have liked to say" (Bolaño 424). Learning that Cesárea's poem is a joke and hearing the boys' interpretation of it could never take a weight off Amadeo's mind; he spent many years of his life puzzling over the meaning of Cesarea's poem, convinced it must have a meaning beyond being

just a collection of lines. The entrance of Belano and Lima, with their new views on art and visceral realism, brings to Amadeo a new type of art—one that rejects solid meaning, that to Amadeo, disgraces the name of more intellectual, profound art. The old values of art he clings to isolate him from both Cesárea's poem and the changing world of Mexican literature. After spending "more than forty years" trying to figure out the meaning of the poem, Amadeo may have come to the same conclusion as Bernhard's narrator—it is better to just give up.

The erudite nature of these novels, however, ventures into absurdity. Bernhard's unnamed narrator begins as he enters an inn by "thinking" about his friend, Glenn Gould, and his friend Wertheimer, both of whom are dead at the age of fifty-one. We can say for certain that the narrator is "thinking" about these two because the narration says, "I thought to myself as I entered the inn" (3). This peculiarity in the narrator's narration continues throughout the entire novel, as he ends almost every sentence with "I thought" or "I thought to myself." Writing about this novel, now, becomes particularly difficult in that the narrator is not actually *doing* much at all, nor is he often speaking with others. He is not writing, as we are certain Garcia Madero is because he introduces himself to his readers through the format of his journal. But he is repeatedly imaging and reimaging the inn or the layout of Wertheimer's house or the servants' distaste for those who misuse, misappreciate the splendor of the house's wealth. On the very first page, the narrator is entering an inn, and forty pages later, à la *Tristram Shandy,* the narrator is still entering the inn. Those forty pages consist of the narrator telling the almost complete story of his friendship with both Wertheimer and Glenn Gould—how they met, where they studied, what they did together, various trips they took. Unlike the self-conscious doubling over of Garcia Madero's narrative, the narrator's aim seems to be extreme precision of speech.

The punctuated repetition of "I thought," perhaps a clumsy version of Latin's "incipit" (he said) drives the novel closer to mania than to the ordinary. Additionally, the high degree of specifying location ("to the nine-year-old daughter of a schoolteacher in Neukirchen near Altmünster ") discloses another maniacal tic. He grasps onto details that are irrefutably true, such as the location where he had the piano delivered, the age of the schoolteacher's daughter, and the fact that he has not yet entered the inn. The insistent presence of these incipits is essential to Bernhard's narrator, he is determined not to misrepresent any parts of the narrative, not to lead the reader astray. His thoughts are simply his thoughts. For example, as the narrator describes his "necessary deterioration" that began with the giving away of his piano, he says to himself, "I am absolutely not a piano virtuoso, I said to myself, I am not an interpreter, I am not a reproducing artist. No artist at all" (8). The narrator's deification of Glenn Gould clarifies the narrator's view on the meaning of true art. However, we must also consider what kind of artist Glenn Gould was (or, more specifically, what kind of art the narrator praised him for). The real-life Glenn Gould had several of his own compositions, but the narrative does not care about the real-life Glenn Gould. What the narrator praises him for is his interpretive work—his dedication to Bach, his perfect playing of The Goldberg Variations. For the narrator, Glenn is the perfect interpreter, the perfect reproductive artist, and he is not—as he says earlier. The idea that the narrator praises perfect interpretation and reproduction of music adds another layer to the narrator's maniacal narrative tic of "I thought." His precision of speech is like musical interpretation. Since he failed to be a true reproductive artist, the narrator makes sure to reproduce his stories for us with as much precision as possible, reminding us that his thoughts are subjective, and that when he says them he is engaged in the act of thinking.[14] Bernhard's narrator seems to be echoing Poe's

[14] We should consider, as well, what Dorrit Cohn writes in *Transparent Minds* about post-monologic insertions like "I spoke this" (which are like this narrator's "I thought"): "The reason for these precautions

narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" when he says, "hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story" (Poe 3).

Garcia Madero's narrative peculiarities read more like self-conscious honesty, where he reveals to his reader that he lied to Maria Font about knowing the magazine *Lee Harvey Oswald*, or that he lies about being a virgin, or that he takes poetic license when describing certain events. Bernhard's narrator inserts these incipits to create narrative precision, in perhaps a desperate attempt to achieve perfection. Even in his own attempts with literature he says, "I didn't read a great deal and when I did it was always the same thing, the same books by the same authors, the same philosophers over and over as if they were always completely new. I had developed the art of perceiving the same thing over and over as something new, developed it to a high, absurdly high skill" (41). Repetition turns into perfection which translates to success, returning us back to the idea that these narrators take great comfort in knowledge. This knowledge creates confidence within the narrators, but also a sense of superiority, which in turn, isolates them from the world around them—or in the case of Bernhard's narrator and Garcia Madero, their desired world of art. This isolation extends to the reader, as well, creating a literature that isolates. Regardless of the narrator's intentions when inserting "I thought," or doubling over on their previous statements, qualifying them with doubts, the insertions function toward disjointedness. They act as delay on the level of the sentence, they interrupt our reading of the novel, our uncovering of the plot. For example, when Garcia Madero runs into the bathroom after being interrupted from

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is readily apparent: a narrator who quotes his past thoughts runs the risk that the reader will mistake them for his present—since the basic grammar—tense time, first person—is the same in both cases). This danger is greatest when past thoughts are detached from the immediate context." From Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 162.

his sexual experience with Brígida, he hears someone call out his name and sees, "two pairs of bright eyes were watching me, like the eyes of wolves in a gale (poetic license: I've never seen a wolf; I have seen gales, though and they didn't really go with the mantle of smoke that enveloped the two strangers)" (Bolaño 18).

