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The Crossword Mentality in Modern Literature and Culture

A dissertation presented

by

Adrienne Raphel

to

The Department of English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

English

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Dissertation Advisors: Elaine Scarry, Stephanie Burt Adrienne Raphel

The Crossword Mentality in Modern Literature and Culture

Abstract

This dissertation examines the crossword's influence in modern literature and culture in three sections: history, literature, and praxis. I argue that while the crossword relies on surface-level connections as aesthetic form, as a cultural mode, by thinking inside the box, people use the puzzle to make connections with each other.

I first tell the story of the crossword from 1913 to the present, charting the crossword's evolution from an afterthought in the newspaper to one of the main media moneymakers of the twenty-first century. Ultimately, I argue that the crossword has become a reflection and an emblem of contemporary leisure-class culture in both America and England.

The second section argues that the crossword plays an evocative role as both formal figure and stylistic trope in modern and contemporary literature. I show the crossword's role in the creative processes of several twentieth- and twenty-first century authors, united by their interest in the puzzle's addictive qualities and capacity to facilitate associative thinking. I track the appearance of the crossword in literary texts between 1913 and 2018, arguing that the crossword typically connotes intellectual prowess without emotional sophistication. This section also considers reading practices, comparing the reading of a crossword to the reading of literature by setting both in conversation with definitions of difficulty. To help understand the crossword itself as form, I provide a detailed taxonomy.

The third section provides a study of the praxis of the crossword in contemporary life. It takes the reader behind the scenes of the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, the nation's oldest and largest competition of its kind. This section also presents a narrative account of a crossword-puzzle-themed ocean crossing on the Queen Mary II. I argue that although the crossword is by nature a solitary practice, the crossword brings people together in surprising and unexpected ways.

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

"I fill in the gaps of the crossword at any spot I happen to choose."
--Vladimir Nabokov

It's a good time to be a crossword.

Millions in America and the UK encounter the crossword daily in newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*; the *Times of London,* the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*. Crosswords populate *Harper's*, *People*, the *Spectator*, the *New Statesman, Soap Opera Digest,* and in-flight magazines like *Sky*. US and British publications alike also feature crossword blogs, with tips for solvers and explanations of the daily puzzle's answers. Other countries have a fairly robust crossword culture—France, Italy, Germany; even China and Japan have crossword-like games that use characters rather than letters—but in the US and UK, the crossword has truly become a empire.

There's a robust cottage industry around the puzzle: crossword compendia, crossword-puzzle dictionaries, reference books; websites dedicated to archiving every clue used in every puzzle; crossword criticism. Designers have used the black-and-white grid as inspiration for clothing, jewelry, and home décor. And the decline of print media, if anything, has only strengthened the crossword's hold. People spend more of their days arranging letters inside the box of a screen, and the crossword is no exception. In 2017, major social game developer Zynga partnered with *People* to launch Crosswords with Friends, an app that lets people compete against each other. In 2018, there were 350,000 subscribers to the *New York Times*'s crossword mobile app.

T.S. Eliot did the crossword, as did W.H. Auden, as does Stephen King. Vladimir Nabokov wrote the first crosswords in the Russian language; Stephen Sondheim brought the cryptic crossword to American audiences. Actors Jesse Eisenberg, Jodie Foster, Vanessa

Williams, Elijah Wood, and Catherine Zeta-Jones are crossword solvers; Teri Garr both appears frequently as a crossword clue and solves regularly. Television hosts Rachel Maddow is an avid crossworder, as are Jon Stewart and Martha Stewart. Nancy Pelosi and Bill Clinton are aficionados of the form.

The first crossword appeared in the *New York World* in 1913, on the eve of World War I and on the cusp of Modernism, and it is one of the most enduring forms in society today. As the form has evolved over the past century, the essential structure has remained the same, but the crossword's capacity for complexity has proven infinitely expansive. If you can dream of a type of crossword, you can build it—and someone probably has. Crosswords embed poems inside them; crosswords can demand the solver to transpose words across clues; crosswords can create triple-decker puns and meta-puzzles that only appear in a completed grid.

But the crossword is fundamentally a simple form. Crossword-generating software allows anyone to type in a few words, and the computer will spit out a functional grid. Crosswords appear as educational tools, sugarcoating rote memorization tasks into a game form. In the early 2000s, constructor Frank Longo created dozens of themed crosswords for The Learning Network that embed facts around subject areas, like a Great Books course in puzzle form. Informative puzzles need not be only about eating your mental vegetables: speciality publications like *Soap Opera Digest* stuff their puzzles with on-brand trivia.

The crossword taps into two common human desires: clues and grids. The modern-day penchant for clues blossomed in the nineteenth century, through the rise of detective fiction and real-life detectives, and the crossword grew up parallel to the Golden Age of crime fiction. In the twentieth century, the grid came to the forefront of art for the first time.

"Grids?—you say—What is there to write or to read about grids? Hasn't everything been said already?" writes art critic Rosalind Krauss.[1] Krauss sees the grid as the quintessential symbol of modernity, and the crossword is the quintessence of that quintessence. As Krauss writes, "The form is ubiquitous in the art of *our* [the twentieth] century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one. In that great chain of reactions by which modern was born out of the efforts of the nineteenth century, one final shift resulted in breaking the chain. By 'discovering' the grid, cubism, de Stijl, Mondrian, Malevich…landed in a place that was out of reach of everything that went before. Which is to say, they landed in the present, and everything else was declared to be past."[2] The grid had been a background figure for centuries, a tool used to create perspective and to provide structure within a painting. Now, the grid was not the ground, but the figure itself. Mondrian's 1943 *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, for example, pixilated Manhattan into a grid of boxes and lines. "Boogie-Woogie" evokes a freewheeling, jazzy sound, but the rhyme creates a strict symmetry. There's also a juxtaposition of high and low, crisp minimalism with clangy pop music. The grid simultaneously flattens and heightens hierarchy.

According to Krauss, the grid is at once centrifugal and centripetal. Is the grid a small subsection of a much larger whole, a single fractal of an infinitely repeatable pattern? Or is the grid a single world contained within itself? Could Mondrian's squares go on forever, or is each painting an isolated incident? Are Jasper Johns's letters and numbers anonymous, ever-expanding systems, or are they particular, individual signs? Grids both focus attention on what is internally organized within the frame, and they point to what exists beyond the frame.

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[1] Rosalind Krauss, *Grids: Format and Image in 20th Century Art* (New York: The Pace Gallery, 1980), 1.

[2] Kraus, *Grids*, 2. The ellipsis is Krauss's.

The crossword also developed in parallel with modernist literature. The game itself was invented as a popular pastime and a way of filling in space, and it has persisted as a popular pastime and a way to fill in space in people's lives. The same mash-up of high and low references in *The Waste Land*, and the same delight in automatic writing and binary operations that Gertrude Stein employed, are apparent in the crossword. The crossword taps into the same mindset that led James Joyce to crow about the puzzles of *Ulysses* that would keep scholars occupied for generations. Critic Louis Menand has compared Ulysses to a "three-dimensional crossword puzzle" for the intricacy of its intertwined plotting within geography and time as well as its dense wordplay and deliberate rejection of a single cohesive plot.[3] Indeed, Ruth von Phul, one of the best crossword solvers of the 1920s, was a scholar of James Joyce. Her articles present a bent to her scholarship that shows her puzzle background: she trawls the archives to find surprising connections, such as highly suggestive similarities between passages of *Finnegans Wake* and the Beatles' song "I Am the Walrus."[4]

But the crossword isn't itself literature. The attention required to solve a crossword is different than reading. Experts can fill in a puzzle automatically, while carrying on a conversation; novices can stare at a single clue for hours without cracking it. And von Phul notwithstanding, the audience that reads *Ulysses* is not the same audience doing the puzzle. Each local mystery in *Ulysses* connects to a greater organizing mythic principle, and there's a deep understanding that all the parts connect under the surface as well as on top of it, to a mythic substructure as well as bodily truth. In other words, the puzzly parts of Joyce are a means to an end, not the end unto itself, and the reader of *Ulysses* comes to the page to enter

[3] Louis Menand, "Why We Are No Longer Shocked by *Ulysses*," *The New Yorker*, 16 Jun. 2016. To be sure, Menand is being somewhat facetious in the comparison, but sincere in his emphasis on the novel's crossword-like intricacy.

[4] Ruth von Phul, "Not a Leetle Beetle" (FW 417.3-4), *James Joyce Quarterly* 6.7 (Spring 1969): 265-266

into a world, not to solve and discard. *Ulysses* presents puzzles, but a major part of reading is figuring out what is a puzzle and what's not, and how the work establishes its rules.

The crossword is highly resonant with literature because it requires strict formal logic and demands connections, but does not constrict how these connections are created. Crosswords allow us to see through spurious links, because the crossword is *entirely* artificial in its connections. In creating arbitrary, endlessly re-combining forms, the crossword is a highly reliable barometer of what is true and what is surface-level. The crossword provides the feeling and structure of connection by constantly commuting ideas back and forth.

There's a certain middlebrow, capitalist aspiration to the crossword, a desire to become part of a leisure class. When the crossword appears as a character in literature, art, and films, it signals something at once classy and slightly crass, a highly demanding but highly consumable form. As sophisticated as a puzzle can be, at the end of the day, it's also the end of the day's trash.

Yet the structure of the crossword also, and crucially, generates community. Even though the crossword is a solitary pursuit by nature, its source of endurance has been its ability to bring people together. The crossword became a fad because people were racing against each other to solve it, or saw each other doing the puzzle in transit, or asked each other for advice. The crossword remained popular as older generations passed the puzzle down to younger ones. Families communicate through crossword clues, lovers in a spat can talk to each other over the grid. Solvers in isolation can know that someone, somewhere, is filling in the same little boxes.

The crossword is cosmopolitan. The crossword thrives in urban environments, in subways, trains, planes, buses, and waiting rooms. Though the crossword has undergone

alterations and refinements, the basic structure itself, and the basic object, has changed little since its initial emergence.

To understand why the crossword arose and endured is to understand modern life. The crossword began as craze and stuck around as a form because the crossword is the perfect middle ground. Juxtaposition is its justification. The crossword provides organization: it's up to people to provide synthesis.

*

To begin thinking about the poetics of crosswords, let's consider Vladimir Nabokov.

In a 1967 *Paris Review* interview, Vladimir Nabokov likened writing a novel to creating a crossword: "The pattern of the thing precedes the thing. I fill in the gaps of the crossword at any spot I happen to choose." Nabokov composed many of his later novels using index cards, thousands of four-by-six cards he carried with him on butterfly collecting expeditions, composing in the car as his wife, Véra, drove. Later, he'd arrange and re-arrange the cards until he'd arrived at the book's order.

Trilingual Nabokov began his career at the intersection between politics and puzzles. In 1920, Vladimir Nabokov's parents emigrated to Berlin from Russia to flee the Bolshevik Revolution. Nabokov's father founded *Rul'*, a newspaper catering to the robust Russian émigré population. Even after the elder Nabokov was assassinated during a political rally in 1922, *Rul'* continued to thrive. After graduating from Cambridge in 1922, young Vladimir moved to Berlin, where he assembled a smorgasbord of odd jobs to support his literary ambitions: he tutored English, gave tennis and boxing lessons, compiled a Russian grammar, translated *Alice in Wonderland* into German, and, in 1924, published the first crossword

puzzle in Russian in *Rul'*.[5] "I find it strange to recall that freak existence," he wrote, cautioning his future biographers not to read too much into his series of work: "Deeply beloved of blurbists is the list of more or less earthy professions that a young author (writing about Life and Ideas—which are so much more important, of course, than mere 'art') has followed: newspaper boy, soda jerk, monk, wrestler, foreman in a steel mill, bus driver and so on. Alas, none of these callings has been mine."[6] Like Joyce, proudly claiming that *Ulysses* would be a pleasure palace for generations of academics, Nabokov both conjures the presence of future critics for his work and points to puzzles as a nexus of interest.

Nabokov coined the term "kreslovitsa"—literally, "cross" plus "words"—for his crosswords, but under the secular Bolshevik regime, "krest" flirted too close to religion, and instead, "krossvords," with its Anglicized spelling masking the etymological whiffs of the cross, stuck.[7] Like their American counterparts, Nabokov's krossvords appear in the paper surrounded by ephemera: advertisments, puzzles, comics. And Nabokov's work is often careless: one day, there's a mismatched puzzle and solution; another puzzle attributes a Knut Hamsun character to Ibsen.[8] Nabokov's puzzles are typically small to medium-sized—nine-by-nine is a fairly average grid for his work—but the puzzles vary wildly in size, shape, and symmetry. Nabokov plays with grid art: one puzzle's shaded squares spell out *руль* [*Rul'*], while another is shaped like a pyramid.

It is easy to point to Nabokov's puzzles as the ultimate test case for evidence of a link between crosswords and precisely patterned literature. Crosswords might appear to be a

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[5] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 273.

[6] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 273.

[7] Joseph Clayton Mills, ed. and trans., *Nabokrossvords: Selected Puzzles from the Russian Émigré Newspaper* Rul', *1924-1926* (Chicago: Sibilance Press, 2012), iii.

[8] Mills, *Nabokrossvords*, iv.

warm-up exercise for Nabokov's more ambitiously labyrinthine efforts, both because he begins constructing them early in his career and because they are much less complex than either his later chess problems or the complex quilt of his index-card writing system.

But Nabokov's cards and crosswords are part of a much larger pattern, extending to chess problems, butterfly classifications, and dream journals: Nabokov's gift was particularization and pixilation without decay, turning the world into precise, abstracted units without losing emotion. Boiling down Nabokov's use of crosswords to symbolize a petri-dish microcosm of the whole only constitutes one part of the story. The medium of the crossword itself is a mode of communication: a formalized dialogue, a game that requires both setter and solver.

To Nabokov, crosswords are less about the intricacies of the word game *qua* word game than a dialogue between solver and constructor. In other words, the crossword is a functional mode of communication, not a frozen artifact. The crosswords in *Rul'*, as translator Joseph Clayton Mills explains, reflect the culture of émigré Berlin in the 1920s:

> It was a world the incongruously mingled high culture and low, East and West Czarist Russia and metropolitan Berlin. In Nabokov's puzzles, references to Pushkin sit alongside the names of department stores and movie starlets, and there are unmistakable political overtones throughout. These are sometimes explicit (one puzzle asks "what the Bolsheviks will do" and provides the answer "disappear") and sometimes more subtle (an insistence upon retaining Czarist nomenclature for weights and measures, for example, after the Bolsheviks had banned their use in the USSR).[9]

The crossword is a means of making money, but it's also the perfect form to encode life in a set of parallel worlds. The crossword allows for stark juxtapositions of references that would be incredibly jarring to convey in standard prose communication.

Nabokov's puzzles were part of the way he pieced together a living, but they also were deeply integral to the way he wrote and communicated. Though Nabokov wrote word

[9] Mills, *Nabokrossvords,* iv-v.

games to survive, Nabokov's most intimate writings, never intended for commercial purposes, also include puzzles—most notably, in letters to his wife, Véra.

In January 1923, Nabokov's engagement to the glamorous socialite Svetlana Siewert was broken off by Siewert's family, who did not believe the neophyte poet's prospects to be secure enough to sustain a family. Broken-hearted, Nabokov continued to write poems to Svetlana until May 1923, when Véra Slonim presented herself to him, in demi-mask, at a ball, and young Vladimir's misery dissipated at once. That June, Nabokov composed a parting poem to Svetlana and another poem to his new lover, which was published in *Rul'*. From that point forward, Nabokov never looked back, and the object of his affection, in both public and private writing, was Véra. By 1924, the couple were engaged.[10] In the summer of 1926, Véra Nabokov was unwell: a bout of severe anxiety and depression had rendered her physically as well as mentally weakened, and she was sent to two sanitoriums in the Schwarzwald, to gain weight and recuperate. Vladimir stayed behind in Berlin to continue tutoring the couple's regular pupils.

Véra made Vladimir promise to send her daily letters reporting on his activities—where he went, what he ate, what he wore, etc. Vladimir obeyed faithfully, almost ostentatiously. He reports tennis matches in the broiling sun, and late suppers of eggs and cold cuts before insomniac nights, during which he writes the very missives Véra reads. The daily digest[11] takes on the tone of a newspaper, though a newspaper about a nation of one, a

[10] Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, trans. and ed. Olga Voronina and Brian Boyde (London: Penguin Classics, 2014).

[11]Literally, a digest: perhaps to help get his "Poundlets" to put on the weight she needs, and partly because she had instructed him to be explicit about his routine, Nabokov narrates his day around his consumption. The food appears in blisteringly lavish detail. "About the milk: this milk is different, more expensive, in hermetically sealed bottles, marvelous—it doesn't go off (16 June 1926); "Huge waffles, like corsets" (23 June 1926); "lunch: meatballs and a nameless jelly (and clotted cream, left over from yesterday's milk" (17 July 1926). Even non-food items are described in edible terms: "Two plumpish coffee-coloured dachshunds are frolicking below in the yard—from above, it looks like two pawless sausages rolling about" (16 June 1926); "The sun is milky, but

diary curated outward. Often, Vladimir begins or ends his letters with some comment about the *Rul'*, still the newspaper of record for Russian émigrés in Berlin. Nearly every sentence is punctuated with affection—a nickname, a sweet note—larding the missives with sweet intimacy. But he does not hide frustrations (money is always a concern), and the quotidian enumeration of daily life lends the work a realistic cast; he may be Pollyanna-ing Pusskins back to health, but he is careful not to pussyfoot around everything, which might make her feel like she's being treated like a child and cause a retreat back to depression. The games to help Véra escape are balanced with reports of the real world that she craves. Indeed, the games appear more for Vladimir's benefit than Véra's: it is Vladimir who lies awake night after night, lonely, reaching out to Véra; he is the one writing eighty percent of the missives. The games are presented for Véra, but the making of the games is for Vladimir.