Unlike Bernhard's narrator, this insertion seems comical—but only to a degree. Garcia Madero holds the reader in suspense; who has called out his name? Who is watching him through the smoke? However, Garcia Madero does not seem to be purposely creating tension and delay. He is instead taking the time to explain his use of simile, and how it does not exactly describe the scene before him. Literature takes for granted the use of poetic license when describing things, poetic license falls under a type of commonplace narrative distortion. However, the qualifying statement that Garcia Madero includes doubles this sense of comedy. Perhaps it is a joke, then, that narratives take themselves so seriously that they would use a simile such as Garcia Madero has used to describe two men getting high in the bathroom of a bar, surrounded by a cloud of marijuana smoke, laughing at Garcia Madero because his penis is hanging out. All three novels take the notion of erudition to their logical extreme, into an unsettling state of absurdity, with *The Third Policeman* dismantling the principles of intelligence altogether. This absurdity persists because of the narrators; they are each trapped by their refusal to fall into the thoughtlessness of ordinary, everyday life.

Conclusion

Of the critics who have written extensively on Bolaño, I will mention two: Jonathan Beck Monroe and Chris Andrews, both who work to situate all of Bolaño's works within a critical interpretive context with each other, seeking a deeper integrated meaning. Monroe's text, *Framing Roberto Bolaño: Poetry, Fiction, Literary History, Politics*, works chronologically through Bolaño's novels from *Antwerp* (*Amberes*) to *2666*. In a lecture he gave at Cornell University in 2020, he expanded on his idea of reading Bolaño's novels as prose-poem novels, following a hunch, as many critics have, that Poe, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud were integral to Bolaño throughout his career, even comparing his first "novel" *Antwerp* (which is a collection of prose poems) to *Paris Spleen* (*Petits Poèmes en prose*). Monroe's criticism aims to communicate the way in which Bolaño, taking the ideas of Baudelaire one step further, creates the prose-poem novel, a structure that overturns the form and scale of poetry and explodes conventional ideas of a binary separation between poetry and prose. Monroe, particularly regarding the interviews of Part II, notes that *The Savage Detectives* was a breakthrough in the terms of prose-poem novel. The interviews, acting as autonomous, self-contained prose poems—much like "The Part about the Crimes" in *2666*,[15] espouse a Rimbaudian difficulty of access and the brevity and intensity of prose poems first advocated by Poe in "The Philosophy of Composition" (Monroe points out the irony that this new genre is perhaps an oxymoronic combination of motifs).

[15] *2666's* "The Part about the Crimes" reads, as Monroe says in his lecture, almost like a collection of obituaries as it chronicles the murders of 112 women in Santa Teresa from 1993-1997. Monroe also points out that Baudelaire's invention of the prose-poem overlaps with the conception of newspapers, to which prose-poems owe much of their form—reading like *fait divers*, or even like obituaries in newspapers, he says.

His chapter "Dismantling Narrative Drive," the only chapter about *The Savage Detectives*, describes the novel as challenging the generic conventions of the detective novel, as well as a narrative drive toward linearity through the formal structure of prose-poem (which is perhaps itself a formless form). The disruptions to narrative drive, mostly illustrated in Part II through a continual and relentless postponing, create "an impossibly sustained assemblage of loosely linked prose poems on an 'epic,' 'novelistic' scale" (Monroe 107). For Bolaño, Monroe notes, the prose poems of Baudelaire and Poe represent a challenge to "traditional realist novel's singular, linear drive," with *The Savage Detectives* resulting in a novel that collapses the conventions of the literary and the non-literary, a detective novel that "is in this sense about the death, or murder, of poetry, if also a case for poetry's survival, a case in which poetry has also, in and through the work of the novel itself, an afterlife, a place where it survives and thrives" (116). I can align myself with Monroe on the basis that we can view *The Savage Detectives* as collapsing notions of literary and non-literary, the two permeating each other, and I particularly agree with Monroe's idea that the true climactic event of the novel is not finding Cesárea (when, in fact, there was "nothing poetic about her" (Bolaño 639)), but the revelation of her poem "Síon." He expands on Belano and Lima's conversations with Amadeo about the poem,

> What is most striking and consequential for the novel's revisioning of poetry's capacities is above all its serious playfulness, and playful seriousness, in entertaining such questions. […] The arc of the prose poem novel's drive into the Sonora Desert in search of Tinajero that structures Part III may be said to encompass a death drive (*una pulsión de muerte*; Freud's *Todestrieb*), a death plot (*una trama de muerte*), and a death trauma (*un trauma de muerte*) that figure, like Salvatierra's name, a certain death of poetry, or rather the death of a certain view or kind of poetry, on which poetry's salvation depends.

> At the heart of this salvation is humor, the capacity for poetry not to take itself too seriously (120).

Monroe postures something akin to a singular, or even allegorical, explanation for the heteroglossic, polyphonic, relentlessly delaying detective novel in his analysis of Bolaño's works—all seen as experiments in prose-poem novel writing.