From July 1 through July 19, 1926, when Véra returned home, Vladimir added a puzzle nearly every day to his daily reports. The first of these puzzles is a crossword, which Vladimir apparently foreshadowed in a "telegrammlet" to Véra the day. As the reports continue, Vladimir finds he must vary them—just as newspapers slowly expanded beyond the daily news into culture pieces, advertisements, and games, Vladimir's newspaper of himself begins to feature weather reports, advice, and a puzzle section. Crossword serve as both a tool and a toy for convalescing Véra: a healing device to stimulate the recovering person's brain muscles, the way squeezing a stress ball might help stimulate the biceps; and a welcome distraction from other concerns.

Nabokov's puzzles are equal parts baubles for Véra's pleasure—a wealthier, less witty, lovesick partner might have enclosed a charm each day for Véra to add to a bracelet—

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hot (23 Jun 1926); "But after the rain, a huge puddle gathered [the leaves] up, some huddled together by the gutter grating, forming a brownish-yellow spot that looked like the slightly browned edge of an omelette" (11 July 1926). Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*.

and pleas for a response. The letters are filled with teasing yet barbed jabs at the ratio of letters between them: if this were a tennis match, Nabokov would be winning several[12] games at love. In his letter of July 2, Vladimir begins the letter with a little hand-drawn crossword puzzle, and when he arrives on the verso side where the puzzle has occurred on the recto, he interrupts his message to note the puzzle: "(here the word puzzle's showing through; I am curious whether you will solve it!)" The parenthetical reflection betrays the puzzle's true purpose: though the crossword is present as a gift to amuse the convalescing Véra, its true purpose is to serve as a mechanism that forces a written reply. "Had we published a little book—a collection of your letters and mine—there would have been no more than 20% of your share, *my love*…I advise you to catch up—there's still time…I love you unspeakably today," Vladimir writes. A crossword guarantees both audience and answer. If Vladimir sends Véra a grid to fill out, she already has a built-in form of response. A daily report is a monologue; a game requires a dialogue.

In this crossword to Véra, Nabokov enacts a crosshatching of imagery and form. He presents the crossword puzzle, five four-by-four word squares arranged in an X on the page: none of the magic squares touch each other, and Nabokov only gives clues to fill in the words vertically. After the crossword comes a description of his morning swim, under "a huge, hot sun. You squint at it, and a silver glitter trembles, a rainbow splinter. On the way back, I bought envelopes, ink (and, as always happens on the day I buy ink, I made a blot), sent off the letter." When we get to the spot in the paper where the puzzle shows through, faintly, on the other side, and Nabokov comments on the puzzle itself, we get a repetition of the effect he has enacted metaphorically. The image of the sun refracting against the water, glittering and splintering, is paired with the inkblot and the materiality of writing; then, the

[12] "seVéral"?

physical reflection of the crossword's letters through the page causes Nabokov's mental reflection on the state of the letters between himself and Véra. The crossword becomes an agent of rhetorical synesthesia, a window through which Nabokov describes the world.

On July 5, 1926, Vladimir draws Véra a moth, labeled *Jaspidea Celsia (♂)*, its markings rendered freehand in careful detail. Nabokov's second, or first, passion was butterflies. He writes in his memoir, *Speak, Memory*: "From the age of seven, everything I felt in connection with a rectangle of framed sunlight was dominated by a single passion. If my first glance of the morning was for the sun, my first thought was for the butterflies it would engender."[13] The day appears to Nabokov as a rectangle waiting to be filled in, like an index card, or a crossword square. Butterflies are hidden and everywhere. Nabokov's impulse is to collect and study the butterflies, to preserve and understand every aspect of their iridescence in meticulous detail.

On July 6, Vladimir draws Véra a butterfly, labeled *Crestos lovitxa Sirin*. The wings of the butterfly are divided in two halves: the upper half contains the crossword grid, while the lower half contains the clues. *Crestos lovitxa Sirin* is 'Nabokov's crossword': *krestlovitska*, Latinized to eliminate the 'k' (not in the Roman alphabet); plus *Sirin*, Nabokov's pen name (he frequently published in *Rul'* as V. Sirin, after the half-bird half-woman of Russian mythology).

[13] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 119-20.

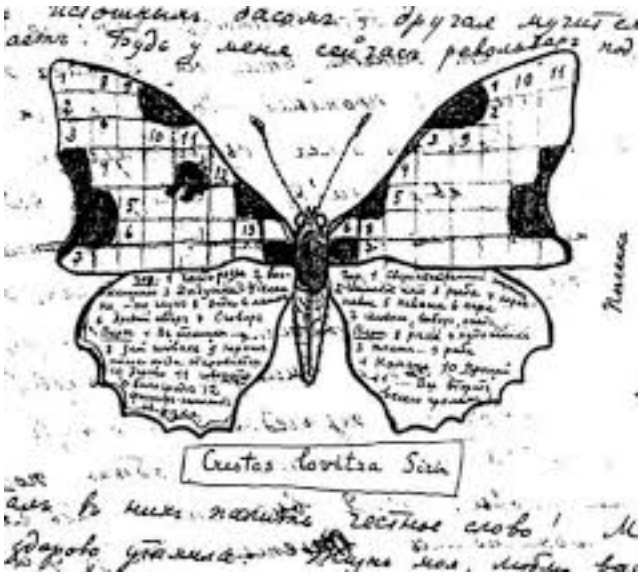

Figure 1. *Crestos lovitxa Sirin*, Vladimir Nabokov, 1926

The crossword butterfly's deadpan taxonomy underscores the enigma underlying the surface-level puzzle in Nabokov's doodle. Is this a crossword-patterned butterfly, or is this a butterfly-shaped crossword? In other words, which is Nabokov drawing: a creature of nature with a whimsical pattern, or an artificial grid posing as a tromp l'oeil butterfly? Is this life imitating art, or art imitating life? Nabokov's other letters to Véra don't clear up the mystery, since he includes both crosswords and butterfly drawings interchangeably in the position of gift or illustration.

Through Nabokov's crosswords, we see the way he makes connections. Crosswords appeal to the intersection of chaos and order. The crossword collects words from the outside world and arranges them in a particular fashion. As Nabokov's crosswords illustrate, the crossword is a liminal space, where language is held in suspense but then released into an exact pattern.

Crosswords offer a *via media* between company and solitude, simultaneously another mind as well as a retreat from the outside. Crosswords are an activity that maintains stability

in a time of loss. Soldiers do crosswords in wartime, both to wile away the hours and to escape from reality. The poet Alice Notley began solving crosswords after her father died, and the puzzles became a ritual after the death of her husband, poet Ted Berrigan. Nabokov began to construct crosswords as a business enterprise, but his private crosswords for Véra to combat loneliness—both his own and hers. Crosswords are companions in limbo. They provide engagement with another mind, when the outside world is too much to confront or one's own mind is too overwhelming to bear.

*

A few key terms related to the field of crosswords are worth defining up front.

- The **grid** is the set of black-and-white squares that go into the physical box of the puzzle.
- The **clues** are the phrases that refer to the answers that the solver must fill into the square.
- The **theme** refers to a conceit that ties together a certain number of clues in a puzzle, typically the longest clues. Not all crosswords have themes, but they're quite prominent in American-style puzzles.
- The **fill** refers to the words that are in the puzzle's grid. If a puzzle has a theme, the fill typically refers to all answers that aren't part of the theme.
- The **solver** is the person who is doing the crossword puzzle.
- The **constructor,** or the **setter**, creates the completed grid and provides an initial set of clues.

- The **editor** takes the constructor's completed grid and clues and does any adjustments necessary to make the puzzle easier or more difficult to solve. The editor's main job is typically to revise clues; editors may rewrite up to ninety percent or more of a constructor's initial clues, or they might leave them all intact. The editor double-checks the grid for any duplicates or unintentional asymmetries. The editor also fact-checks the puzzle.
- An **American-style** puzzle refers to one where the letters connect in a grid that typically interlocks, that is, there are no lone letters that aren't joined up to others. This type of puzzle uses clues with a mix of wordplay and definition-style answers, but the wordplay isn't always elaborately encoded. The grids typically have rotational symmetry. There are also American-style puzzles in which the grid does not fully interlock, but these are typically of a more amateur variety.
- A **cryptic** crossword, popular in Britain, still uses a grid, but not all the letters are interlocked, and all the clues use elaborate wordplay that doesn't rely on external definitions.

Chapter 1

CROSSWORDS: A HISTORY

Preface: Crosswords, A Prehistory

Crosswords bring together two components: the clue and the interlocking of letters in a grid. A clue is a statement that the reader solves to arrive at a particular answer. A straightforward clue demands a transaction of facts—the second-largest mountain in Nepal,[14] the winner of the 1957 Oscar for Best Picture[15]—while a more Byzantine clue operation creates a Matryoshka-doll-esque pun that requires a decoding of all aspects of that phrase. In his memoir *Pretty Girl in Crimson Rose (8)*, Sandy Belfour dissects the title to explain how this clue employs wordplay at every level. The answer to his title is REBELLED, eight letters. BELLE is the "pretty girl" inside crimson, that is, the letters RED. "Rose" distracts the reader, since at first one might think that it is a noun described by "crimson," but "rebelled" is also a synonym for "rose" (as in, an uprising). Pretty girl in crimson rose: a red belle rebelled.[16] With most clues, there is more than one answer available, but the grid constricts the possibilities to a single[17] correct response. Inside the grid, interlocked letters begin to yield words once clues are filled in. Grids with more letters joined together will reveal more words as the puzzle progresses, enabling the solver to cross-check between

[14] Kangchenjunga.

[15] *Around the World in 80 Days*.

[16] Sandy Belfour, *Pretty Girl in Crimson Rose (8): A Memoir of Love, Exile and Crosswords* (New York: Tarcher, 2003).

[17] Unless the crossword is a Schrodinger puzzle: a very few crosswords feature grids that can be filled using two letters in specific squares.

visual pattern and problem-solving logic to get the answers; in grids with more black spaces, it's every clue for itself.[18]

Where there's language, there will be language games. The relationship between arranging letters and thinking about language is hardwired. Visual puns and grids are an important part of wordplay. Children can babble verbally and visually: long before he could read, my brother discovered that he could rearrange alphabet magnets into "word" combinations.[19] Anagrams, acrostics, and riddles saturate the Bible.[20] Ancient Romans loved the happy coincidence that "ROMA" and "AMOR" are anagrams. The SATOR square, or a five-by-five word square that can be read either across or down, was first discovered in the first century in Pompeii. The square turns up for centuries engraved in masonry across the Roman empire, from Pompeii to England. Medieval Sator squares abound, carved in the buildings like a twelfth-century "Kilroy Was Here," or engraved in amulets as a charm to ward off evil or cure illness. When written out in a sentence, the words form a palindrome: "SATOR AREPO TENET OPERA ROTAS" ['The sower Arepo holds a plough'].[21]

S A T O R
A R E P O
T E N E T
O P E R A
R O T A S

[18] Grids with fewer blank spaces aren't necessarily easier, though; long "stacks," or clues that build without breaks, can be extremely difficulty to fill in, because they often have to resort to unfamiliar letter combinations to function.

[19] In a family home video, my brother is perfectly capable of "reading" the words, but most of the letter combinations do not adhere to anything that would resemble correct English morphology combination. He, however, did get "FOX." Synesthetes with grapheme-color association—that is, those who relate a particular color to a particular letter of the alphabet in their minds—who were raised with a certain set of Fisher-Price alphabet magnets frequently have their synesthetic alphabets cued to those colors.

[20] Gen. 6:8: "And Noah found grace"; "Grace" and "Noah" are anagrams in Hebrew.

[21] Marcel Danesi, *The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2002), 51.

In the third century AD, the Roman emperor Caracalla prescribed that malaria sufferers wear a magical amulet containing the word "Abracadabra" written in a descending triangle:[22]

A - B - R - A - C - A - D - A - B - R - A
A - B - R - A - C - A - D - A - B - R
A - B - R - A - C - A - D - A - B
A - B - R - A - C - A - D - A
A - B - R - A - C - A - D
A - B - R - A - C - A
A - B - R - A - C
A - B - R - A
A - B - R
A - B
A

The clue that leads to the solution of a puzzle has also been part of logic and language for millennia. Figuring out clues to solve a puzzle is a basic narrative structure. Riddles are ubiquitous throughout ancient and modern cultures; a riddle is, essentially, a clue that requires a solution. Samson, the Biblical Nazarite of prodigious strength, wagered an impossible riddle to the Philistines—*Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet*—referring to an answer that could not be guessed from the clue itself[23]. In the Old Testament story of Susanna and the Elders, Daniel cross-examines witnesses to reveal a false account. In *Oedipus Rex*, the title character discovers the truth of his birth through questioning. Hamlet uses evidence to reveal the full nature of Claudius's treachery.

A clue is a ball of yarn. It came to mean "that which points the way" because of the Greek myth of the labyrinth: Theseus uses a ball of yarn, which Ariadne had given him, to find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth. In the mid-nineteenth century, writers used the

[22] Hugh Chisolm, ed. "Abracadabra," *Encyclopedia Britannica,* 11th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1910).

[23] Bees and a hive in the corpse of a lion. Samson's riddle is a neck riddle, that is, one with a solution that requires knowledge external to the riddle itself.

clue as a way to untangle a narrative; a story ends in a denouement, or un-knotting, that resolves the knot of the plot. Many clues, in stories and in life, were made of cloth.[24]

Detective fiction first emerged as a popular literary genre in the mid-nineteenth century. Edgar Allan Poe's 1841 short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is widely considered to be the first detective story. The detective soon thereafter became a staple figure in real-life British and American police forces. In 1887, the first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, was published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, a yearly paperback magazine, after being rejected many times. Originally, the work received little attention: *The Sign of Four*, the second Holmes novel, was published to the mildest of fanfare in 1890. But this indifference soon changed. In July 1891, *The Strand*, a new monthly magazine, published the first Holmes short story, "A Scandal in Bohemia." Readership soared. When *The Strand* serialized *The Hound of the Baskervilles* from 1901-1902, subscriptions increased by thirty thousand; people lined up around the block of the magazine's offices to get the next installment. What made Holmes Holmes—what made Sherlock so popular amid the glut of detective fiction at the turn of the twentieth century—was his use of the clue to put together the pieces of the puzzle.[25] And what made Doyle's writing about Holmes so addictive was the sense that all of the aspects of the case were baked[26] into the story: we, too, can solve the puzzle (provided, of course, that we have Holmes's astute intellectual prowess and hyper-sensitive powers of observation).

The late nineteenth century also saw a boom in popular interest in acrostics and word games. The double acrostic, or an acrostic that contains words running down both

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[24] Kate Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher: The Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 68.

[25] Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1: Mar. 2000, 207-227.

[26] 221b Baked.

sides of the text, became popular in the eighteen-fifties; Queen Victoria was very fond of double acrostics, even constructing one herself.[27] In 1865, Lewis Carroll published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which was an immediate commercial success; Alice-mania continues to the present. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was a revision of an 1864 manuscript called *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* that Carroll wrote for Alice Liddell. The revision from the 1864 to the 1865 version adds most of the puzzles and wordplay to the original story, which was a more straightforward dream narrative. Word games might not have been the only element that attracted readers to Alice, but playing with language has become an indelible part of Alice's world. Carroll also captivated the Victorian imagination through his popularization of word games like a proto version of Scrabble and his "doublets," or word ladders that change one letter at a time to transform one word into another.

Not only did *The Strand* regularly publish Holmes and other popular detective fiction, it was also known for its puzzles and brain-teasers, printed in a regular column called "Perplexities." The clue and wordplay became physically bound together.

*

Since their inception, crosswords have been perceived as timeless. We can imagine Augustus and Livia quibbling over XVI-descendum in a *crux verborum*, or off-duty monks crafting elaborate cryptics in the margins of medieval manuscripts. Hints of a crossword begin to appear in the nineteenth century. The phrase "cross word puzzle" appears as early as 1862 in the children's magazine *Our Young Folks*, and in the 1890s, an Italian magazine printed a word square with clues titled "Per passare il tempe" (To pass the time). A 1924 article in Britain's *Tamworth Herald* about crossword puzzles in America posits that the

[27] Queen Victoria's "Windsor Enigma" brings coals to Newcastle: The left-hand side of the acrostic reads NEWCASTLE down the page, while the right-hand side, if you read from top to bottom, reads COAL MINES. Gregg Hecimovich, *Puzzling the Reader: Riddles in Nineteenth-Century British Literature.* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2008), 17.

pastime has been around since at least the Civil War.[28] But the puzzle that soon became known as the crossword first appeared at a specific time and place: December 21, 1913, in the *New York World*.

1913-1942: This Is Not A Toy!