However, his argument finds its limitations in the idea that the revisioning of poetry's capacities is a playful, humorous, endeavor. Here I would like to return to my idea of the isolating absurdity of erudition (or what Monroe would call "the literary"). Monroe suggests in his analysis that traditional or "literary" poetry must die, and will be salvaged by a new blend of prose-poetry that rejects seriousness. I mention in my own analysis that the game Belano and Lima play with Amadeo, deciphering the meaning behind the title "Síon," signals the absurdity of literature that willfully inflates its power or takes itself too seriously. Yet even as Belano and Lima tell Amadeo the poem is a joke, the context does not feel like a very comic moment. Consider the dread felt by Amadeo after learning the poem is a joke, when he cannot bring himself to tell the boys that their explanation had "taken a weight off [his] mind." Studying the poem for "more than forty years" and discovering that it was always a joke only drives Amadeo to another glass of tequila. After a while, the boys begin to ask him what happened to the rest of the people he and Cesárea knew, to which he replies,

> We didn't realize, but in those days everything was sliding inexorably toward the edge of a cliff. Or maybe that's putting it too strongly. In those days we were all sliding downhill. And no one would try to make the climb back up again, except maybe Manuel, in his

> own way, but otherwise no one else. Miserable goddamn life, isn't it, boys? (Bolaño 486).

This sense of sliding toward the edge of a cliff certainly signals the drive toward the death of "literary poetry," as Monroe points out. However, Monroe wishes to view this "cliff" that Amadeo describes as the Dover Cliffs of *King Lear*, wherein a pretend fall over the edge gives Gloucester back his life, and reunites him with son, all functioning toward the resolution of the play. Yet for Amadeo the metaphorical cliff is the end of poetry as he knows it, and the end of his literary existence. Before he gives them Cesárea's poem, he sends the boys to the store to buy *Los Suicidas* tequila, perhaps knowing that by letting the boys in, by letting them see Cesárea's poem and possibly explaining it to him hastens his own metaphorical suicide. Perhaps Amadeo knew already that Cesárea's poem might be nothing more than an absurd collection of lines on a page, in which to stake his belief, but was unable to realize it until Belano and Lima came to tell him.

What he knows now, after hearing that it was always a joke, is that life is "miserable", "art is crazy," and he is simply alone—isolated. Where Monroe wishes to regard this moment as a hopeful and playful example of poetry on the precipice of immense change, Amadeo can only see it as a catastrophic ending. Consider, as well, the tense moments where the boys continue reading what Amadeo now calls "Cesárea's wretched magazine," where he starts to view the boys as "psychotic," "goddamn psychotic boys! As if speaking in one's sleep were nothing! As if making promises in one's sleep were nothing!" (Bolaño 588). This new tension between him and the boys, this new dislike of Cesárea's magazine and his presence in their house stems from their nonchalance at ruining Amadeo's view of poetry (and of Cesárea herself)—as if it were nothing (although here he is referring to the strange way that one of the boys seems to be talking in his

sleep, behaving like a ventriloquist; still the disruptive idea holds and takes root). Amadeo's disappointment and distress in this moment weighs on him much like it does on the narrator of *The Loser*, where Bernhard's narrator finds that, after fifty years of pursuing an art that continues to elude him, it is better to give up.

Of course, linking Amadeo's discovered disappointment with the cynical and pessimistic moment of *The Loser* argues that all these three novels, when read against each other, contextualize and reify the obvious and latent absurdity of high seriousness. But the joke that is Cesárea's poem still results in isolation in more ways than one. The humor of the novel, whose existence I do not deny, does not seem to me to be found in these moments of endings and beginnings. Consider further Monroe's analysis of the language game Garcia Madero, Belano, Lima, and Lupe play in the car driving through the Sonora Desert,

> Transformed from a source of tragi-comic humiliation (tragic for him, comic for the reader), in the context of their search for the forgotten poet Tinajero and her poetry, into a running gag, improvisational comedy routine, the inside joke of Garcia Madero's precocious poet-apprentice knowledge, as shared with the four protagonists in the car speeding through the Sonora Desert, is no longer at García Madero's or any other characters' expense, but a source of joy they share within the fictional frame, the literal/figurative "vehicle" of their experiences, which the novel shares as well with its readers (Monroe 121).

Monroe here seems to dispel the notion that any reader would identify with Garcia Madero in these moments, that we would find his categorical knowledge of ancient poetic forms a joke on any occasion. They certainly seem comical at the beginning of the novel when he accuses his

poetry professor of not knowing what a rispetto is, but that comedy came from his self-conscious undercutting of his own narrative— for example, where he retrospectively inserts, "I don't know what I was thinking. The only Mexican poet who knows things like that by heart is Octavio Paz (our great enemy)" (Bolaño 4). The comedy early in the narrative comes from Garcia Madero's forceful but ineffective attempts to align himself with visceral realism, to turn his back on his own definitions of true poetry in a sort of childish attempt (although we know that he was not truly able to let go of them, considering his reading of "The Vampire"). The language game Garcia Madero plays in the car is considerably different, less humorous, and the assertion that a reader separates themselves from our narrator's point of view to find an outside perspective on humor to be false to our reading experience.