I. FUN and the *New York World*

The *New York World* began publication in 1860. Each issue cost a penny. Originally, the newspaper was pro-Lincoln, but when a consortium of Democrats bought the publication, it turned anti- on a dime. In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln accused editor Manton Marble of publishing a forged report from the President that called for more men to join the Union army.[29] Marble was arrested, and the paper shut down for several days. Throughout the 1870s, the *World* limped along as a propaganda rag for whichever railroad owned it at that time, and it continued to puff along until 1883, when famed publisher Joseph Pulitzer bought the operation. In an aggressive circulation-boosting campaign, Pulitzer pumped the paper full of news, entertainment, cartoons, and yellow journalism, transforming the *World* into one of the most popular publications in the country, and the first in America to reach over one million subscribers daily.[30] Pulitzer hired popular reporters like Nellie Bly, who performed such gonzo stunts as traveling around the world in seventy-two days to best Phineas Fogg's famed eighty. In 1890, the *World* triumphantly moved its offices into the brand-new, eighteen-story, gold-domed *New York World* Building, then the tallest office building in the world. The skyscraper gleamed next to City Hall on Park Row at

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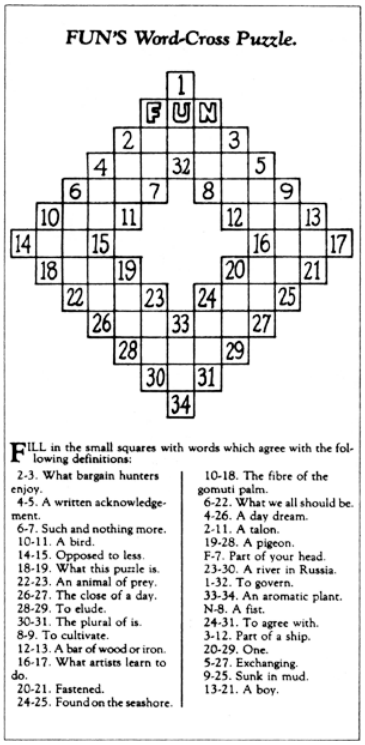
[28] Roger Millington, *The Strange World of the Crossword* (London: M J & Hobbs, 1974), 20.

[29] "Manton Marble, Publicist, Dead. Editor and Owner of the New York World from 1862 to 1876 Dies in England at 82. Noted Political Writer. His Famous 'Letter to Abraham Lincoln' Followed President's Suspension of His Newspaper. His Letter to President Lincoln." *New York Times*, 25 Jul. 1917.

[30] Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy: The Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels* (New York: Fantagraphics Books, 2017), 31.

the bottom tip of Manhattan. The *World* grew known for its lavish visual spreads. In 1899, the *World* became the first paper to have a color supplement, and its cartoon department, though small, was legendary.

By December 1913, Arthur Wynne was in charge of the *World*'s "FUN" section, a component of the paper's elaborate, colored Sunday supplement. Wynne was born on June 22, 1891, in Liverpool, England. His father, George, was the editor of the local *Liverpool Mercury*. When Wynne was nineteen, he emigrated to Pittsburgh, where he took a job on the *Pittsburgh Press* and played violin in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Soon, Wynne moved to New York and joined the staff of the *New York World*, where he eventually found himself at the helm of "FUN." For the 1913 Christmas edition of the *World*, Wynne was in a jam: he had to fill space, but had nothing to fill it with. He'd been instructed to add more puzzles to "FUN," and Wynne, in desperation, turned his writer's block into a grid, a diamond-shaped interlocking set of squares flanked by clues that ran differently across and down. "FUN's Word-Cross Puzzle" instructed readers, "Fill in the small squares with words which agree with the following definitions." The crossword conceit—here are clues, here is a grid, go forth and fill the grid with the answers to these clues—was born.



FUN'S Word-Cross Puzzle.

FILL in the small squares with words which agree with the following definitions:

2-3. What bargain hunters enjoy.
4-5. A written acknowledgement.
6-7. Such and nothing more.
10-11. A bird.
14-15. Opposed to less.
18-19. What this puzzle is.
22-23. An animal of prey.
26-27. The close of a day.
28-29. To elude.
30-31. The plural of is.
8-9. To cultivate.
12-13. A bar of wood or iron.
16-17. What artists learn to do.
20-21. Fastened.
24-25. Found on the seashore.
10-18. The fibre of the gomuti palm.
6-22. What we all should be.
4-26. A day dream.
2-11. A talon.
19-28. A pigeon.
F-7. Part of your head.
23-30. A river in Russia.
1-32. To govern.
33-34. An aromatic plant.
N-8. A fist.
24-31. To agree with.
3-12. Part of a ship.
20-29. One.
5-27. Exchanging.
9-25. Sunk in mud.
13-21. A boy.

Figure 2. "FUN'S Word-Cross Puzzle," Arthur Wynne, 1913.

Wynne's Word-Cross looks like a modern crossword, with obvious differences. It's a diamond, not a square, and rather than black spaces throughout, there's one concentrated blank in the middle, like a doughnut hole. Rather than separating the clues into across and down, Wynne listed clues by giving their beginning and ending squares.

Wynne's puzzle doesn't deploy pyrotechnic layers of wordplay. The clues proceed as fairly straightforward definitions; none of them ask the reader to solve a riddle, or decode an acrostic, or undo a pun to arrive at the solution. Ambiguity is on the level of information rather than imagination: "A bird" (DOVE) for example, could have any number of solutions, but this puzzle is only looking for flying animals, not, say, jailbirds or stool pigeons. Most clues are fairly generic. Many of the clues establish a bond between the cluer and the solver, a wink from Wynne to us: "What we should all be," for example (MORAL),

or, "What this puzzle is" (HARD). The puzzle also repeats itself: "A pigeon," like "A bird," is also DOVE. Some require extremely esoteric knowledge—"The fibre of the gomuti palm" (DOH) would likely be impossible for most non-botanists, particularly since the gomuti is far more common in Indonesia than Manhattan—so filling in the puzzle relies not only on the reader's capacity to get the clues via the definitions alone, but on the simultaneous ability to deduce the answer from corresponding letters in the grid.

Part of the ingenuity of Wynne's Word-Cross is that it isn't original it all: Wynne's genius isn't to reinvent the wheel, but to move the needle precisely enough. Victorian newspapers and magazines frequently featured word squares that challenged readers to fill in blanks with words that read the same horizontally and vertically; a simple example might be the following:

OFF
FOE
FED

Wynne freely acknowledged that his word-cross did not come to him *sui generis*. He based the puzzle on similar word puzzles that had been published in children's newspapers in England. The popular children's magazine *St. Nicholas* had regularly been publishing acrostics and word puzzles since the eighteen-eighties. A "Riddle Box" from the February 1905 issue of *St. Nicholas* features not only a word game with clues and a diamond-shaped diagram, but also a "cross-word enigma," a riddle that asks readers to tease out a word from a rhyming poem of cryptic clues. And the proto-crossword wasn't limited to English. In 1890, Italian journalist Giuseppe Airolodi introduced a four-by-four word game printed with a grid, with the goal to create a word square. The September 1904 edition of the *People's Home Journal* features a blended square, or five word squares that interlock at the corners; the blended squares do have criss-crossed elements, the blank grid isn't printed, and solvers must

recreate the grid for themselves to fill in, and thus the puzzle is not a proper crossword. But Wynne's crossword is the first that incorporates crossed words directly on the page with blocked-out squares, pushing beyond the natural limitations of the word square and creating a much more flexible, and expandable, game. Wynne took advantage of advances in twentieth-century printing technology that made it easier to print large grids in the newspaper itself. Rather than posing a problem and asking readers to draw their own grids or write the answers elsewhere, Wynne's puzzle provides the empty squares, inviting the reader to engage directly with the puzzle right in the newspaper. If music comes to life in the spaces between the notes, the crossword became the crossword because of the gaps in the puzzle.

Each week, Wynne printed a new puzzle of this word-crossed type in the *World*. A typographical error two weeks after Wynne's original Word-Cross crossed the title's two words, suggesting that readers "Find the Missing Cross Words," and the following week, the paper presented the puzzle under the heading "Fun's Cross-Word Puzzle." Eventually, the hyphen disappeared, as did the capital letters, and the Cross-Word became the crossword. The trend of disappearing hyphens isn't unique to the crossword: the early twentieth century saw many words that were once hyphenated become either two separate words or compounds (*to-day*, *ice-cream*, *bumble-bee*)[31]. Cross-Word, like Xerox or Band-Aid, shifted from becoming descriptive of a certain kind of word game in one particular paper to the generic name for the puzzle itself.

Gossip columns, classifieds, detective stories, rebuses, advertisements, and other layers of subcutaneous information insulated FUN from the rest of the *World*. (A full-page ad in January 1914 proclaims, LET US MAKE YOU FAT. By March, another

[31] David Crystal, *Making a Point: The Persnickety Story of English Punctuation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 264.

advertisement, in exactly the same location, declared, FAT IS DANGEROUS.) Readers soon began to submit their own crossword puzzles to the paper. The grids were usually diamonds, but erratic in size and shape. No black squares interrupted the white squares, as is typical in crosswords today. Mostly, Wynne used diamond-shaped grids, but the shapes were not standardized: in January 1915, for example, one week's grid was in the shape of an F; the next week, a U; and the following week, an N. "That spells FUN for every one of FUN's puzzle solvers," wrote Wynne.

Wynne was not subtle about the aim of his puzzle page. The first Word-Cross already has one answer filled in—FUN—so that even readers who did not go to the trouble of filling out the rest of the grid would be cued that this was a FUN activity. FUN serves the double purpose of being the name of the puzzle section of the paper and the effect that that section of the paper is intended to produce. The title "FUN'S CROSS WORD PUZZLE" suggests FUN as a demigod, bestowing fun in crossword form from the land of fun. FUN seems to speak through the headnote that Wynne provides for each puzzle: though the constructor or source of inspiration is recognized, the only consistent force on the page is the presence of the figure of FUN, overlord of the puzzle. The brand adds another ritual dimension to the nature of solving. Crossworders are a coterie, filling in the same grid with your remote fellow cohort, week after week. Already in 1915, Wynne imagined his readers as a loyal club who turned to FUN religiously. Once you're a crossworder, you're in the club.

Wynne's diamond grew as big as the Ritz. The crossword immediately became a regular fixture of the *New York World*. Wynne also introduced black squares into his symmetrical rows and column, which gave the puzzles clear units of negative space and allowed for more varied grids. Wynne tried to patent the crossword, but the *World* refused to foot this bill, and the crossword remained open for all to use. In 1920, it cost thirty-five

dollars to file and issue a patent, and a typical patent lawyer's fee would have been about seventy dollars.[32]

After constructing the *World*'s first seven crosswords himself, Wynne, in Tom Sawyer fashion, suggested to his readers that it was more difficult to create than to solve a crossword, prompting a surplus of submissions.[33] In February 1914, a Mrs. M. B. Wood became the first constructor given a byline.

Each week, Wynne provided a brief headnote that introduced the puzzle and provided its genesis. On March 7, 1915, Wynne painted a picture for his readers of FUN's offices in the crossword deluge, his desk a Noah's ark in the flood: "The editor of FUN receives an average of twenty-five cross-words every day from readers. Considering that only one cross-word is published per week you can possibly imagine what the office of FUN is beginning to look like. Everywhere your eyes rest on boxes, barrels and crates, each one filled with cross-word puzzles patiently awaiting publication. However, the editor of FUN hopes to use them all in time. The puzzle editor has kindly figured out that the present supply will last until the second week in December, 2100."[34] Wynne's system became the prototype for the editor-constructor model that would become standard for most papers. The *New York Times,* for instance, still relies on freelance submissions, where veterans and rookies alike go through the same process of sending their puzzles for acceptance or rejection to the editor. It might seem surprising that Wynne was deluged from the onset,

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[32] "First Deficiency Appropriation Bill, Fiscal Year 1920," Hearings Before Subcommittee of House Committee Appropriations, Sixty-Sixth Congress, First Session (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 431.

[33] Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, Bobby Schweizer, *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 85.

[34] Helene Horovec, "A Crossword Hall-of-Famer: Margaret Farrar," *CROSSW_RD Magazine*, Nov/Dec 1992, 5. Current editors face the same problem. In 2018, editor Will Shortz at the *New York Times* has a backlog of three to four months, at least; indeed, puzzle gestation and human gestation can be roughly identical. One constructor told me that he knew he had a puzzle coming out later that year for Halloween. It was March.

given that the learning curve for creating a puzzle is high even today, and solvers in the initial days lacked both generations of examples and grid-generating software. But crosswords at the onset had far fewer regulations than the puzzles printed in most newspapers today: there were no rules about the puzzle's size, its shape, its symmetry, types of clues, repeated words, or conventions of the form. Any word-forming letters sorted within a grid-like space that was dotted with blank squares could be rightfully called a crossword in the early days.

The word-cross Wynne had jury-rigged in desperation would soon become his albatross. As the puzzle persisted, week after week, Wynne soon grew both bored with his creation and overwhelmed by its popularity. He was a careless editor, and the puzzles were constantly riddled with errors: clues that didn't match their definitions, answers leading to nowhere. Readers badgered Wynne, complaining that his oversights were making the puzzles unsolvable, but their complaints exploded on the occasional weeks that FUN didn't publish a puzzle: "The only thing I give a hang about on your page or in your Sunday magazine is the crossword," wrote one solver.[35]

In 1920, Wynne recruited Margaret Petherbridge, a family friend and secretary for the *World*'s Sunday editor, John O'Hara Cosgrave, to oversee the crossword. Petherbridge, an aspiring journalist, was at first indifferent to the job. She selected grids based on their aesthetic appeal, not on any principle of solvability; indeed, she didn't even bother to solve the puzzles before they ran in the paper. But in 1922, the *World* poached legendary and influential columnist writer Franklin P. Adams from the *New York Tribune*, and put Adams in an office near Petherbridge's. Adams, it turned out, was also a devoted cruciverbalist, and he was both addicted to the *World*'s crosswords and furious that they stank. On Monday

[35] Horovec, "A Crossword Hall-of-Famer," 5.

mornings, Adams would march into Petherbridge's office, slap the previous day's crossword on her desk, point out each error, and meticulously chew her out.[36]

At first, Petherbridge was incensed, but when she sat down to solve one of the puzzles she'd been setting for weeks, she felt the agony she'd unknowingly been inflicting on her readers: definitions left out, wrong numbering, warped definitions, words, she said, "that had no right to be dragged out of their native obscurity." Petherbridge converted on the spot. With her left hand on a dictionary and her right in the air, she took an oath: Margaret Petherbridge's crosswords would be, as she declared, "the essence of perfection." She insisted on doing every puzzle herself, establishing a firm Golden Rule principle: "If it be not fair to me / What care I how fair it be?"[37] The crossword had found its guardian angel, and the puzzle blossomed from an untended, weedy corner of the paper to one of its most meticulously groomed sections.

Wynne gladly abdicated all crossword duties to Petherbridge, who put her journalism career on hold and became the *World*'s official puzzle editor. Wynne soon moved on not only from the crossword but from the *World* itself. He spent most of his career working for papers owned by print mogul William Randolph Hearst, chief rival of Joseph Pulitzer, who owned the *World*.

After jumping ship to the Hearst empire, Wynne finally won his attempt to patent a word game, but it wasn't his word-cross. In 1925, Wynne and King Features Syndicate, Hearst's distribution conglomerate for puzzles, comic strips, and other games, successfully patented Wynne's "step-word puzzle." The game is a word ladder: starting with two words at

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[36] T. Campbell, *On Crosswords: Thoughts, Studies, Facts and Snark about a 100-Year-Old Pastime* (New York: Koehler Books, 2013), 11.

[37] Horovec, "A Crossword Hall-of-Famer," 5. Farrar adapts her mantra from 17th-century poet George Wither's "Shall I Wasting in Despair: "If she be not so to me, / What care I how fair she be?"

either end of the ladder, the player has to find a chain of other words that links the two, in which every word in the chain changes by exactly one letter. (To turn cat into dog: CAT→ COT → DOT → DOG.) Lewis Carroll, not Wynne, invented the word ladder; Nabokov calls the game "word golf" when his narrator plays it in *Pale Fire*. Wynne's patent is not for the idea, but for "a cross word puzzle card embodying a multiple series of stepped enclosures for the reception of letters, there being the same number of enclosures in each horizontal series, each series having thereon a letter to form a basic letter of the word to be placed in said series, each series to receive letters to form progressively from the top to the bottom series, different words."[38] Wynne tried to sneak in the phrase "cross word," but though he won the step-word, he knew he'd lost the war: the technology of the crossword was free for the world to use as it pleased.

The puzzle spread quickly. The *Pittsburgh Press* began publishing a crossword in 1916; the *Boston Globe*, 1917. Clare Briggs, a prominent newspaper comic strip artist, had several recurring cartoon features, including "Movie of a Man" sequences; in October 1922, Briggs drew "Movie of Man Doing a Crossword Puzzle," which features a beleaguered solver, cigar clutched in his mouth, pen clutched in his hand, who grows increasingly bombastic in his frustration: "87 Across 'Northern Sea Bird' !!??!?!!? Northern Sea Bird??? Hmm-m-m-m Starts With an 'M' Second Letter is 'U'…" He looks up the answer, crows in triumph, and returns to the grid, his smoke spiral chugging in a tidy line again rather than a frustrated squiggle.[39]

In 1919, a fourteen-year-old named Ernie Bushmiller arrived at the *New York World* as a new copy boy. Born and raised in the Bronx, the son of a German immigrant and an

[38] Arthur Wynne, "Puzzle or Game," US 1558071, United States Patent and Trademark Office, 20 Oct. 1925.

[39] "Clare Briggs," *Lambiek Comiclopedia*, 2016.

Irish immigrant, Bushmiller attended Theodore Roosevelt High School for six months before his self-described "lucky break": quitting and joining the *World.* (Teen Bushmiller's other career option was becoming a cabin boy for the Cunard steamship line,[40] at which thought he later shuddered: "Thank God! Otherwise I'd probably be a steward on the *Queen Mary*!")[41] Every morning, Bushmiller rode the Lexington Avenue IRT for nearly an hour from the Bronx to Brooklyn Bridge-City Hall, where he exited the subway and entered the palace on 63 Park Row. Bushmiller spent as much time as possible hanging around the art department, raptly watching the cartoonists at work. Copy-boy-to-comic-strip was not an uncommon career trajectory at the *World;* indeed, many of the men in the art room had started in Bushmiller's shoes. By 1920, Bushmiller had been promoted to art department assistant, where he was given menial assignments such as lettering word balloons and laying out the weekly crossword puzzle. Bushmiller proved excellent at this latter task, and, at age fifteen, Bushmiller became the *World*'s expert crossword puzzle line drawer.[42]

Bushmiller got jazzier with his grids week by week. One grid had a faux-woodcut finish, as though Dürer had been resurrected to print the crossword; another grid looked as though he'd drawn it with a calligraphy pen. The thickness of his lines waxed and waned over the weeks.[43] Sometimes, the black squares were solid black, but sometimes striped, and sometimes speckled.