Monroe's distorted sense of what is comic in the novel includes a large portion of the language game played in the car in Part III,

> What is a tetrastich?'
>
> 'What?' said Lupe beside me.
>
> 'A metrical system of four verses,' said Belano.
>
> 'And a syncope?'
>
> 'Oh, Jesus,' said Lima.
>
> 'I don't know,' said Belano. 'Something syncopated?'
>
> 'Cold, cold. Do you give up?' (Bolaño 592).

While Belano and Lima are somewhat able to join in the game, Lupe remains isolated. When Lupe says to Garcia Madero that all the words "sound like Arabic" to her, he laughs, "and when I had stopped laughing I told Lupe that I wasn't laughing at her or her ignorance (or lack of sophistication) but at all of us" (593). The idea that this game is a "source of joy" for all four of them to join in ignores the foundation of Garcia Madero's character, as well as his words. Though he may say that he is laughing at all of them together, he still points out (probably not to Lupe, and just to the reader of his journal) that Lupe's inability to participate stems from a lack of sophistication, demonstrating that Garcia Madero does not surrender his opinions on "true" poetry (the "literary") so easily. He unconsciously clings to these values, even when they isolate him, like when Lupe and Belano say to him, "you know a lot" (593). Upon hearing this, he is, "seized by laughter again, laughter that was expelled instantly from the car. Orphan, I thought" (593). If this game is a moment of togetherness, as Monroe would have us believe, why would Garcia Madero return to thoughts of himself as an "orphan"? Why would he seize on orphan, except to expose his isolation, his uneasy separation—certainly not to advance "togetherness."

Monroe also includes the portion of the language game where Lupe takes over as questioner, asking about slang terms. She begins by posing the questions to Garcia Madero, "Mr. Know-it-all," she calls him (597). She asks him what a "*prix*" is ("a toke of weed"), and what "*muy carranza*" means ("something very old"), but it is Belano and Lima who offer these answer, not Garcia Madero. He says, "'let me answer' […] because all these questions were really for me" (597). Belano and Lima relent momentarily, but when Garcia Madero finally responds that he does not know what "*lurias*" means, Belano, Lima, and Lupe take over again, with Belano and Lima even asking some of the questions. This portion of the game is played strictly between Belano, Lima, and Lupe—excluding Garcia Madero altogether. As they reach

the end of the game, Garcia Madero comments, "for a moment, it seemed impossible to me that I'd ever made love with a girl like Lupe" (598). For Monroe, this game is

> [b]ased not on pedantry but on play, not on exclusion but on togetherness, the combined games of poetry and poetics, slang and dialect, dismantle the high-low distinction, combining diverse linguistic repertoires and fields of knowledge of poets and prostitutes, of academic and non-academic speech genres (Monroe 125).

The text, at this moment, certainly relies on a combination of diverse linguistic repertoires, but this remains a strictly formal element of the text, perhaps an outside debunking of the high seriousness of formalism. Garcia Madero's game excludes Lupe (and often Belano and Lima), and Lupe's game excludes Garcia Madero—to the point where he begins to see her as distasteful, wondering how he ever overlooked her ignorance, her "lack of sophistication." The togetherness of these moments is not clear to me, nor would they be clear to a reader who has come to identify with Garcia Madero over the course of his narrative. Garcia Madero, like Amadeo, like Manuel Maples Arce, suffers in the in-between space created by the "literary" and the "non-literary," suggesting an uncomfortable, isolating, perhaps even violent moment when the "literary" and "non-literary" attempt to be pushed together.

This isolating feeling extends to the reader, as well, by means of Garcia Madero along with the many other narrators of Part II (which Monroe's argument lightly dismisses as playful expressions of prose-poetics, an experiment), although this is in fact exactly the point of *The Savage Detectives*. Monroe's claim that the novel is a prose-poem novel inspired by the likes of Poe, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud suggests that the overall form of the novel is trying to break away from any set forms at all. The alienation felt by the reader throughout this whole novel is

certainly proof of that, and I would argue that this is where the importance of character, discounted by Monroe's claims, enters. The novel seems to suggest, to me at least, that moving away from traditional "literary" forms to create a new form of literature that embraces both "literary" and "non-literary" traditions cannot be accomplished by cutting off altogether different methods of learning, and different forms of knowledge—in fact, we can see how this method would fail through Garcia Madero, how he quit school, abandoned his family, abandoned his home, all in the pursuit of a truer understanding of visceral realism. A reading of *The Savage Detectives*, like my own, that heavily ponders character form, as well as forms of distortion within the novel, creates a more open text—one that attempts to extend beyond form, what I believe to be Bolaño's goal. Through Garcia Madero, readers can interrogate why, exactly, we feel confused by the combination of "literary" and "non-literary" language, why we might feel like "art is crazy" like Amadeo if someone tells us the newest art is canned shit, and why we might feel alienated as readers by a novel that employs both "literary" and "non-literary" ideas.

Diverging from Monroe's critical approach, Chris Andrews, a prominent translator of Bolaño's works into English, examines in *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe*,[16] the reception of Bolaño's fiction in English translation and what he believes to be the key ideas behind its popularity. He gives seven explanations: Bolaño is an exceptional writer, an American writer, a translatable writer, a writer who has given rise to a myth, a writer who supplies a lack in

[16] Monroe includes a nod to Andrews' work in his chapter "Dismantling Narrative Drive," writing, "*The Savage Detectives* has led more than any other of Bolaño's works prior to the posthumous publication of 2666 […] to Bolaño's canonization, comparable to that of Gabriel García Márquez among writers of the previous Latin American "Boom," as the synecdochic writer of his generation, the "expanding universe" of whose reception, in Chris Andrews' useful formulation, has come to include a growing sense of his pivotal importance" (Monroe 105).

North American fiction, a writer who men like, and a writer who has been misread (Andrews 3). Each of these explanations results in his overall conclusion that Bolaño's literary success in translation is somewhat an "anomalous case." As Andrews explains, the power behind Bolaño's works carves out or invents, "a new position in the literary field," created not just by disruption but through "the combining of properties and projects that are generally held to be incompatible" (7). However, Andrews rejects the idea that Bolaño's narratives are "poetic prose," which he claims is an expression generally used to describe "slow, meditative, richly textured prose," not much of which can be found in Bolaño's works. Instead his training as a postsurrealist poet, Andrews claims, manifests in "passages of plain, quickly paced narration [that] are interrupted by bursts of imagery or by lists" (8).

Unlike Monroe, then, Andrews moves away from the poetics of Bolaño's work and into a study of the narrative strategies that create Bolaño's works, as well as the ethical and aesthetic values that accompany it. Because Andrews' criticism discusses all of Bolaño's work as an "expanding universe," he does not separate his chapters by novel, as Monroe does. Each of Bolaño's novels (and poems, and other collections) become, under his terms, inextricably linked to one another. His chapter, "Aimlessness," focuses most closely on *The Savage Detectives* where he provides a methodology by which to understand the general aimlessness of Bolaño's narratives through an understanding of characters and lives. He begins with a discussion of "Narrative Identity," citing Galen Strawson's challenge to "the universal validity of what he calls the psychological Narrativity thesis ('one sees or lives or experiences one's life as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories') and the ethical Narrativity thesis ('a richly Narrative outlook on one's life is essential to living well, to true or full personhood') (98). Instead, Strawson distinguishes two kinds of self-experience: diachronic and episodic.

Diachronic self-experience, according to Strawson is when "one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future" (Andrews 98). Episodic self-experience is when "one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as some-thing that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future" (98).

This broad, controversial attitude toward self explains for Andrews why Bolaño's fiction "is largely populated by aimless characters who are little inclined to see themselves as the protagonists of life stories" (100). He writes, "for Bolaño, as for Strawson, the Episodic life is not intrinsically inferior to the Diachronic life. It is equally worthy of fictional treatment, and there are many natural Episodics among Bolaño's characters" (100). Indeed, Andrews' analysis here goes far in explaining the narrative features of *The Savage Detectives*, particularly in relation to the interviews, as well as perhaps in explaining the non-linear chronology of Garcia Madero's journal entries. His broad claim within this is that Cesárea Tinajero is represents a general tendency toward aimlessness in the fiction of Bolaño, "Bolaño's fiction values an improvising openness over concentrated striving to attain objectives and to 'make something of one's life'" (Andrews 95). His argument here, recalling Monroe's position, also perhaps helps to discover Garcia Madero's intense feelings of alienation from the visceral realists—Garcia Madero's certainly had fixed objectives at the start of the novel, as well as a desire to make something of his life, in contrast with Belano and Lima who live to wander (as evidenced by the interviews of Part II). But many philosophers have strongly objected to Galen Strawson's beliefs that no human being is responsible for their actions (that there are no restraints on behavior). Hence, he is applauding and applying an unsubstantiated piece of reasoning (Strawson's) that some think fictitious and viewing it as the grounds to explain how unethical fictional behavior of

Bolaño's characters imitates controversial, possibly false explanations about what it is to be human.

The process where Bolaño's characters appear and reappear, circulating from text to text (41), is the chapter from Andrews' text that most closely relates to my thesis. He writes in this chapter,

> When Bolaño renames a character who is recognizably the same, he enriches and compounds the significance of the character's names. When he reuses a name for a character who is discernibly different, he further exploits the single name's connotative potential. […] His characters are not strictly constrained by their first versions: they evolve; their names and properties are allowed to change in response to new fictional environments. He systematically relaxes the requirement of consistency that Balzac attempted to meet in *The Human Comedy*. This gives his fiction-making system a degree of free play unavailable to writers in a more strictly realist tradition (46).

Interestingly, Andrews' explanation opens the door for how to read inconsistency in modern fiction, kicking Forster's explanation down the road, and perhaps reminds a reader of similar renaming circumstances appearing in *The Third Policeman*. The problem, most prominent in Andrews' work, but visible in the arguments of Monroe, is that Bolaño's works become inextricable from each other. This criticism suggests an isolating quality such that a reader of *The Savage Detectives* would not be able to understand the use of characters in *The Savage Detectives* alone without understanding the rest of Bolaño's novels, or that a reader cannot access the deeper meaning of the novels (which for Monroe is its form) without knowing that the form of *The Unknown University*, a collection of Bolaño's poems, was written from verse to

prose to verse. The idea that Bolaño's novels fit together like pieces of a puzzle to create a universe of their own functions the same way that the use of "literary" language functions in *The Savage Detectives*—to isolate others. My reading of Andrews' criticism may be too harsh, but it derives from the very feeling of isolation I point out. Imagine my surprise upon finishing the six hundred or more pages of *The Savage Detectives* only to have critics tell me I cannot possibly understand the full meaning of the novel without complete knowledge of the entire Bolaño canon.