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[40] Karasik and Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy*, 31.

[41] More on the *Queen Mary* later.

[42] Though one might imagine a certain nostalgia for other tactile aspects of newspaper life—linotype machines, slugs, those massive scrolls—it's hard to picture anything but a unanimous appreciation for the digitization of the grid. Though the creator still has to figure out where the blank squares occur in any given grid, it's infinitely easier to get a more perfect grid than any human could ever draw simply with a few strokes of a computer program, and there's nothing inherent about a hand-drawn grid that connects with the sanctity of the puzzle, one way or the other.

[43] Karasik and Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy*, 35.

What Bushmiller really wanted to do was draw comics, but at the *World*, the way to do that was by working his way up through puzzles. Bushmiller earned his reputation through his reliably excellent draftsmanship of the crossword, and he was put in charge of *Ingenuities*, the World's puzzle page, where he began to insert his own signature touches when he could: the margins, for instance, were an excellent place for the Bushmiller characters to romp. But the crossword was still Bushmiller's bread and butter, and when, in 1924, the *World* bumped its crossword frequency from weekly to daily, Bushmiller continued to be in charge of the grids.

Though the crossword was his livelihood, not his passion, the crosswords gave Bushmiller daily training for the logic as well as aesthetic patterns that would, in a decade, come to define his signature comic strip, *Nancy*. Nancy began as a nosy little sidekick in *Fritzi Ritz*, a strip about a flapper, but by 1938, she had overtaken the cartoon, and the strip was renamed. As cartoonists and scholars Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden write in their exhaustive study of the strip, *How to Read Nancy,* "Comics are primarily *neither* drawing nor writing, but they are, in some respects, like simple machines, designed to communicate swiftly and efficiently and with all working parts laid bare."[44] Replace "comics" with "crosswords" and the analysis holds just as acutely.

Like the crossword grid, *Nancy* is immediately recognizable on the page. The *American Heritage Dictionary* illustrates its definition of "comic strip" with a sample from *Nancy*,[45] probably because the style is so distinct and so graphically simple: even in thumbnail size on the margins of tissue-thin paper, *Nancy* looks like *Nancy*. Bushmiller's training in the

[44] Karasik and Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy*, 23.

[45] Karasik and Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy*, 22.

grid is essential to his ability to make *Nancy* operate as not only a series of drawings, but as a fully functioning world. Karasik and Newgarden write:

> To say that *Nancy* is a simple gag strip about a simple-minded slot-nosed kid is to miss the point completely. Nancy only appears to be simple at a casual glance. Like architect Mies van der Rohe, the simplicity is a carefully designed function of a complex amalgam of formal rules laid out by the designer. To look at Bushmiller as an architect is entirely appropriate, for Nancy is, in a sense, a blueprint for a comic strip. Walls, floors, rocks, trees, ice-cream cones, motion lines, midgets and principals are carefully positioned with no need for further embellishment. And they are laid out with one purpose in mind—to get the gag across. Minimalist? Formalist? Structuralist? Cartoonist![46]

Through his crossword grids, Bushmiller practiced repetition with a difference day after day. He also practiced creating a clean, bold, black-and-white style that flattened the world into juxtaposed squares. Like the crossword, *Nancy* is at once endlessly varied and infinitely repetitive, a world that repeats itself day after day yet always begins anew. There are recurring characters and types of events, but *Nancy*, unlike more soap-opera style strips, has no narrative arcs; each day is the same Nancy but a new *Nancy*.

II. "They Lead Such Puzzling Lives": The Crossword Craze

The crossword grew more and more popular through the 1920s, but it didn't hit full-blown craze status until 1924. In January of that year, Richard Simon, an aspiring publisher on the verge of starting his own company, went to dinner with his Aunt Wixie, who asked him where she might find a book of crossword puzzles: a niece had become addicted to the things, she said, and she wanted to buy her a collection. Simon brought up the conversation to his business partner, Lincoln Schuster, and they realized that no crossword collection existed.

Simon and Schuster were still in the process of forming their fledgling house, and the crossword collection would be their first foray into the world as publishers. The pair were

[46] Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik, "How to Read Nancy," in *The Best of Ernie Bushmiller's* Nancy by Brian Walker (New York: Henry Holt, 1986).

afraid that the book would make their new publishing house seem trivial, and that it would flop, so they decided they'd release the book under the moniker "Plaza Publishing," a dummy imprint named after their telephone exchange.[47]

The pair hired Margaret Petherbridge—who now worked with two co-editors on the crossword, Prosper Buranelli and F. Gregory Hartswick—and paid them twenty-five dollars per puzzle to assemble a book-length collection from their backlist. Simon and Schuster also hired Bushmiller to draw the squares and number the grids. Simon and Schuster attached a sharpened pencil to every book and priced the volume at $1.35; in April 1924, Plaza Publishing released *The Cross Word Puzzle Book*. Simon and Schuster took out a one-inch ad in the *New York World* that they hoped would be a self-fulfilling prophecy:

> 1921—Coué
> 1922—Mah Jong
> 1923—Bananas
> 1924—THE CROSS WORD PUZZLE BOOK

The Cross Word Book, just as Simon and Schuster had aggressively prognosticated, was a hit, selling 350,000 copies in its first year. Every morning for weeks, the door to the offices of Simon & Schuster was physically blocked with mailed-in orders for the new book.[48] For *The Cross Word Book*'s second edition, priced at twenty-five cents, one distributor alone ordered 250,000 copies, the highest book order to date ever placed in the United States.[49]

As the *Cross Word Puzzle Book*'s sales exploded, the *World*'s puzzle offerings expanded, including not only a daily crossword but more word puzzles, rebuses, and logic games. In November 1924, in addition to drawing the daily crossword, Bushmiller was

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[47] Alan Connor, *Two Girls, One on Each Knee (7): The Puzzling, Playful World of the Crossword* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 143.

[48] Herbert Mitgang, "Margaret Farrar, 87, Editor of Crossword Puzzles, Dies," *New York Times*, 12 Jun. 1984.

[49] Alan Connor, *Two Girls, One on Each Knee*, 144.

placed in charge of "Red Magic," the *World*'s bigger and bolder puzzle supplement, ostensibly edited by Harry Houdini.

The public wanted crosswords, and the *World* wanted Bushmiller to draw them. Bushmiller realized that his livelihood could be his inspiration: if people were so nuts about puzzles, presumably they'd want to read about puzzles in other forms. In the spring of 1925, Bushmiller slipped his new strip into "Red Magic": "Cross Word Cal," the adventures of a mild-mannered cruciverbalist. One strip, for instance, features Cross Word Cal as a frustrated cabbie idling for passengers when a pedestrian tells him to get a "checkered cab." Cal dives into a stack of newspapers, cuts out the crossword from each one, and spackles them to his car; in the final panel, and he's zipping along, a fare in the backseat and people frantically running alongside him to hail his cab.[50]

When Mildred Jaklon, the Chicago *Tribune*'s society editor, heard about the new crossword craze, she thought that the *Tribune* should join the trend, so she created a puzzle and sold it to the paper for twenty-five dollars. The *Tribune* published Jaklon's crossword in September 1924, pronouncing that the nation had caught "cross-word-puzzle-itis" and unless "you're a babe in the arms or a doddering idiot you're certain to fall victim."[51] On October 8, 1924, the *Tribune* published a story about Mary Zaba, a woman filing for divorce on the grounds that her husband wasted his time doing crossword puzzles instead of working, and in December of that year, the paper ran advertisements for the Chicago Evening American's crossword contest. In 1929, Jaklon spearheaded a crossword-puzzle contest for the *Tribune*, with a $5,000 prize; the contest proved so popular that the paper

[50] Karasik and Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy*, 42.

[51] Stephan Benzkofer, "How Crosswords got in Tribune's Cross Hairs," *Chicago Tribune*, 29 Dec. 2013.

instituted a regular daily puzzle, with Jaklon as its editor, a role she would hold for the next forty years.[52]

By the end of 1924, crosswords were everywhere. Gelett Burgess, most famously the author of the "Purple Cow" (I never saw a Purple Cow / I never hope to see one / But I can tell you anyhow / I'd rather see than be one), became a crossword setter for the *New York World*.[53] When his first puzzle was published in November 1924, Burgess self-mockingly commemorated the event:

> The fans they chew their pencils
> The fans they beat their wives
> They look up words for extinct birds
> They lead such puzzling lives.[54]

Crossword enthusiasts wore their devotion on their sleeves with grid-pattern dresses, jackets, jewelry, and special wristbands with tiny dictionaries strapped to them, like proto-Fitbits. One solver who was an equally zealous sewer created a quilt featuring 48 separate embroidered crossword puzzles, one for each state in the union. The University of Kentucky offered a class on crossword puzzles. Puzzlers danced to "Crossword Puzzle Blues" and "Cross Word Mama You Puzzle Me (But Papa's Gonna Figure You Out)." Solvers could eat their words with Cross-word Cream Biscuits, made by Huntley and Palmers, Ltd. In 1925, Broadway triple threat Elsie Janis wrote, directed, and starred in *Puzzles of 1925*, a revue that featured a crossword sanatorium for puzzlers whose obsession had driven them to insanity.[55]

Commuters loved crosswords. In late 1924, a man on a train from New York to Boston did a survey of his fellow passengers and found that at least sixty percent were doing

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[52] Benzkofer, "How Crosswords Got in Tribune's Cross Hairs."

[53] A.N. Wilson, *After the Victorians: The Decline of Britain in the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 290.

[54] Connor, *Two Girls, One on Each Knee*.

[55] More on crossword-related claustrophobic madness later.

the crossword. The B&O railroad company placed dictionaries in train cars for the convenience of crossword-crazed commuters. Not to be outdone, the Pennsylvania Railroad printed crosswords on the menus. (Train stops frequently served as a stopwatch for solvers: as a reader to the *Times of London* wrote, her father returned home one day and announced, "Ah, it was a tough one today, took me between Barming and Swanley to complete." Dad has mastered the art of crossword faux-self-deprecation; at only six stops, Barming to Swanley—East Malling, West Malling, Borough Green & Wrotham, Kemsing, Otford, and Swanley—is about half an hour, a perfectly respectable time.) Even the Cross yielded to the crossword's power. One Sunday, a Reverend George McElween in Pittsburgh set up a large blackboard with a crossword grid in front of his pulpit, and told his congregation to solve it before service began; the solved puzzle contained the text for his sermon. Members of a church in Atlantic City distributed crosswords in pamphlets to promote a missionary campaign.[56]

In February 1925, Walt Disney released the animated short film "Alice Solves the Puzzle," the fifteenth of his "Alice Comedies," a series in which a live action little girl named Alice[57] and her animated cat Julius have adventures in an animated landscape. Everything in the film is animated except for Alice. When the film opens, our heroine, a cherubic little girl with a dark bob and a fringe, is frowning over a crossword puzzle. "Little Alice – never had a cross word, not even with a puzzle," says a title slide. Crumpled puzzle grids are scattered on the floor around Alice, and two large volumes labeled "SYNONYMS" and "DICTIONARY" are stacked next to her on the desk. "Three Letter Word" pops up in a thought bubble above Alice's head. CAT, she thinks. RAT. BAT. (Why not "FUN" is

[56] Millington, *The Strange World of the Crossword,* 20.

[57] The Lewis Carroll crossover craze is hardly hidden: the first film in this series is called "Alice's Wonderland."

unclear.) Finally, at the end of the film, we see her grid for the first time, and we arrive at the solution: THE END. As long as the crossword remains unsolved, we can enter Alice's head and follow her through her journey; when the puzzle ends, the sympathetic fusion between viewer and Alice ends, too. Alice must finish the puzzle to find herself.

Contests of all stripes were big in the 1920s, particularly ones that involved some sort of grueling feat of discipline for a useless skill: dance marathons; flagpole sitting; egg-eating races; yo-yo competitions; gum-chewing contests and "noun-and-verb rodeos," in which the prize went to the fastest speaker.[58] Puzzle contests, a popular subset of the contest mentality, merged seamlessly with the crossword craze. Newspapers and magazines ran crossword contests for cash, turning the crossword from not only a game you played against yourself to while away a commute, but a way to show off your intellect with your friends and family, and, as an added incentive, turn a profit from your prowess.

Crosswords had already diverted readers from novels to grids, and crossword contests wreaked special havoc on booksellers and libraries. Bookstores blamed crosswords for lagging sales of novels, but had trouble keeping reference books such as dictionaries and glossaries in stock. Traditional volumes moldered as readers dove into puzzles. A 1924 Reuters report from Canada claims, "Cross-word puzzles and the radio have been given as the reason for a marked decline during the recent months in the demand for books at the Ottawa Public Library."[59] But the facilities themselves were far from abandoned; indeed, as in the case of bookstores, demand for dictionaries and encyclopedias overwhelmed reading rooms. The *Western Times* of England reported in February 1925 that the damage to the

[58] Not unlike some high-school debating competitions, in which students get points for both content of speech and speed of articulation.

[59] Quoted in Alan Connor, "Crosswords: The Meow Meow of the 1920s," Crossword blog, *The Guardian*, 15 Dec. 2011.

dictionaries in Wimbledon's library, due to people trying to solve the crossword, "has been so great that the committee has withdrawn all the volumes."[60] Dulwich Library began blacking out white squares in the crosswords to prevent people from hogging newspapers for hours on end: too many people were loitering to pore over the puzzle, so the library had to take action to make the puzzle less addictive. The annual report of the New York Public Library for 1924 tartly details the puzzle's impact:

> The latest craze to strike libraries is the crossword puzzle. There is much to be said for such puzzles as recreation, in the hospital, or on an ocean voyage or a railway journey, or as a cure for insomnia, but when prizes are offered for solutions, and the puzzle 'fans' swarm to the dictionaries and encyclopedias so as to drive away readers and students who need these books in their daily work, can there be any doubt of the library's duty to protect its legitimate readers?[61]

Crossword tournaments were a natural extension of the crossword contests that almost immediately permeated publications. In January 1925, an intercollegiate crossword puzzle tournament was held at the Hotel Roosevelt in New York. The contest was divided by gender: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and the City College of New York on the men's side; Wellesley, Smith, Vassar, and Bryn Mawr on the women's. Wellesley and Yale won their respective divisions, and the championship round was neck and neck, but when the judges scrutinized the grids, Wellesley had made a mistake in one of the final words, and Yale emerged victorious.[62]

By 1925, the crossword was everywhere. The first issue of the *New Yorker*, published February 21, 1925, features a "Jottings About Town" column by "Busybody," with bite-

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[60] Quoted in Alan Connor, "Crosswords: The Meow Meow of the 1920s."

[61] *Report of the New York Library for 1924*, New York Public Library, 1925, 24. As Elaine Scarry points out, the crossword puzzle was seen by libraries and bookstores as nearly the same kind of threat as Amazon: the new technology threatening to change drastically the way people used texts.

[62] The *Harvard Crimson*'s baleful reporting notes that Yale easily beat Harvard, but that the wife of a Harvard man, who was on the Bryn Mawr team, "distinguished herself especially, even in defeat." "Yale Adds Another Sprig to Its Athletic Laurels by Taking Intercollegiate Crossword Puzzle Championship," *The Harvard Crimson*, 6 Jan. 1925.

sized aphoristic remarks about life in the city. One of Busybody's signature humorous tics is the overstatement of the obvious or banal as a faux-profound observation. "A richly dressed woman left a badly torn umbrella at a Broadway repair shop late Tuesday evening. The umbrella was recovered." "Many people may be interested to know that the real name of Edna Ferber, the writer, is Edna Ferber." Busybody further notes, "Judging from the number of solvers in the subway and 'L' trains, the crossword puzzle bids fair to become a fad with New Yorkers."[63] The joke is not the revelation, but the commonplace: the crossword has become so prevalent that to proclaim its ubiquity is akin to "discovering" that people seem to enjoy drinking coffee in the morning.

In 1926, Margaret Petherbridge married John Farrar, of the publishing firm Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and stepped down from her duties at the *World*, but she remained puzzle editor at Simon & Schuster, a position she would hold for the rest of her life. Simon & Schuster's series of crossword puzzle books became the country's longest continually published book series.[64] Once she'd put her two children to bed in her apartment on the Upper East Side, Margaret Farrar worked late into the night on puzzles. She made the best of becoming a forced night owl: "After the phone stopped ringing," she claimed, "was the best time to think up that magical definition."[65] She never returned to journalism.

New publications embraced the crossword to gain readers quickly. In 1924, the newly formed *New York Herald Tribune*, a merger of the *Herald* and the *Tribune*, immediately embraced the crossword, with a daily puzzle column and a yearly crossword tournament. The *Herald Tribune* helped publicize the world's first crossword ingénue: Ruth von Phul.

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[63] Busybody, "Jottings About Town," *The New Yorker,* 21 Feb. 1925, 30.

[64] Alan Connor, *Two Girls, One on Each Knee*, 144.

[65] Horovec, "A Crossword Hall-of-Famer," 7.