From here, Andrews descends into a discussion of Bolaño's characters and narratives as autobiographical. Both Andrews and Monroe agree that Arturo Belano of the *The Savage Detectives*, along with a host of other characters perhaps even including Garcia Madero, is something of a fictional alter-ego for Bolaño. A strange similarity between the work of Bernhard and Bolaño, particularly between *The Loser* and *The Savage Detectives*, exists in that both novel's narrative voices can be perceived as autobiographical. Bernhard grew up in Salzburg and Vienna, studying music like his unnamed narrator, and critics like Monroe and Andrews often argue that both Garcia Madero and Arturo Belano act as alter egos for Bolaño and his involvement in Mexico with ultra and radical surrealist practices. Both novels (though Bolaño's more than Bernhard's) devise characters based on real people (people that exist outside of the narrative—Octavio Paz, Gabriel Marquez, Glenn Gould). Yet, the intersection of literature and real people and true experiences produces two entirely divergent reactions for these two. The "real-ness" of the text of *The Savage Detectives* pushes critics to search for more life-like mapping, more aspects of reality, more intertextuality (or "metarepresentation" as Andrews calls it) between the novel and its real/fictional geographical domain. Every reference made by Bolaño requires that it be deeply embedded into the reality of his life, his relationships, the real Mexico

in the late 1970s. But *The Loser*'s "real-ness" only draws the reader and critic deeper into the text itself. The Glenn Gould of *The Loser*'s narrative is not the Glenn Gould of real life, despite the insistence on intimate experiences that attest to us that they are the same person. Bernhard's Glenn Gould remains firmly rooted in the pages of the novel, never venturing into known performances or anecdotal conversations with Yehudi Menuhin, whereas Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima are, as critics suggest, jumping off the page and pointing us to the novel's deeper meaning that must exist elsewhere—perhaps in the life of the author, or the lives of those people on which their characters are based.

The most common claim among all the critics I have drawn on throughout the thesis to discuss *The Savage Detectives*, as well as Jason Berger, Ignacio López-Vicuña, Alberto Medina, Tania Gentic, and Sarah Pollack, several of whom I will next discuss, is that Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima are the protagonists of the novel. Now, if Belano and Lima are the protagonists of *The Savage Detectives*, then Wertheimer and Glenn Gould are just as likely to be the protagonists of *The Loser*—which is why I have a hard time believing such a claim. If the protagonists of *The Savage Detectives* are Belano and Lima, what makes it so? Because the novel is supposedly about them? Wertheimer and Glenn Gould are both dead, yet they appear more often than Belano and Lima do in Garcia Madero's journals. Perhaps it is because, as Andrews suggests, Belano seems an obvious alter-ego for Bolaño, and because Belano appears in several other of Bolaño's works. Andrews writes, "seven stories feature Arturo Belano, either as a first-person narrator involved in the action ('Enrique Martín,' 'The Grub'), or as a main character in third-person narration ('Detectives,' 'Photos,' 'The Old Man of the Mountain,' 'Death of Ulises,' and 'The Days of Chaos')" (Andrews 47). There are also five third person stories about a character called B, who could easily be either Belano or Bolaño, not that the two

are so different, according to Andrews. That Andrews also subscribes to the idea that Belano and Lima are the protagonists calls into question his earlier claim that Bolaño's characters often resist the urge to be the protagonists of their own stories. Are Belano and Lima the protagonists simply because they refuse to see themselves as protagonists? Why is Garcia Madero not the protagonist? I do not mean to argue that Garcia Madero is the protagonist simply because he is the narrator, but it is taxing to read the novel and not assume that the story is about Garcia Madero's life.

I would argue that the characters of Belano and Lima convince critics they are the protagonist solely because Garcia Madero *writes* them to be so. The Glenn Gould of the narrator's mind is inhuman and unattainable, and Wertheimer is weak and nervous. As we know from the many interviews in Part II of *The Savage Detectives*, Belano and Lima are also "nothing special." Of course, they have had many adventures and met many people, some of whom describe them with reverence and some of whom simply describe them as dirty weed dealers with no money, relying on the graces of their friends for food and a place to stay. In Garcia Madero's eyes, however, Belano and Lima are great mysterious figures. They are on a true quest for knowledge, they are leading a poetic movement that will revolutionize all literary culture in Mexico. Holding these two novels, which are both similar and extremely different, together so closely reveals, then, something about the way character functions in a text—not as a symptom of the text itself. Character, in effect, must have the ability to change the course of the novel itself.

Of the other critics I have mentioned, only Berger, Pollack, and Gentic (who will be discussed later) attempt to read *The Savage Detectives* outside the context of Bolaño's other works. Berger, in his text "Roberto Bolaño's *Moby Dick*: Unflattening Formalism," uses the

principles of "visceral realism" to illuminate the ways in which contemporary formal criticism prefers a surface-level, or aesthetic, engagement with literature. Per the title, Berger does not read *The Savage Detectives* entirely on its own, as he invokes Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, but his argument comes to conclusions like that of Monroe (if not more pointed). He does not claim, as I do, that the principles of visceral realism present the reader with a sort of literary nonsense, but considering them as nonsense supports his argument. The pivotal moment of the novel, according to Berger's argument, is the revelation of Cesárea's poem,

> In Belano and Lima's reading, Tinajero's poem goes much further than Madero's observation, early in the novel, that one of the visceral realists' "poetry-writing tenets is a momentary disconnection from a certain kind of reality" (Bolaño 10). When Belano and Lima tell Amadeo that Tinajero's poem is a "joke … covering up something more serious," they mean it quite literally, that the poem qua joke signals other actual realities. In this way, Tinajero's poem offers an approach to formalism that recalibrates the standard relations among form (manifest surface) and content (depth) (Berger 32-3)

Ironically, Berger's argument seems to suggest that the deeper meaning of the poem (and perhaps the novel) is beyond what one can see on the page. The nonsensical principles of visceral realism, then, force one to look beyond any preliminary analyses of the novel. For example, Belano and Lima's suggestion that Cesárea's poem represents a boat upon the sea in varying types of weather, is not *the* joke of the poem—it is one of many possible jokes, or many possible realities for the text to inscribe meaning. Berger's argument recalls Monroe's argument about the combination of the "literary" and the "non-literary" and its effects on the text. Though Berger does not argue using these specific terms, the privileging of an aesthetic reading of novels certainly falls under the "literary." However, Berger's analysis here shifts toward my argument

about the novel's purposeful discomfort upon the combination of the "literary" and the "non-literary," as he does not claim a joyous union between the two.

On the other hand, Sarah Pollack, in "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* in the United States," finds similarity with Andrews in that she discusses the reception of Bolaño's novel in English translation, though arguing further that the success of *The Savage Detectives* suggests a reconfiguration of the "U.S. reader's" definition of Latin American Literature. Interestingly, she notes that Garcia Madero's escape to the Sonora Desert with Belano, Lima, and Lupe, "which occupy less than a third of the novel, constitute its closest approximation of a plot and seem to be the aspect of the book that holds the greatest appeal for most U.S. readers" (Pollack 359). Pollack here makes a very culture-centered argument, which I leave out of my thesis although it may hold value. From Pollack and Berger, we can reconsider Figlerowicz's notion that flat protagonists, and the literature that contains them, can teach us something about ourselves.

As evidence by the works of these critics, my methodological approach throughout this thesis leaves many other methods untouched. For example, there is a notable absence of women in *The Loser* and *The Third Policeman*, and though there are women in Garcia Madero's narratives they take a backseat to the stories of Belano, Lima, and other men revered by the visceral realists. The women throughout the interviews in Part II of *The Savage Detectives* are often ex-lovers of Belano or Lima, which becomes the focus of their interviews rather than anything else about them. Of course, the fact that the interviews center on stories of Belano and Lima alters the content of the women's interviews, as well as why they would be interviewed at all. The women who are part of the visceral realist movement are similarly relegated to the sidelines, as Pancho details when he talks about who noticed the *Lee Harvey Oswald* magazine,

"well, other poets, of course, literature students, and the poetry-writing girls who came each week to the hundred workshops blossoming like flowers in Mexico City" (Bolaño 22). Here Pancho distinguishes "poets" from "poetry-writing girls," and later tells Garcia Madero, "'lift a stone and you'll find a girl writing about her little life'" (22). Perhaps Pancho's comment here affects Garcia Madero's subsequent portrayal of women throughout the journal entries due to his desire to fit in with the visceral realists, as this thesis argues. However, an analysis of *The Savage Detectives* driven by gender-theory certainly can be promoted in terms of recognizing outside the terms of the novel's ethos a literary world in which the writing of women is less valuable than the writing of men.

The benefit of reading a novel through the lens of character, however, is that it illustrates internal coherence of the novel even when a novel ceases to communicate sense or relinquishes the referents of the ordinary world. The narrative world of *The Third Policeman* descends rapidly into nonsense, leaving the narrator and the reader alienated and confused. Reading the novel through character, then, allows a reader to find a path through what is recalcitrant and often opaque. Holding the character accountable for his or her words (à la Stanley Cavell) and understanding the principles that guide these narrators makes even the most nonsensical narrative coherent. Studying character in the novel is heuristic, then, in the way it teaches a reader how to solve narrative problems, extending the study of character in a Barthesian way to include voice. Listening to voice and listening to what character *is* through their own voices supports my interpretive claims, and these novels have a heteroglossic multiplicity of voices.

Continuing the previous gender-oriented methodology, another way to read absent women into *The Third Policeman* would be through the gendering and feminization of objects, like what, for example, the narrator says of his bicycle,

> I knew that I liked this bicycle more than I had ever liked any other bicycle, better even than I had liked some people with two legs. I liked her unassuming competence, her docility, the simple dignity of her quiet way. She now seemed to rest beneath my friendly eyes like a tame fowl which will crouch submissively, awaiting with out-hunched wings the caressing hand. Her saddle seemed to spread invitingly into the most enchanting of all seats while her two handlebars, floating finely with the wild grace of alighting wings, beckoned to me to lend my mastery for free and joyful journeyings […] How desirable her seat was, how charming the invitation of her slim encircling handle-arms, how unaccountably competent and reassuring her pump resting warmly against her rear thigh (O'Brien 170-1).