Born in 1904 and raised in Manhattan, von Phul became the fastest competitive crossworder in America when, at age twenty, she won the inaugural 1924 *New York Herald Tribune*'s National All Comers Cross Word Tournament. Von Phul routinely set the bogey time for crosswords, meaning that newspapers published her time next to the puzzle so readers would have a point of comparison.[66] Von Phul appeared on the cover of *The Cross Word Puzzle Magazine* in March 1925, and in April of that year, the *New Yorker* featured von Phul in a "Who's Who"-style column called "The Hour Glass." Yet von Phul didn't make a career out of crosswords. In 1979, in a new profile in the *New Yorker,* von Phul said, "I loathe the *New York Times* Sunday puzzle. Too easy, for one thing. And then all that cuteness. Ugh." She became a scholar of James Joyce. James Joyce declared, proudly, of *Ulysses*, "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality."[67]As a Joycean, von Phul used her prodigal and prodigious cryptographic eye to bear on the text, trawling unexpected finds from the deep archives and teasing out unpredictable connections. Von Phul discovers that in a 1930 letter to a "Miss Weaver," Joyce describes an early draft of *Finnegans Wake II*: "The second time he maunders off into sentimental poetry of what I actually wrote at the age of nine: 'My cot alas that dear old shady home where oft in youthful sport I played upon thy verdant grassy fields all day or lingered for a moment in thy bosom shade etc etc etc etc.'" Von Phul notes that Joyce, never notorious for scrupulous verity in

[66] Ben Tausig, *The Curious History of the Crossword: 100 Puzzles from Then and Now* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2013), 54.

[67] Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, Revised Edition (New York: Oxford UP, 1982), 521.

his self-portraiture, might have manufactured both the poem and its origin story for the purpose of its eventual evolution in *Finnegans Wake*.[68]

As a Joycean, von Phul shines when she is making the kinds of associations that make an excellent crossword solver: a simultaneous joy in sleuthing for persnickety details with the instinct to juxtapose highbrow and lowbrow connections. Von Phul's most delightful contribution to Joycean studies is her discovery of the connection between James Joyce and John Lennon. "Yellow matter custard / Dripping from a dead dog's eye /Crabalocker fishwife, pornographic priestess/ Boy, you've been a naughty girl / You let your knickers down," a lyric from Lennon's "I Am the Walrus," is, per von Phul, "a lapidary memento of *Ulysses*." Von Phul links Lennon's yellow matter custard to Stephen's description of Parisian cocottes, "their mouths yellowed with the *pus* of *flan breton*."[69] Von Phul writes: "In transmuting the 'pus' ingested by bitch mouths into matter exuded from a dead dog's eye, Lennon is skillfully using one of Joyce's habitual devices, the reversed mirror image, and I suspect is quite consciously alluding to *Ulysses*, and to Stephen, blind, jaundiced with envy, dead with existential or neurotic angst."[70]

But von Phul did not entirely shut herself off from the games world. In December 1973, *Harper's* invited readers to submit original haiku to "Hip Haiku," that month's contest in the magazine's "Game" column. Ruth von Phul's entry was one of the runners-up and is printed in the February 1974 issue:

> What a paradox
> Is an unbending person
> Who cannot unbend.[71]

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[68] Ruth von Phul, "Notes: A Sketch of the Artist as Self-Parodist," *James Joyce Quarterly* 3.1 (Fall 1965): 62.

[69]Quoted in Ruth von Phul, "Not a Leetle Beetle" (FW 417.3-4), *James Joyce Quarterly* 6.7 (Spring 1969): 265-266.

[70] von Phul, "Not a Leetle Beetle," 265.

[71] Quoted in W.D. Lewis, "Game: Curious Criticism," *Harper's* (Feb. 1974): 94.

III. Crossing the Pond: England and the Crossword Craze

During the first half of the eighteenth century, London had entered in a state of constant, extreme drunkenness: gin was cheap, and people were getting soused on the regular. Parliament passed a series of escalating censures against gin, culminating in the Gin Act of 1751, which prohibited distillers from selling to unlicensed merchants. The Act also encouraged men to drink more beer.[72] In 1751, to promote the Gin Act, English artist William Hogarth issued two contrasting prints, *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane*. *Beer Street* depicts a prosperous and plump citizenry: "Here all is joyous and thriving. Industry and jollity go hand in hand."[73] *Gin Lane*, in contrast, features a boozy mother letting her child slip from her arms, crowds rioting behind her. The only thriving business on Gin Lane is the pawnbroker, whose cross-shaped sign dangles like an overblown hangnail and blocks the view of the church, becoming the steeple from our perspective. Denizens of Gin Lane worship a different god.

For British hand-wringers nearly three hundred years later, crosswords had become the new gin. America, the papers warned, had turned into a wasteland of crossword addicts, wasting precious time on this wanton activity. In a December 1924 article entitled "AN ENSLAVED AMERICA," the *Tamworth Herald* describes the crossword as an epidemic plaguing America. "In a few short weeks it has grown from the pastime of a few ingenious idlers into a national institution: a menace because it is making devastating inroads on the working hours of every rank of society." The article escalades towards a conclusion of

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[72] In 1995, fast-food chain Chick-fil-A used a similar tactic, with an ad campaign depicting cows painting a billboard encouraging passerby to "EAT MOR CHIKIN."

[73] William Hogarth, "Remarks on various prints," *Anecdotes of William Hogarth, Written By Himself: With Essays on His Life and Genius* (London: J.B. Nichols and Son, 1833), 64.

rhapsodic melancholy: "Many years ago, a misguided person thought to beautify some ugly stretches of shallow southern rivers by planting them with wild hyacinths. The plan succeeded beyond all expectation. The hyacinths spread with amazing rapidity, choking the rivers at last and putting the authorities to enormous expense to clear out their channels again. The cross-word puzzle threatens to be the wild hyacinth of American industry."[74]

The *Herald* luxuriates in its hysteria over the hyacinths.[75] There's a prurient delight to these hysteria-documenting articles, which thoroughly enjoy their doomsday depiction of all America trapped in crossword hell. The reader gets to feel immensely superior, envisioning an entire nation trapped in a grid, like fish in a tank, frenetically swimming around and around but getting nowhere. Pity the bettas across the pond.

The rhetoric of British backlash against the crossword stems from a firm moralistic streak. To be an upstanding member of society, the newspapers admonish readers, you should be productive and should be attempting to maximize your time to its full potential. "AN ENSLAVED AMERICA" is sandwiched between "A FEW COOKING HINTS" and an article on missionary schools.

Time and industry are equated with morality in these anti-crossword articles. Just as faddish as the crossword itself is the hand-wringing of its naysayers, with the same bossy-cum-savior mentality that, nearly a century later, would propel Lynne Truss's grammar gotcha book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* to the *New York Times* bestseller list. The real sin of the

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[74] "Cross-Word Puzzles: An Enslaved America," *Tamworth Herald*, 27 Dec. 1924.

[75] Cultivating a combination of mass superiority and mass fear is neither a new nor a unique tactic, and it persists in popular culture. In Meredith Wilson's 1957 musical *The Music Man*, when salesman Harold Hill comes to River City, Iowa, the first thing he tells the good citizens of that town is that the latest fad to hit their town—the pool hall—is a time-wasting, morally decrepit menace: "Well, ya got trouble my friend, I say, trouble right here in River City… The first big step on the road to deg-ra-day – I say, first: medicinal wine from a teaspoon, then beer from a bottle! … Trouble with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for Pool… Friends, the idle brain is the devil's playground! Trouble! …That game with the fifteen numbered balls is the devil's tool." (Meredith Wilson, *The Music Man*, 1957.)

crossword is that it flagrantly advertises its uselessness. Those hours filled by filling in squares are hours of work, but useless work, and therefore all the more poignant for being squandered, since they could be squeezed into something useful. The *Herald* calculates these lost hours: "It is estimated," the article suggests, "that not less than 10,000,000 people have caught the infection, and that they spend half an hour daily, on the average, with the insidious pastime; that is to say 5,000,000 hours daily of the American people's time—most of nominally working hours—are being used up in unprofitable trifling."[76] (How the author calculated these numbers, or how much time the *Herald* took to arrive at these statistics, is not revealed.)

The crossword is the perfect symbol of wasted time in modern life. The crossword apes productivity: you're greeted with an empty grid and told to fill it in, which, on the surface of it, is the gold standard of what work is. But the labor that the crossword requires is purely a leisure activity, not one of industry. The crossword demands the same attention and focus as productive labor, yet solving the puzzle produces nothing new. In fact, as soon as the crossword is completed, it's rendered useless. The crossword does not need its solvers—all the answers are already there. And the ability to do the crossword requires a work day with a certain amount, and certain type, of non-work time scheduled into it. The farm hand who must rise before sundown and works in the field until dusk might have a break in his day, but he's less likely to have a newspaper and pencil readily on hand than the commuter taking the subway from the Bronx to Wall Street, with time to fill that can't be productive time, yet is still part of the working day. The crossword gears the commuter up to produce: it creates the simulacrum of work without the product of industry. Just as putting

[76] "Cross-Word Puzzles: An Enslaved America."

on a suit puts the person in the body of a worker, the crossword puts his mind in the grid of industry.

However, moral guilt crossed with a superiority complex is also a cocktail for curiosity. The crossword became more appealing than ever for its shock factor. Suddenly, a mildly boring pastime has the power and allure of a dangerous demon. Who could resist the pull of this illicit, addictive pursuit?

British publishers also capitalized on this hysterical language to promote the crossword. The preface to the 1924 British edition of *The Cross Word Puzzle Book* gave instructions as officious as a surgeon general's warning:

> THIS IS NOT A TOY!
> To Fathers, Mothers, Uncles and Aunts:
>
> It is just possible you may pick this book up thinking of it as a present for younger children. Will you please do us this one favour—in the name of humanity? Just solve half a dozen of the puzzles, taken at random, *yourself*, before you pass it on. It's a small thing to ask—you'll be able to go back to your work in about a week.[77]

By 1925, the crossword hyacinth had spread across Britain. Established leisure activities were being abandoned to pore over the puzzle. The *Nottingham Evening Post* announced, "The picture theaters are also complaining that the crosswords keep people at home. They get immersed in a problem and forget all about Gloria Swanson, Lillian Gish, and the other stars of the film constellation." (In an earlier decade, the very films heralded as pinnacles of society were the scourges of culture, drawing people away from more virtuous pursuits with their addictive allure. The new kid on the block is always blamed.)

British libraries, like American ones, were pestered with dictionary-seekers, and these weren't the only resources taxed. Zookeepers in Nottingham reported being beleaguered by questions about crosswordese species: "What is a word three letters meaning a female swan?

[77] Tony Augarde, *The Oxford Guide to Word Games*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003, 60.

What is a female kangaroo, or a fragile creature in six letters ending in TO?"[78] Ernie Bushmiller mocks the zoological crossword craze in a May 1925 *Cross Word Cal* strip, where the animals are labeled by crossword definition: a fluffy "Three Letter Dromaeus" pokes out its beak from behind the bars, a "Three Letter Boidae" coils around a branch, and a "Five Letter Bactrianus" (though we can only see one of its humps) leans its head through the bars to nibble from a bucket of "Alphabet Soup." The entire world had been re-tooled a reference book for the crossword.[79]

British superiority as expressed through the medium of the crossword shifted, from stoic resistance of the grid's temptation to muscular proclamations of intellect. British crosswords were harder to solve, and therefore more virtuous endeavors. Early crosswords frequently featured Latin in the clues: a 1929 "Virgil Bi-Millenary Crossword" in the *Listener* featured macaronic clues that not only leapt between English and Latin, but embedded further puzzles into the Latin clues. (50-Down: *Et patrio Andromachen iterum —— marito [anag. of first five letters only]*.)[80] Virtue shifted from stoic resistance to difficulty. When the *Times* of London finally caved to popular demand and began publishing its daily crossword in 1930, the paper published a Latin puzzle that same year, to reassure its readers that all hell had not broken loose.

1942-1993: The Sunday Breakfast Test

IV. The Crossword Goes To War

[78] Quoted in Connor, *Two Girls, One on Each Knee*, 110.

[79] In the car as a child, I used to play the Alphabet Game: you had to find the letters of the alphabet, in order, somewhere outside the window, shouting out the letter and site upon sighting. The person who could get from A to Z fastest was the winner. The world gained entirely new meaning. Dairy Queen, Quizno's, and Jiffy Lube became shrines.

[80] Alan Connor, "The return of Latin," Crossword blog, *The Guardian*, 19 Oct. 2015.

The Eccentric[81] Club of London, or the Illustrious Society of Eccentrics, or The Everlasting Society of Eccentrics, was founded in the 1780s. The club's motto, "Nil nisi bonum," is an abbreviation of the Latin phrase "De mortuis nil nisi bonum dicendum": say nothing if not good of the dead. Its members have included playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan; Lord Melbourne, Queen Victoria's mentor; professional snooker player Joe Davis; Lord Edward John Barrington Douglas-Scott-Montagu, founder of the National Motor Museum and a key figure in British decriminalization of homosexuality; and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. In 1914, the Club moved into the Dieudonné's Hotel near St. James's Square, a stone's throw from the Ritz and Fortnum & Mason, where its members convened until 1986, when the Club was forced to liquidate. In the mid-2000s, with the financial support of Prince Philip, enthusiasts reincarnated the Club and revived such traditions as the Friday the Thirteenth feast, in which members parade under ladders, unfurl umbrellas indoors, and embrace black cats. Throughout its history, the Club has never come to a clear definition of what it means to be "eccentric": bedazzled fezes, tartan slacks, and the propensity to burst into song at any moment are common features among members at its gatherings, but the club's eccentricities can veer far from your garden-variety self-stylized oddball.

In late 1941, the *Telegraph* posed a challenge to its crossword solvers from a "Mr. W. A. J. Gavin, Chairman of the Eccentric Club." Gavin, the *Telegraph* reported, had sent a £100 bank note to the *Telegraph*, and if a reader succeeded in solving the puzzle under controlled conditions in fewer than twelve minutes, the newspaper was authorized to donate that bank

[81] Nearly all *New York Times* clues for ECCENTRIC give "odd" or "an odd fellow," though Eileen Lexau's 2010 puzzle clued it as "Like a three-dollar bill."

note to the "Eccentric Club Minesweepers' Fund."[82] For the past few years, solvers had been writing letters haranguing *Telegraph* that the crossword had gotten too easy, and Gavin's test appeared to be a gauntlet for complainers—if solvers found the *Telegraph*'s puzzle such a snooze, they'd have to prove their prowess.

Stanley Sedgewick, a managing clerk for a London accounting firm, was intrigued. He regularly did crossword to pass the time on his commute and had become fairly expert, so he decided to take up the challenge. On a chilly Saturday in January 1942, Sedgewick joined over two-dozen aspiring speed solvers in the *Telegraph* newsroom on Fleet Street. The contestants sat at individual tables facing a panel of judges that included the newspaper editor, a timekeeper, and Chairman W. A. J. Gavin himself. The editor pulled a sealed envelope from a stack containing the puzzles due to appear the following week. Five contestants beat the deadline, although the fastest was disqualified for misspelling a word. The quickest correct solver, a Mr. Hawes of Dagenham, received a cigarette lighter as his trophy. Sedgewick was one word short. He was a bit deflated, as he'd just that day completed the puzzle in the train to Waterloo in under twelve minutes, but the Chairman treated the contestants to tea afterwards in his dining room, and Sedgewick returned home, thinking nothing more of the event than as a pleasant way to spend a Saturday afternoon.

But the Eccentric Club was a red herring. "Imagine my surprise," Sedgewick later recalled, "when several weeks later I received a letter marked 'Confidential' inviting me, as a consequence of taking part in 'the *Daily Telegraph* Crossword Time Test,' to make an appointment to see Colonel Nicholls of the General Staff who 'would very much like to see

[82] Alan Connor, *Two Girls, One on Each Knee*, 100.

you on a matter of national importance.'"[83] Colonel Nicholls was the head of MI8, a branch of the military intelligence service. Sedgewick was told, he said, that "chaps with twisted brains like mine might be suitable for a particular type of work as a contribution to the war effort."[84] Along with a small coterie of fellow puzzle experts, Sedgewick was first sent to a "spy school" in Bedford and then to Bletchley Park, home of the British wartime code-breaking operations. Only years later, long after World War II was over, did Sedgewick learn that the "German weather codes" he'd worked on had been a crucial part of cracking the Enigma. The operation was so top-secret that even the puzzlers themselves weren't allowed to know what they were solving.

Many children's books riff on the fantasy of an exam that, unbeknownst to the test-taker, is actually a trial for something entirely different. In Trenton Lee Stewart's 2007 novel *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, Reynard[85] Muldoon sees an advertisement in the newspaper directing "gifted children looking for special opportunities" to present themselves at an office building to take a series of tests, which consist of hidden puzzles and codes: the children have to figure out the solution, but first discern what the puzzle is, then what the puzzle is asking them to do. (They're also tests of honor: Muldoon is offered the right answers early on in the process, but he refuses the opportunity to cheat, making him doubly qualified to serve.) Muldoon and three other eccentric, brainy children pass the test and are promptly sequestered to a hidden area, where they meet a Mr. Benedict, who tells them that cryptic messages are being broadcast into people's brainwaves by nefarious forces. The

[83] Michael Smith, *The Secrets of Station X: How the Bletchley Park Codebreakers Helped Win the War* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2011), Kindle ed.

[84] Smith, *The Secrets of Station X*.

[85] *Reynard*, French, "fox." Foxes have a special literary affinity for puzzles and have been associated with cleverness for centuries. The anthropomorphic fox Reynard is the main character in an allegorical cycle of literary fables from the Middle Ages; Reynard is wily and not always ethical, and his adventures consists of him deceiving both the good guys and the bad guys.

quartet become spies to crack the codes, infiltrate the evildoers, and save the day—and all because they are expert puzzlers.

But if crosswords could find heroes, they could also find traitors.