A critic from outside the time of *The Third Policeman* recognizes a strong sense of feminine representation through the bicycle, particularly through the attachment of female pronouns in this lyrical, almost poetry-like description. Not only is O'Brien feminizing the bicycle, but he is also sexualizing the bicycle as "desirable," "charming," offering up her "spreading saddle." If we take this bicycle to be a substitute for a woman, which in this imaginative construction it obviously is, then the narrative even further suppresses women by stereotyping them as docile and submissive, viewing them as a tool to be used by men.

Taking an entirely different approach to nonsense language in the works of Bernhard, Jacob Haubenreich writes in "'Das Problem liegt im Wie': Reading Thomas Bernhard Writing,"

> composed of rambling, repetitive, rhythmic clauses that can proceed for multiple pages without pause, Bernhard's writing defies typical narrative conventions and destabilizes the linguistic structures of thought through which reality is constructed. Bernhard's

> textual deluges become at times so overwhelming, so nonsensical, that the reader can lose track of what the text is even 'about' (Haubenreich 59).

His descriptive methodology takes its cue from Bernhard's own acknowledgement that he sees

> the subject matter proper as entirely secondary. . . .To come back to how I write my books: I would say, it's a question of rhythm and has a lot to do with music. Yes, one can only understand what I write when one realizes that the musical components matter first and foremost, and that what I narrate only comes second (59).[17]

Haubenreich takes Bernhard's comment as instructions of what a reader should see and understand when reading his novels, using it to chart a way through the destabilized linguistic structures. His claim implies that my thesis violates the first order of paying attention to the novel, but curiously even the voice of Bernhard himself echoes his narrator in *The Loser*, separating music and words and insisting that the way to understand this novel comes from a specific understanding of music that must be achieved first. Where Haubenreich critically responds in kind to Bernhard's words, I take Bernhard's voice as guidance, even though approaching the narrative through authorial intent was not dominant in my analysis.

Tania Gentic, in her article "Realism, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of Reading in Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*," takes the study of mimesis to another level, past just the consideration that Belano may be an alter-ego for Bolaño himself. She argues that the novel

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[17] Jean-Louis de Rambures, "Aus zwei Interviews mit Thomas Bernhard," in *Antiautobiografie. Zu Thomas Bernhards 'Auslöschung,'* ed. Hans Höller and Irene Heidelberger-Leonard (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 13–14. All translations by the author.

employs a mode of realism that calls attention to the line between "the real" and "the literary" through the novel's use of real people as characters. She writes,

> within the narrative Cesárea is an almost mythical figure who has been forgotten by the literary establishment but who is the proclaimed muse of the real visceralistas. At the same time, she is narratively tied to an extratextual and historicized reality defined by the multiple estridentista (Stridentist), surrealist, and Dadaist writers, painters, and poets who are invoked by the novel's characters as interlocutors. Trotsky's great-granddaughter, the poet, Verónica Volkow; avant-garde writer Alice B. Toklas; the French electric poet Michel Bulteau; and Mexican poet Manuel Maples Arce, the founder of the estridentista movement, among others, are all mentioned and at times given voice in the novel. One fellow poet of Cesárea's who claims to have spoken with Belano and Lima even suggests that in her first and only edition of the journal Caborca, Cesárea Tinajero had published works by Maples Arces, Arqueles Vela, Salvador Novo, André Breton, and other known avant-garde artists, as though the fictional characters Bolaño invents inhabited the same plane of reality as these historical literary figures did (Gentic 401)

Gentic's analysis centers on peopling the novel with the real-life figures of the fictionalized beings, delving into their mentions as representative of the reality of the avant-garde Latin American movement. Using realism rather than an "avant-garde literary sensibility," her reading situates the novel in a mimetic reality, rejecting the notion that *The Savage Detectives* employs tactics of other postmodern, "antirealist" narratives (401). Gentic's understanding of Cesárea as a mythical being tied to extratextual and historicized literary movements is very separated from the way this thesis construes Cesárea, where she is foremost a character in the mundane setting in which she appears, and not tying her to abstract notions of "high artistry" or presenting her as an

evocative spirit of surrealist poetic movements. This neither claims that Cesárea is empty, nor are the rest of the characters whose names attach to real literary figures, but a character-oriented analysis recognizes the elasticity of character within the novel itself, noting that the fictitious versions of these people do not have a very strong connection to their external referents. I instead read the mundane representations of these artists, as they appear within the novel—through the eyes of Garcia Madero, or from their own fictionalized mouths.

This thesis does recognize that explanation itself is a complex idea as it applies to literature, particularly considering the criticism of Gentic, Haubenreich, and the possible gender-oriented reading of both *The Third Policeman* and *The Savage Detectives*. All three of these methodologies willfully distort in ways that emulate how criticism itself is the very cauldron of distortion. These critics distort and exaggerate isolated moments of the text that do not necessarily encompass the experience of what it is to read intuitively, or to through-read a character in a novel. Reading these novels within the bounds of character takes on the totality of narrative space and treats it as a guide for interpretation, rather than looking for repeatability and evidence of isolated instances. This thesis sees voice as an analytic for organization, both examining the changing voice of character and the consistent voice of character toward an idea of coherence. Managing character in this way does not aim to tame the unbridled postmodern text, but in effect, reorganizes and rethinks these novels through readerly memory of narrative that brings into it critical visibility.

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