*

Leonard Dawe was an English amateur footballer most notorious for taking the field while wearing glasses. Born and raised in west London, Dawe played football in Cambridge, and upon graduating in 1912, signed on Southampton's amateur team. In 1912, Dawe was a member of the squad representing the United Kingdom in that summer's Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden. The team took the gold for the second consecutive year, though Dawe himself didn't actually play in the Games. Dawe did make one appearance for the English amateur national football team in 1912, when he played for England against Ireland.[86] Bespectacled Dawe found more success as a schoolteacher than a footballer. He taught at several prestigious institutions before settling down as the headmaster of the Strand School, a boy's grammar school in London. Dawe, a firm but fair disciplinarian, became known as "moneybags" because of his initials (LSD = pounds, shillings, and pence).[87]

Dawe was also part of the first generation of British crossword setters. In 1925, he began publishing puzzles for the *Telegraph*'s then-nascent crossword, and over the following four decades, he would contribute nearly five thousand puzzles to the paper.[88] Dawe is one of the first setters to use cryptic clues, that is, clues that rely on wordplay rather than straight definitions. Under Dawe's watch, the puzzle became more standardized and rigorous, with

[86] England lost, 2-3.

[87] Forty years later, a quartet of Liverpudlians would make the initials LSD more famous for different reasons; "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" does not refer to coinage.

[88] Alan Connor, "Leonard Dawe: the man behind the infamous D-Day crosswords," Crossword blog, *The Guardian*, 26 May 2014.

more elegant clues and no more two-word answers.[89] Sometimes, Dawe would leave a blank crossword grid on a table and invite students to fill in the blanks with words, both as a mental exercise for the pupils and a convenient pre-software mechanism to help save Dawe some time. Once the students had figured out the letters in the grid, Dawe would set clues and send it to the paper.

During World War II, the Strand School was evacuated to Surrey, next door to a camp of American and Canadian troops. Whenever they were on breaks, the schoolboys crept as close as they could to the fences to eavesdrop on the soldiers. In the months leading up to D-Day, "GOLD," "SWORD," and "JUNO," three codenames for beaches assigned to Allied troops, popped up in various *Telegraph* puzzles, but since these are relatively common words, and they were spaced fairly far apart, intelligence offices chalked the concurrence up to chance. But in May 1944, more unusual codewords started appearing in the puzzle: "UTAH" and "OMAHA," two more beaches; "MULBERRY," the operation's floating harbors; "NEPTUNE," the naval-assault stage; and "OVERLORD," the name for D-Day itself. Dawe's clues had nothing to do with military operations; OMAHA, for example, was "Red Indian on the Missouri," and OVERLORD appeared with the clue "—but some bigwig like this has stolen some of it at times." The coincidence was now too strong for the government to overlook, though Dawe had no idea that he was being a disloyal citizen.

MI5 officials arrived at the bewildered Dawe's house and made him burn the notebooks that he used to work on crossword clues. Dawe nearly lost his job, but MI5 couldn't find any evidence that Dawe was using the crossword to leak information to the enemy, so they didn't arrest him. Dawe soon figured out that the codenames had appeared

[89] Connor, "Leonard Dawe."

thanks to his co-setters. In 1984, Ronald French, one of Dawe's former students, told the *Telegraph* that he'd helped fill the grid with the code names. He, like many students at the school, hung out around the soldiers' camp, and he filed notebooks with any stray words and bits of information that they could glean. "I told [Dawe] all I knew and he asked to see my notebooks," said French. "He was horrified and said the books must be burned at once. He made me swear on the Bible I would tell no one about it. I have kept that oath until now."[90]

V. The *New York Times* and the Crossword: From Mania to Microaddiction

When the crossword craze was sweeping American newsstands in the 1920s, one publication rejected the puzzle flat-out: the *New York Times*. On November 17, 1924, the *New York Times* ran an opinion column describing the latest crime for which one can get put to death in Bolshevist Russia: "economic espionage," or, the knowledge at any time in one's life of any economic precepts other than those of the Communist party. In the same section, a column entitled "A Familiar Form of Madness," presents another danger of the modern era: the crossword puzzle. The crossword, the *Times* sniffs, is the latest psychological tinker toy to satisfy the masses.

> Scarcely recovered from the form of temporary madness that made so many people pay enormous prices for mahjong sets, about the same persons now are committing the same sinful waste in the utterly futile finding of words the letter of which will fit into a prearranged pattern, more or less complex.[91] This is not a game at all, and it hardly can be called a sport; it merely is a new utilization of leisure by those for whom it otherwise would be empty and tedious.[92]

In March of 1925, the *Times* proclaimed, "Fortunately, the question of whether the puzzles are beneficial or harmful is in no urgent need of an answer. The craze evidently is dying out

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[90] Tom Rowley, "Who Put Secret 'D-Day clues' in the 'Telegraph' Crossword?," *The Telegraph*, 27 Apr. 2014.

[91] The author must not be immune to the crossword, as the writer seems to be highly familiar with the form: this half-sentence description of the crossword itself is admirably succinct yet precise.

[92] "Topics of the Times: A Familiar Form of Madness," Editorial, *New York Times*, 17 Nov. 1924.

fast and in a few months it will be forgotten."[93] By 1929, the *Times* was still trying to quash the crossword: "The cross-word puzzle, it seems, has gone the way of all fads," claims an article entitled "All About the Insidious Game of Anagrams."[94]

Readers disagreed. In a letter to the editor from Friday, February 1, 1930, the inaugural date of the *Times* of London's crossword puzzle, a Richard H. Tingley of Port Chester, New York writes, "From the viewpoint of one who has constructed and published more than 2,000 of these mental teasers, and is still making them at the rate of seven a week, I can assure you that there is little warrant for your editorial assumption that their end is near. The craze—the fad—stage has passed, but there are still people numbering into the millions who look for their daily cross-word puzzle as regularly as for the weather predictions, and who would be sorely disappointed should the supply be cut off."[95] Tingley's view was hardly non-biased, but he was also not wrong. The puzzle had gone mainstream: the crossword was a staple part of culture, not a passing trend. By 1941, the *Times* was the last major metropolitan daily newspaper in America that didn't offer a crossword puzzle.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the Japanese Navy Air Service launched its military strike against the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. On December 18, 1941, Lester Markel, the Sunday editor of the *Times*, sent a memo to its publisher, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, that read, "We ought to proceed with the puzzle, especially in view of the fact it is possible there will now be bleak blackout hours – or if not that then certainly a need for relaxation of some kind or other."[96] Attached to the memo was a note from Margaret

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[93] "Topics of the Times: Sees Harm, Not Education," Editorial, *New York Times,* 10 Mar. 1925.

[94] "All About the Insidious Game of Anagrams," *New York Times*, 29 Dec. 1929.

[95] Richard H. Tingley, Letter, "Cross-Word 'Brain Teasers' Still Hold Their Popularity," *New York Times*, 1 Feb. 1930.

[96] "75 Years of Crosswords," *New York Times*, 14 Feb. 2017.

Petherbridge Farrar: "I don't think I have to sell you on the increased demand for this type of pastime in an increasingly worried world," she wrote to Sulzberger. "You can't think of your troubles while solving a crossword.[97]" But Sulzberger had already fallen: a crossword addict himself, he'd taken to surreptitiously buying the *New York Herald Tribune* to solve its puzzle. It was time. Why skulk in stealth to pay your competitors when you could print money?

The *Times* hired Farrar as its puzzle editor, and the paper's crossword made its debut on Sunday, February 15, 1942. The first crossword, by Charles Erlenkotter, entitled "Headlines and Footnotes," is a 23-by-23 grid—an unusual size, since the Sunday puzzle would soon come to be standardized at 21-by-21—and the average word length is 5.36; there are fourteen nine-letter answers, which are the longest entries.[98] Clues are fairly dry, more dictionary than whimsy, and, reflecting the rest of the *Times*, have a militaristic bent: "Famous one-eyed general (WAVELL); "Flier lost in Pacific, 1937" (AMELIA); "Native Hindu in a British Army" (SEPOY).

The *Times* heralded the occasion in almost clinical fashion, with a scrupulous lack of fanfare: "Beginning today, *The New York Times* inaugurates a puzzle page. There will be two puzzles each Sunday—one with a flavor of current events and general information, and one varied in theme, ranging from puzzles in a lighter vein, like today's smaller one, to diagramless puzzles of a general nature."[99] The tone is more obituary than FUN, as though the *Times* is issuing a prescription to its readers, not a game.

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[97] "75 Years of Crosswords," *New York Times*, 14 Feb. 2017.

[98] "Headliners and Footnotes," *XWord Info*, ed. Jim Horne and Jeff Chen, xwordinfo.com.

[99] Horovec, "A Crossword Hall-of-Famer," 6.

If the *Times* was going to have a crossword, this was going to be a serious puzzle that reflected the rest of the paper. The *Times* would not lower itself to the base crossword, but raise the technology of the crossword to the standard of the *Times*. The *Times* began running a weekly puzzle every Sunday, and, in 1950, launched its daily puzzle, a 15x15 little brother to the Sunday grid. At first, the *Times* crossword was more of a news quiz than word game, but as the puzzle evolved, Farrar let the style loosen up: even though the *Times* wanted its puzzle to be dignified, the crossword was built as an escape from the news, not simply a casserole of the rest of the paper rehashed into a grid.

Under Farrar's guidance, the *Times* crossword became the gold standard for crosswords in America; like Xerox or Kleenex, the *New York Times* crossword is often thought of not as a brand but as the thing itself. Farrar's mandates around grid design, which she arrived at by trial and error through the need to develop some sort of weeding-out rubric to wade through submissions, became industry standards for American-style crosswords.

- Boxes in a single answer have to be contiguous.
- Grids cannot contain unchecked squares; that is, all the white squares of a crossword puzzle must interlock, without singletons dangling into the void of black squares.
- No one- or two-letter answers. (Answers can contain one-letter and two-letter words, but they have to be part of a larger phrase.)
- Grids must have rotational symmetry: if you flip a crossword grid one hundred eighty degrees, it will be exactly the same pattern.
- A puzzle cannot have repeated words in the grid. Wynne's first word-cross, with its doubled DOVE, would never fly in the Farrar era.

- Diagrams must be a square, and must have an odd number of letters on each side, so that there is an exact center to the square. The standard *Times* daily puzzle size is 15x15 squares, and the Sunday puzzle is typically 21x21.
- Black squares should occupy no more the one-sixth of the total diagram.

In addition to architectural aesthetics for the grid itself, Farrar also instated regulations for the content of the clues and answers, which become a bit fuzzier.

- Answers should not be obscure.
- Clues do not have to be dictionary definitions.
- The crossword should pass the Sunday Breakfast Test; that is, its clues and answers should be appropriate for all ages, from Baby Johnny to Grandma Janie. Its clues should also not stray into emotionally or psychologically uncomfortable terrain. If one must use CANCER, a useful combination of vowels and consonants, the clue should always refer to the Tropic Of, or the sign of the zodiac, not to the disease.
- Crossword answers can be more than one word.

For each of Farrar's rules, there are, of course, exceptions. One April Fools' Day puzzle repeated every word in the grid. A puzzle about the Guggenheim museum mimicked the spiral shape of the museum, and constructors often experiment with bilateral instead of rotational symmetry. Before Will Shortz's editorial era, the *Times* had not published any non-square puzzles. But even the Shortzian exceptions are still exceptions, and each rebel has a cause. For example, Jacob Stulberg's 16x15 puzzle of Wednesday, May 4, 2016, embeds the phrase "INTO EACH LIFE SOME RAIN MUST FALL" diagonally across the grid, and the pattern requires an extra column.

Farrar remained at the helm of the *Times* crossword until 1969, when she turned seventy-two and, under the *Times*'s then-mandatory retirement policy, had to step down from her post.

Under Farrar's leadership, the crossword mellowed from mania to microaddiction. Fans were no longer the wife-beating fanatics of Burgess's 1924 ditty, sacrificing sanity in the heat of the moment. The craze had calmed, but the climax was no less intense. Crosswords had cooled from a lust-filled affair into a domestic partner. A craze, by its nature, disrupts your daily patterns, but typically as a one-off event: it's not part of a typical routine to sit atop a flagpole for hours, or race people to eat the most eggs in the fastest time, or storm the New York Public Library's reference room to jockey against patrons all thumbing through the same encyclopedia for a river in Africa. A full-blown addiction becomes the thing around which you organize your life on a daily basis, often furtively, and often to the detriment of your mental and physical well-being: I'll pawn my watch so I can win that and more back at roulette, I'll slip out to the bar while the others are sleeping.

The crossword provides an outlet for microaddiction: a ritual that helps you organize your daily thoughts and activities so that they fit into the overall structure of your life. The regularity of the crossword—its size, its shape, its location in the daily paper—enables this use of the grid as an organizing principle that helps you maintain control from within. As a microaddiction, the crossword isn't the thing that takes over your day: it's a habit that becomes a lynchpin around which your mental and physical activities can settle. By both creating a problem and solving it, the crossword gives the hit of an addiction—the drama, the itch, the cathartic high—but is structurally subordinate to the rest of the day. The microaddiction is a workaround: it's the thing you feel you need to do, and you crave doing it, but you crave it because it's a ritual that stabilizes you. Whether your life is overly chaotic

or overly controlled, the crossword offers a sweet spot of a safe, firm, supported, structured grip, where there are definite right answers, but they also are tantalizingly not offered to you immediately, so you have to put yourself through frustration to get there. The crossword provides relief, but just as critically, it provides an itch to scratch.

That's also why the crossword is so suited to a commute: it lets the mind take a mental commute, organizing the journey, but it's distinctly not the point. The commute creates a structure that gets you from Point A to Point B. The microaddiction of the crossword allows you to feel purposeful, even without a purpose. If you have a busy day and a commute that is dictated by others' schedules, the crossword gives a space of your own control. Conversely, if your day is adrift, the crossword provides the feeling of a purposeful commute, an action that you can point to and say, *I did that* –and then can happily discard. The *feeling* of the microaddiction is the product, not the thing produced itself. The crossword is a focus to quiet the other demons.

VI. The Cryptic Crossword

"There are crossword puzzles and crossword puzzles" declared Stephen Sondheim, the eminent composer, in a 1968 article for *New York* magazine, in which he gave American readers a primer in the art of the British-style cryptic crosswords. Sondheim wrote six cryptics for *New York* magazine, and they reveal many of the constructor's own predilections: "Does she stick on one note in La Boheme?"[100]; "Successor to The Sound of Music"[101]; "Entertain and wind again?"[102] Sondheim writes:

[100] MIMI (mi, mi)

[101] HEIR (air)

[102] REGALE (re-gale)

> To call the composer of a crossword an author may seem to be dignifying a gnat, but clues in a "British" crossword have many characteristics of a literary manner: cleverness, humor, even a pseudo-aphoristic grace. In the best puzzles, styles of clue-writing are distinctive, revealing special pockets of interest and small mannerisms, as in any prose style. The clues of the author who calls himself "Ximenes" in the London *Sunday Observer* are, to the eye of a puzzle fan, as different from those in, say, *The Manchester Guardian* as Wilde is from Maugham. But a "Bantu hartebeest" remains a "Bantu hartebeest" whether it's in *The New York Times* or *The Daily News*.[103]

The grand poobah of the cryptic set the hardest crosswords in the world while cross-legged in pajamas. Edward Powys Mathers was born in 1892 in Forest Hill, South London, to the son of a newspaper proprietor. Mathers attended Oxford and became a poet and translator; in 1923, he published a well-received translation of Jean-Charles Mardrus's French version of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Mathers was also an expert in detective fiction and reviewed many detective stories for the *Guardian*.[104] Mathers discovered crosswords in 1924, soon after puzzles crossed the ocean from America, but he was dissatisfied with the straightforward cluing style. In 1925, Mathers published a crossword in the Saturday *Westminster Gazette* under the name "Torquemada," the first Spanish Inquisitor General. Torquemada[105] was the first crossword compiler[106] to use entirely cryptic clues, that is, clues built on complex wordplay rather than definitions. In 1926, Mathers switched to the *Observer*, which published his crosswords until Mathers's death in 1939.[107] In a foreword to a collection of Torquemada puzzles, Mathers's widow created a romantic portrait of the great setter, composing in bed like Proust:

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[103] Stephen Sondheim, "How to Do a Real Crossword Puzzle, or, What's a Four-Letter Word for 'East Indian Bezel Nut' and Who Cares?", *New York Magazine*, 8 Apr. 1968.

[104] Emily Cleaver, "Torquemada and the Torturous Literary Puzzle," *Litro* Magazine, 26 Jun. 2010.

[105] While most American-style constructors use their real names, cryptic constructors nearly always write under a pen name.

[106] In America, a crossword's author is typically referred to as its "constructor," while in Britain, the terms "setter" and "compiler" are more common.

[107] John Halpern, *The Centenary of the Crossword: The Story of the World's Favourite Puzzle* (London: Andre Deutsch, 2013), 30.

> I see him sitting cross-legged in bed, with a puzzle in front of him, looking very like a somewhat relaxed Buddha, a cigarette between his fingers and eyes fixed in the distance - until something clicks and, with a contented smile or discontented shrug, he writes on the list in front of him, and ticks off the word in gaily coloured chalk. Or prowling around his shelves in baggy flannel trousers, his shirt open at the neck and sleeves rolled above the elbow, in search of a quotation through which he would lead his solvers to read or reread some favourite in verse or prose. Or sitting at a table in the living room, kitchen or garden, one ankle resting on the other knee, a hand hugging the foot, drawing marginal decorations in vari-coloured chalks while he broods on some uninspiring word.[108]

Mathers typically wrote his clues in verse forms and often created mini-narratives through the puzzles; one puzzle, for example, features clues in the form of knock-knock jokes. Mathers's clues favor literary or biblical references. Though his puzzles were notoriously fiendishly difficult, they also had a rabid fan base. One solver wrote in to the *Observer* to say that she'd memorized several of Mathers's rhyme puzzles by heart. The *Observer* offered a prize for the first three correct solutions received each week, and it typically received over seven thousand qualifying entries. Solvers from all corners of the globe—West Africa, India, Alaska—sent in solutions. Many solvers worked together, either in person or over the telephone.[109]

Upon Mathers's death, constructor D.S. Macnutt took over the *Observer*'s puzzle, writing under the pen name Ximenes, one of the original Torquemada's successors in the Inquisition. In 1966, Macnutt published *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword*, a style guide and rulebook for the elements that should be present in all good cryptic crosswords. Macnutt based his rules on the guidelines that Torquemada had laid down and passed on to him. For a clue to pass the Ximenean bar, it must be absolutely clean and precise in its ambiguity: the clue must provide some sort of deception that the reader must enter and actively decode, but the clue should also not provide the reader with inaccurate information. Macnutt is not afraid of wordplay thickets, but he prizes elegance and efficiency in cluing. The Rube

[108] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 153.

[109] Quoted in Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 153.

Goldberg machines he creates for the reader to arrive inevitably at a particular word might require twenty steps where two would do; but those extra eighteen hoops are what make the puzzle worth entering. Macnutt loathes cluing clichés or tics of compilers, and find himself bored with conventions: if a way of cluing a certain word does not feel fresh, it will not titillate the solver. There is not one logic that drives a Ximenean clue; on the contrary, Macnutt provides an astonishing array of ways of getting from A to B.

When I wrote to Sondheim in 2017, to ask if he were still involved with crosswords, he replied:

> Dear Ms. Raphel –
>
> Thank you for your letter. I don't have time to answer all your questions, but I can tell you the following:
>
> I became interested in cryptics because I subscribed (and still do) to the London Sunday Observer for its film, theater and literary criticisms. I entered the Ximenes competition for many years (never won, but got a number of Honorable Mentions). I even attended the dinner in honor of Derek MacNutt's thousandth puzzle in London. I then got interested in The Listener puzzles and did them with some regularity. I got to know Apex (i.e., Eric Chalkley) because he wrote me as a fan.
>
> I have no "crossword coterie," nor do I have a "routine." The only crosswords I still do (and only in the bathroom) are the ones in the Cryptic All-Stars books.
>
> I have no answers to your other questions, as they are too general, and crosswords are not a large part of my life. I am, however, proud that I introduced the cryptic to the general public in the United States. Prior to my contributions to New York Magazine, the only cryptics were those in a small-circulation publication called The Nation, and they were all versions of the London Times (no variations).
>
> Yours truly,
> [signed] Stephen Sondheim

Cryptic crosswords' most deeply enigmatic offshoots take such specialized skills that they foster rabid loyalty and intimacy. Apex,[110] a notorious cryptic constructor, constructed a Christmas cryptic (ApeXmas) every year, mailed to a select but devoted crew, including Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein. Just as intimate a tribute to cryptic crosswords occurred on a larger scale in December 2012, when Rev. John Galbraith Graham, a crossword constructor who wrote as Araucaria, broke the fourth wall through clues. The crossword was

[110] "Ape" "X," that is, ape-ing Ximenes.

introduced with the preamble "Araucaria has 18 down of the 19." 18-down read "Sign of growth (6)": Araucaria has CANCER. A longer preamble, which could be decoded once readers had filed in the grid, read:

> I have CANCER of the OESOPHAGUS; no CHEMOTHERAPY, just PALLIATIVE CARE; no NARCOTIC or STENT or MACMILLAN NURSE yet – plenty of MERRIMENT, though I wouldn't have chosen the timing.[111]

VII. Interregnum

When Margaret Farrar left the *New York Times* in 1969, Will Weng, the chief of the Metropolitan news desk, became the puzzle editor. A genial schoolteacher from Terre Haute, Indiana, Weng remained in this role until his retirement in 1978, and during his relatively brief decade-long reign, he maintained the puzzle in non-controversial status quo. Weng claimed that one of the main reasons he liked his job was that none of the highest executives at the *Times* did the puzzle, so he didn't face the scrutiny felt by his peers editing other sections. This laid-back, democratic spirit prevailed in the puzzles themselves. Even though the clues themselves might be tricky, barrier for entry is low, because the puzzles rely more heavily on wordplay and groaners than esoteric cultural knowledge.

If Farrar was the doyenne of the Sunday Breakfast Test, Weng was the master of the dad joke. Weng embraced gags, aiming for the clever twist rather than the wonkish factoid. Typical Weng-ish wags include answers such as EYELOVEU for "Optometrist's cherished alma mater"[112] and DELIVERED for "Removed a chicken part."[113] 1971's April Fools' Day puzzle sprinkles a phrase through the puzzle that turns out to be a commentary on the

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[111] Alan Connor, *Two Girls, One on Each Knee (7): The Puzzling, Playful World of the Crossword* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 37.

[112] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 18.

[113] "The New York Times Crossword, Tuesday, April 1, 1975," ed. Will Weng, xwordinfo.com.

puzzle itself: the clue for 1-Across reads "An old saw, with 31, 40, 46, 51, 57, 66 and 67 Across"; those answers, respectively, are "FOOL" "MEONCE" "SHAMEON" "THEE" "FOOL" "METWICE" "SHAME" "ONME."[114] The Weng aesthetic is less Woodstock and more Mister Roger's Neighborhood[115]: his puzzles are freewheeling in that puns and wordplay run rampant, but the formulae and essential crossword status quo that Farrar had set in motion remain firmly in place.

When Weng left, things changed—or, things stayed the same, but the crossword world changed.

In a 1966 interview with *Boy's Life*, the magazine of the *Boy Scouts of America*, Margaret Farrar is asked to describe some of her ace constructors. Nearly all of them, she says, have full-time careers and write their puzzles on the side. She cites Eugene Maleska of Creskill, New Jersey, a prominent figure in the New York City Department of Education, as one of her most prolific and reliable constructors. "He started in his teens," Farrar reports, "and now even his children are constructing puzzles."[116]

Born and raised in northern New Jersey, Maleska created his first puzzle in 1933, while an undergraduate at Montclair State University, to get the girl. From the beginning, Maleska showed a certain disregard for universal accessibility in his clueing style. His 1-

[114] "The New York Times Crossword, Thursday, April 1, 1971," ed. Will Weng, xwordinfo.com. Note that the puzzle flouts one of Farrar's rules—a puzzle should never use the same answer twice—but that this rule-flouting is the heart of the puzzle.

[115] Mister Roger's Neighborhood—the public-access children's television show in which Fred Rogers takes viewers on field trips and visits Make Believe, the puppet neighborhood-within-a-neighborhood—made its national debut in 1968.

[116] Alex Haley, "Crossword Puzzles," *Boy's Life*, Oct. 1966, 48.

Across, "Most beautiful girl on campus," led to JEAN, the co-ed Maleska was dating and would later marry.[117]

When Jean showed her roommate the romantic puzzles Maleska had been making for her, the roommate, a more pragmatic type, told Maleska that he could earn five dollars per puzzle if he published them professionally.[118] Maleska began submitting crosswords to the *New York Herald Tribune* (the *Times* did not yet have a puzzle), and received over forty rejections in two years, until the editor finally accepted one, and Maleska became a regular contributor. Maleska later learned that the editor suspected the newcomer of plagiarism because the grids that were coming from this unknown constructor were perfectly made, where normally, a rookie's puzzles would be riddled with errors—too many black squares, unkeyed clues, etc. Many of the puzzles Maleska initially saw rejected were later printed.[119]

After college, Maleska took a job as a Latin and English teacher in Manhattan and rose through the ranks of New York City's education administration, eventually becoming superintendent of a school district in the Bronx, but he continued to construct at a voluminous clip, and his aggressively clever puzzles appeared regularly in the *Times*. He invented forms such as the "Stepquote," which embedded a quotation diagonally throughout the puzzle. Maleska retired in 1973 from education, but continued to create puzzles, and his side life became his second career. When Weng stepped down in 1978, the *Times* hired Maleska to replace him. During Maleska's regime, mandatory age-based retirement at the *Times* ended. The crossword puzzle editor's tenure would now end with the death of the newspaper or the death of the editor, whichever came first.

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[117] James T. Barron, "Eugene T. Maleska, Crossword Editor, Dies at 77," *New York Times*, 5 Aug. 1993.

[118] Eugene Maleska, *A Pleasure In Words* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 10.

[119] Maleska, *A Pleasure In Words*, 384.

Weng had been a goofy but loveable master, with a penchant for the easy yuk. Maleska was a strict disciplinarian, and the puzzle became a test. Solving a Maleska-edited puzzle required a specific knowledge base, the kind most easily achieved in certain East Coast bastions of education. The puzzle under Maleska upbraided readers for not knowing arcane Victorian slang, or the Latin names of birds. Under Maleska, the *Times* puzzle became an exam, a litmus test of fuddy-duddy adroitness.

Maleska's *Times* crossword flew the flag of its breed of erudition proudly. To be able to solve a *Times* crossword meant knowing that you had to become fluent in very specific crossword language; once you were in the know, you could become part of the club, but you had to know what club you were joining. The veneer of democracy that pervaded Weng's puzzles changed to a proud hierarchy, and completing the crossword became conceived as a marker of a certain elite cultural status: largely white, upper-middle-class, groomed in the kind of education most easily achieved in ivy-covered fortresses of higher learning. Like any crossword, the puzzle under Maleska's reign requires a certain amount and kind of leisure time and space to complete, but the casual solver would find it difficult to drop into any Maleska puzzle. As crossword enthusiast Marc Romano writes in his memoir about the competitive crossword world, the name "Maleska" became a metonym of a certain cultural aspiration:

> If you were of a certain age or cultural snob or raised in or around New York City (or, ideally, all three), [Maleska] was your hero. You knew what to expect from the crossword that would appear on your doorstep the following morning, and you could be reasonably certain you'd eventually finish it. In a sense, consistently solving Maleska's puzzles made you an honorary New Yorker…[120]

Under Maleska, the *Times* grid shifted from garden to gate. The crossword was no longer a space for all but a threshold for a particular breed of elite solvers. If Farrar was the

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[120] Marc Romano, *Crossworld: One Man's Journey into America's Crossword Obsession* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), 6-7.

puzzle's guardian angel, and Weng its groundskeeper, Maleska became the *Times* crossword's gatekeeper. Farrar and Weng had established that the *Times* puzzle was the industry's gold standard. Maleska established the *Times* crossword as not only the standard but a status symbol.

VIII. The Oreo War

During Maleska's reign, a rebellion stirred. Crossword makers divided into the old guard, constructors who proudly rely on crosswordese, arcane trivia, and genteel puns; and a self-proclaimed "New Wave," who thought that crosswords should reflect the way people use language currently. Traditionalist Maura Jacobson, crossword constructor at *New York* magazine, exemplified the type of word play the old guard relied upon, with puns that easily sailed through the Sunday Breakfast Test. ("What results from embassy vaccinations? DIPLOMATIC IMMUNITY.")[121] Merl Reagle, in contrast, who wrote crosswords for papers such as the *LA Times* and the *San Francisco Examiner*, was a leader of the New Wave, with puzzles that regularly defied the old rules, such as one embedded "s-e-x" throughout the clues ("Expensive job for Jimmy Durante: NOSE XRAY").[122]

The New Wavers found a hub in *Games* magazine, which debuted in 1977. Published by Playboy—which had not previously been known for its puzzle offerings, with the notable exception of jiggling "jigsaws" in which customers put together images of cover girls[123]—*GAMES* received, perhaps for the better, little to no oversight from its owners. The magazine very quickly hit a six-figure circulation, and readers spent, on average, five and a

[121] Randall Rothenberg, "Puzzle Makers Exchange Cross Words," *New York Times*, 10 Aug. 1988.

[122] Rothenberg, "Puzzle Makers Exchange Cross Words."

[123] Campbell, *On Crosswords,* 21.

half hours on every issue.[124] (They weren't reading it for the articles.) In 1978, *Games* hired a recent law school graduate, Will Shortz, to be its editor, and the magazine became a place for young crossworders to hone their chops and experiment with the form. Emily Cox and Henry Rathvon, for example, created grids with no black squares and a few seemingly random letters scattered throughout; solvers had to figure out where the black squares were, as well as the correct answers, clutching the grips of the letters provided like climbers scaling a rock wall.[125] Constructors peppered their puzzles freely with the pop culture references and racy humor that Maleska eschewed.

The battle between the ancien régime and the New Wave culminated in the Oreo War. OREO is a terrific crossword word. Four-letter words are the bread and butter of crossword grids: in a typical 15 x 15 layout, over a quarter of the answers will probably be four-letter words.[126] Ever since 1912, when Nabisco first offered its splittable, dunkable, crème-filled black-and-white sandwich cookie, the word has had a prominent connotation in American culture. But under common crossword conventions, brand names were not permitted as clues. To those on the traditionalists' side—Maleska; Jacobson; Will Weng; William Lutwiniak, co-editor of the *Washington Post*'s Sunday puzzle and former NSA cryptologist—"OREO" should always be clued with reference to the prefix meaning "mountain," as in "oreortyx," a mountain quail. But to the Young Turks—Shortz, Reagle, Stanley Newman at *Newsday*, Henry Hook at the *Boston Globe*—"Oreo" was a cookie. (To liven up the crossword world, Newman organized a "crossword cruise" to Bermuda.)

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[124] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 21.

[125] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 22.

[126] Michelle Arnot, *Four-Letter Words: And Other Secrets of a Crossword Insider* (New York: Perigee Books, 2008), 14.

In 1986, Robert Guilbert, a former ad copywriter from Milwaukee who enjoyed spending his retirement doing the puzzle, invented a game called Pago Pago, an infinite crossword on a Möbius strip, and began to peddle it around to crossword fans. When Guilbert discovered how devoted puzzlers were to their pastime, he saw a business opportunity. Guilbert wanted to create a Crossword Puzzle Academy, with its crown jewel a Crossword Hall of Fame that would celebrate all things crossword. But Guilbert had no idea the hornet's nest he was getting into. He later told the *Times*, "While these constructors are a close-knit fraternity, there's not much unanimity there."[127] In 1988, both the old and new factions convened in the Harvard Club in New York City to discuss the Academy's foundation. Traditionalists Maleska and Weng were president and chairman; New Wavers Shortz and Newman, vice president and secretary. Shortz was tasked with picking a "Pantheon of Immortals," extraordinary cruciverbalists recognized for their contributions to the field. Other honorees were inducted into the Academy, such as Merv Griffin, the television producer. The end of the proclamation lauding Griffin reads:

> WHEREAS, [Wheel of Fortune] inspires an interest in words, in spelling, and in word-play games, and from its inception has sustained and nourished the public's fascination for the American phenomenon known as the Crossword Puzzle,
>
> **THEREFORE**, we proclaim that **M E R V _ G R I F F I N** from this time forward is **FELLOW**, the American Crossword Puzzle Academy's **HALL OF FAME**.

Guilbert died in 1990, before the Crossword Puzzle Academy could come to fruition, and the plans were abandoned. But the seeds of reconciliation had been planted.

1993-present: Crosswords in the Digital Age

IX. Will Shortz

[127] Rothenberg, "Puzzle Makers Exchange Cross Words."

"Why are crossword puzzles so damn dull?" asked Eric Albert in the September/October 1993 issue of *CROSSW_RD* magazine. In a column entitled "Puzzling Thoughts," Albert posits the radical notion that crosswords need not be so tame, wondering why they've persisted as Pollyannaish when neither creators nor solvers want them to be bland. "Are we having fun yet?" Albert asks. "Of course not. The things that make us sweat, the things that make us hot, the things that make us uncomfortable, are precisely the things that make us feel most alive. We can never touch people's hearts without stepping on their toes."[128] All pun and no sex make Cross Word Cal a dull boy.

In August 1993, Maleska, who was still puzzle editor at the *Times*, passed away. Mel Taub stepped in for a few months as interim editor, but at the end of 1993, Will Shortz, a leader of the New Wave, took over. When Shortz became editor at the *Times*, he switched out the Maleskan dullness for something closer to a Weng wink, but modernized. The first Shortzian Sunday puzzle features color-themed answers that include AL GREEN, a distinctly contemporary (or, at least, relatively contemporary) celebrity. The Grey Lady's crossword was now in the black-and-white equivalent of Technicolor.

Shortz was born in 1952 in Crawfordsville, Indiana, where he was raised on an Arabian horse farm. His mother, Wilma Shortz, wrote children's stories about horses. She was also a puzzler, and won two cars and a vacation by entering corporate contests for jingles and slogans (like "Quint Mint," a gum brand).[129] She helped Shortz refine and sell his first puzzle, at age fourteen, to a national Sunday school magazine. In 1965, Shortz encountered *Language on Vacation: An Olio of Orthographical Oddities* by Dmitri Borgmann, which he called a "mold-breaking" book: this was the first book he'd ever seen dedicated to

[128] Eric Albert, "Puzzling Thoughts: So Damn Dull," *CROSSW_RD*, Sept./Oct. 1993.

[129] Christopher Short, "From Point A to Point B: Crawfordsville's cleverest son holds forth on his Hoosier half," *The Paper of Montgomery County Online*, 17 May 2010.

"logology," or the art of describing and solving wordplay, rather than simply a collection of puzzles. Shortz wrote to Borgmann, asking him for advice on how to become a professional puzzler. "Borgmann's advice," said Shortz: "Don't."

Undeterred, for an eighth-grade assignment on what he wanted to be when he grew up, Shortz wrote an essay entitled "Puzzles as a Profession." In neat, careful cursive loops, the essay describes the types of puzzles he's already created and cites a *Newsweek* article about Borgmann to show precedent for such a career. Shortz reasons that the startup costs of such a profession would be low—just a few books, reference materials, and pads of graph paper—and concludes, "Making puzzles is a great life from my point of view—easy life, fun and leisure[ly]." The essay received a B+. In the margin, his teacher wrote, "I thought you would connect this to the topic of becoming an adult. Obviously, you did not understand me."[130]

Shortz attended Indiana University, where Wilma had discovered a new individualized major program: students could craft their own majors from scratch. Will crafted a major he dubbed "enigmatology," that is, the study and science of puzzles. After graduating, Will went to law school at the University of Virginia, though he never intended to practice law. In 1978, he saw an ad in the *New York Times* for a puzzle editor at an unspecified publication. Certain that the ad was from *GAMES* magazine, in an uncharacteristically bold yet characteristically straightforward move, Shortz waltzed into that publication's offices and announced that he was applying for the job. The ad wasn't from *GAMES*, but the magazine hired him anyway.

In 1978, Shortz also founded the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament (ACPT), the nation's oldest and largest crossword tournament. A 2006 documentary about the ACPT,

[130] Stephen Hiltner, "Will Shortz: Profile of a Lifelong Puzzle Master," *New York Times Insider*, 1 Aug. 2017.

Wordplay, became of the top ten grossing documentaries of all time, and constructors and editors who were still kids or teenagers when the movie was released universally cite it as a major influence in making them want to join the crossword world. Celebrities like Jon Stewart and Bill Clinton have cameos solving the puzzle; constructors such as Merl Reagle demonstrate how they work; lightning-quick solvers like Tyler Hickman whip through puzzles in less time that it typically takes to record a voicemail. After *Wordplay* was released, the ACPT became so popular for a few years that it outgrew the Stamford Marriott and had to relocate to Brooklyn; in 2015, the tournament returned home to Stamford, to the delight of most attendants, who tend to like routines.

At the *Times*, Shortz canonized a gradient of crossword difficulty. In the pre-Shortzian era, crosswords were classified by how the grids were constructed—rebus, compounds, direction-changers, etc. Maleska had begun to institute a slope of difficulty throughout the week, with easier puzzles earlier and harder puzzles later, but under Shortz, this calendrical metric became standardized. Monday is the easiest puzzle, and Friday and Saturday are the most difficult. Monday through Thursday are themed puzzles, meaning that several of the longest clue answers all constellate around something in common: an idea, a pun, a quote, a shape, etc. Friday and Saturday are themeless, which makes the puzzle more difficult both to construct and to solve. In a themed puzzle, once you get the central conceit, the backbone of the puzzle snaps into place, but in a themeless grid, each answer is autonomous. Sunday's puzzle is roughly a Thursday-level difficulty and, because it's bigger, typically features the most elaborate theme of the week; Sunday puzzles also have titles that help announce the theme. Certain grids may be trickier than others, but mostly, what makes a puzzle easy or hard are its clues. Constructor Brendan Emmett Quigley explained how BACON might be clued on different days of the week: for a Monday puzzle, BACON might

be "Strips with fried eggs"; for a Wednesday, "Sir Francis"; Saturday, "Strips in a club."[131] As editor, a major component of Shortz's role became adjusting the clues so that each day's puzzle would be appropriate to the corresponding level.

Standardizing the appearance of different puzzle levels on a regular basis allowed for a balance between diehard crossworders, who take pride in joining an exclusive society; and casual solvers, who want to drop in on the puzzle but don't want to commit to memorizing crosswordese like ORYX and ESNE and ALEE or the names of rivers in Siberia. Organizing puzzles by difficulty also gave the crossword the bandwidth to expand its own capacity and range without losing its identity. The *Times* crossword could be jokey on a Monday or brutal on a Friday, but on both days, it would still be the *Times* crossword.

The Shortzian difficulty scale helped broker a peace treaty in the Oreo War. Before Shortz's era, OREO appeared as an answer in 106 *Times* puzzles, always clued in one of two ways: "Mountain: Prefix" or "Mountain: Comb. form." (The sole exception is in a 1992 puzzle by Tap Osborn: "Mountainous cookie?")[132] Shortz, a charter New Waver, came down firmly on the side of the brand name, but because of the range of options that the calendar gradient permits, the cookie took a variety of forms, from straightforward to persnickety. OREO on a Monday might be "Cookie with a crème center"; on a Saturday, "It's 29% cream." And even though the OREO was a cookie, that didn't mean that it couldn't also be a status symbol for serious cruciverbalists: "Dessert item that was clued as 'Mountain: Comb. form' in old crosswords"[133] appeared on a Wednesday.

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[131] Interview, Will Shortz. Note that the clues each refer to the same part of speech, grammatically, as the answer, but that Saturday's clue misdirects in two directions. "Strips in a club" suggests the verb "to strip," which connotes a certain kind of "club," but when we realize that the "club" is a club sandwich, and "strips" is a noun, our answer is clear.

[132] Clue results for OREO, "Find clues or match patterns," xwordinfo.com.

[133] Fred Piscop, "The New York Times Crossword," ed. Will Shortz, Mar. 2, 2016, xwordinfo.com.

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Other crossword editors had achieved notoriety and respect in the crossword world, but Shortz was the first crossword editor to become a celebrity. Even people who never did the crossword puzzle knew Will Shortz as the emperor of the crossword.

Shortz is everyone's uncle. He carries himself with the formal politeness of a foreign affairs diplomat and the wholesomeness of a Midwestern tennis coach. He has a sheepish grin, boyish cheeks, and a trimmed mustache that defies trendiness; his eyes flicker on each blink between anxious to please and slyly ready to deceive. The piercing in his left earlobe is a shock: there's nothing else to suggest a rebellious past, present, or future in this collar-popped, genteel ping-pong puzzler. On closer inspection, his ear isn't pierced; he's got a mole that's exactly the size and shape of a stud.

Shortz's predecessors at the *Times* had confined their role to be steward of the crossword, but Shortz expanded the position: he became the kingpin not only of crosswords, but of the American puzzle world. Shortz servees as "Puzzlemaster" on *National Public Radio*. There are hundreds of volumes of *Times* reprinted crosswords that Will has edited, and for which he presumably has collected handsome royalties. (Crossword constructors are independent contractors; once a puzzle is sold to the *Times*, the constructor also sells away the rights, for a one-time fee with no royalty deal).

Crosswords are Shortz's main livelihood, and, for him, a comfortable one at that, but his fortune came from another puzzle, one having nothing to do with words. Sudoku is a number puzzle in which the player get a nine-by-nine grid and is instructed to fill in all the numbers such that every row and every column contain the numbers one through nine precisely once each. The game isn't originally Japanese—there are versions of such a grid in several games publications throughout the globe—but got its name in the 1980s, when it

became popular in Japan. Though the game had been popular in Japan for decades, it reached mainstream English-speaking audiences in 2004, when the *Times* of London printed its first Sudoku. The combination of the puzzle's easy learning curve but huge variations in difficulty made it addictive; it was also very easy to play online or on a phone. Unlike crosswords, Sudoku are created by computer, and can be generated in large quantities very quickly. In 2005, St. Martin's Press, which publishes the anthologies of *Times* puzzles, eagerly latched onto the trend, asking Shortz to create three books of one hundred Sudoku each in ten days' time. Shortz hired a computer programmer in the Netherlands and got the job done.[134] By 2006, forty of the top fifty bestselling books in the "adult games" category were Sudoku, and a third of these were edited by Shortz.

Shortz's other passion, besides puzzles, is table tennis. In 2009, he used some of the money he had made from his puzzle empire to restore a warehouse a few blocks from his home and converted it into the Westchester Table Tennis Center, a fourteen-thousand-square-foot, world-class table tennis facility. Like Cal Ripken, Jr., the Baltimore Oriole famed for playing the most consecutive baseball games, Shortz does not miss a day playing ping pong. When he travels for puzzle championships, he finds local clubs; he's played in all fifty states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and over thirty countries. In 2012, Kai Zhang, a fourteen-year-old table tennis player from Beijing moved to Pleasantville to train for the Olympics at the Center. Shortz helped search for housing for Zhang, but eventually, the easiest solution seemed to be for Zhang to live with Shortz, a bachelor. The ping-pong prodigy lived with the puzzlemaster for four years.[135]

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[134] Clive Thompson, "The Puzzlemaster's Dilemma," *New York*, 19 Jun. 2006.

[135] Charles Bethea, "Will Shortz and the Ping-Pong Prodigy," *New Yorker*, 2 Nov. 2015.

Shortz edits the crossword not from an office in the *Times* building but from his home in Pleasantville, New York, a fifty-minute Metro North ride from Grand Central Station. PLEASANTVILLE, 15 letters, precisely spans a daily crossword grid. Originally, Pleasantville was going to be named Mechanicsville, but there was already a town in New York with that name, so Pleasant it became. In 1922, *Readers' Digest* was founded in Pleasantville, and for over a decade, the publication was housed in several garages, warehouses, and old banks scattered around town; though the organization moved its physical operations in 1939, the magazine retained its mailing address through the Pleasantville post office. In this hamlet, population 7500 (the largest of any Pleasantville in the United States), nearly everything is walkable. Shortz's house is one block down and a few across from the Pleasantville train station, and a few blocks away from the Westchester Table Tennis Center.

Shortz's Tudor-style house is devoted to the crossword. The dark dining room contains the puzzle submissions: dozens of slush-pile manila envelopes are heaped on the floor, sorted puzzles stacked on the table. Shortz and his assistant carry the puzzle submissions they want to discuss that day into the living room and sort through them on the coffee table. The living room décor consists of several glass curio cabinets filled with puzzle ephemera. One cabinet contains crosswordy odds-and-ends: a vintage crossword bracelet from the nineteen-twenties, a promotional crossword on a box of Kellogg's cornflakes from the nineteen-fifties, with a grid in the shape of a "K." As Shortz tours you around the collection, he might pause and attempt to solve the K, as a reflex. (It's not a very good crossword: since the clues don't all cross each other, some of the answers are pretty much impossible, since they could be filled in several different ways, and all those ways could be right.)

The books are on the second floor, the entirety of which is, essentially, a puzzle library and office. There are floor-to-ceiling shelves of oddly specific reference books and old encyclopedias. Small mechanical puzzles are studded throughout the house. There's a crossword-themed pinball machine in the basement. Shortz and his assistant don't eschew Wikipedia; it's one source among many, and it has its own merits and drawbacks. There's a small spare bedroom in the attic, and Shortz's bedroom, and bathrooms. There are a few word magnets on the side of the refrigerator, from a magnetic poetry kit, but no photos on the door, or other decorative items. The house, like Santa's workshop, is a working space devoted to crosswords. The house is both stuffed with puzzle stuff and weirdly empty.

Shortz and his assistant work together in an office overflowing with dictionaries. For over a decade, Shortz worked on the puzzle by himself, but when the slush pile and letters became overwhelming, on top of Shortz's other puzzle duties, he began hiring college students or recent graduates as interns, one at a time, and rotating out after the summer or year. Joel Fagliano served as Shortz's intern in the summers during college and then for a few years after college, until he was promoted as the manager of the digital crossword at the *Times*, at which point Shortz got a new intern to work for both of them. The assistant also helps Shortz keep the puzzle's pulse tuned to the outside world, bringing awareness of youth culture to the clues and themes. Ralph LAUREN keeps the old guard happy, LAURYN Hill keeps it woke.

X. Crosswords Go Digital

During the early 1990s, crossword constructors began shifting to computers to build their puzzles. In the early days of computers, constructors used to work by paper and pencil, then transfer their grids to Excel spreadsheets. Now, for about fifty dollars, anyone can buy

a program that will spit out a crossword grid that technically works. Nearly all constructors use a program such as CrossFire or Crossword Constructor, which will create a grid that automatically corrects for rotational symmetry. A major part of crossword construction now is the word list: crossworders have compiled enormous databases of words and phrases that will fit into a grid, and each word gets a ranking based on its inventiveness as well as its commonness. Words that are technically in the dictionary but are too crosswordy—plural versions of anagrams like NNES (North-North-East-s), for example—get low marks, whereas phrases of common words might get higher ones.

There's a tech-bro machismo among many constructors today, because part of being an expert constructor is having a really robust list of words and phrases that the computer can use to create its fill. Length comparisons abound. (Though, many constructors have assured me, size doesn't matter; it's about quality.)

Computers can also solve puzzles, though not all of them. They can be extremely fast at creating and filling in accurate and functional grids, but they have difficulty both solving and writing clever themes. Dr.Fill[136] [*sic*], a computer program developed by veteran solver Matt Ginsberg, has competed in the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament since its creation in 2012, and has steadily crept up the rankings in the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament. Dr.Fill is very good at facts and figures, but less good at wordplay and associations. It can fill out a crossword in about eight seconds, but for accuracy, it still can't best the top solvers on the hardest puzzles.

In 1994, the toy company Herbko International, Inc. released The *New York Times* Crossword Companion Roll-a-Puzzle System. The System was something between a Palm Pilot and a player piano. You loaded a roll of fresh crosswords into the Luminator, a plastic

[136] Dr.Fill doesn't have a space in its name, mostly, Ginsberg said, because he was sick of autocorrect filling in "Phil." Interview, Matt Ginsberg.

box that backlit the puzzle (four AA batteries required) so that you could play anywhere (in a house, with a mouse, on a boat, with a goat). Like *The Cross Word Puzzle Book*, The Crossword Companion came with an attached pencil. Once the puzzle had been solved, you scrolled forward to the next one; once you'd gone through the lot, you replaced it with a fresh cartridge of puzzles. In 2017, the artist Camille Henrot presented *Days Are Dogs*, a multi-room exhibit spanning the Palais de Tokyo museum in Paris. Each cavernous room represented a day of the week. In the "Sunday night" room, an archaeological dig-cum-flea market, Henrot arranged certain mementos of technology in carefully disheveled heaps. Inspirational posters (an "Excellence" lion) roared under visitors' feet; rotary phones with cords tangled in coital yet sterile intimacy. Next to the heap of phones sat, among other garage-sale items, a heap of shrink-wrapped *New York Times* Crossword Companion Roll-a-Puzzle Systems.

The Crossword Companion never quite caught on. But the Companion it was the harbinger of the first seismic change in crossword-solving technology for a century. Just as crossword-puzzle software had changed the nature of constructing, solving, too, would soon go on a screen.

The *New York Times* launched its digital crossword in 1997, fifty-five years after the puzzle's print debut in the paper of record. Originally, the online version worked with the paper just like its print counterpart: a subscription to the digital *Times* also gave you access to that day's crossword puzzle online. But in 2012, for the first time in the then-seventy-year history of the *Times*'s crossword, the puzzle and the paper became detached. If you subscribe to the *Times* digitally, you would no longer automatically get the crossword bundled in; now, you have to pay a separate fee and download separate software to play the puzzle on your devices. You also don't get a subscription to the *Times* if you buy a *Times* crossword

subscription. This separation is a seismic shift: until this point, *Times* crossword solvers also had to be *Times* readers, even if they did nothing with the rest of the paper except flip through it to get to the crossword. *Times* readers who were not solvers also had to confront the crossword; even if they did nothing with the crossword except flip past it, the grid was still a part of the *Times* experience.

By 2017, at the seventy-fifth anniversary of the *Times*'s puzzle, even though they're housed under the same name, the *New York Times* and the *New York Times* crossword had become separate brands. In many ways, though, this separation has drawn the crossword and the paper closer together than ever, at least fiscally. By separating the crossword into its own money stream, the *Times* gets to see, quite literally, how much people value the puzzle. What was once a free add-on that was worthwhile because it attracted readers to the paper, even if it didn't actively make money itself, has now become something that directly brings in revenue to the *Times*. The *Times* has taken a free thing and made it into a mint. In 2018, the *Times* crossword app had 350,000 subscribers, double what they'd had the previous year.[137] At $39.99 a subscription, that's just shy of fourteen million dollars in crossword bucks per year.

The print crossword remained, at its core, a one-man show, Will Shortz in a house in Pleasantville sending text files to the *Times*. The digital crossword employs over a dozen full-time staffers: back-end programmers making sure that the puzzle works; front-end programmers who translate the puzzle for all platforms; API and iOS specialists who fix compatibility issues; a designer who solves problems, like bringing mini puzzles more prominently forward so more people will play them; a marketing team; and development managers who concentrate on how the programs will be structured.

[137] Interview, Joel Fagliano.

The crossword app has been housed in house since 2014. Before then, the Times had outsourced the game to another company's platform, but since the app was doing so well, and people were paying for the crossword on top of the paper, corporate decided to expand the operation. The digital *Times* puzzle is supposed to be a thing that follows you everywhere you go, and the imagined ideal digital solver has multiple devices: you can have it on your phone in the subway, your desktop at work, and your tablet at night. It's the digital equivalent to carrying around a folded-over Arts section in your pocket.

XI. The Mini Crossword

In 2014, the *Times* introduced a Mini crossword on the digital app. The *Times* wanted to be able to offer something for free to hook solvers into paying for a crossword subscription, so Joel Fagliano, digital puzzles editor at the *Times*, created a miniature amuse-bouche. The mini is a five-by-five grid, in comparison to the daily fifteen-by-fifteen, and the clues are, on average, much more straightforward. A daily might take half an hour, minimum; the Mini might take two minutes, max.

Crossworders initially greeted the Mini with mixed reviews. In a *Slate* article with the demure title "The *New York Times* Mini Crossword is an Utter Disgrace to the *NYT* Crossword Brand," contributor Ruth Graham lambasts the Mini in maximal bombast; like the hyperbolically hysterical hyacinths in "AN ENSLAVED AMERICA," Graham is at once serious in the substance of her gripe and giddy with the vitriol of her style. The Mini, she argues, devalues the *Times*'s brand, dubbing it "the *People* magazine crossword puzzle of the *New York Times*." The Mini, she writes, "is a four-letter word for 'Are you kidding me?'" (There are other four-letter words on the brain.) "It doesn't tickle your mind," she continues, "so much as punch you in the brain with its blatancy. It's so clearly designed as a mere loss

leader for the actual crossword that finishing it has the exact opposite effect that a good puzzle should have—it's less a tiny surge of accomplishment than the sense that you've wasted an entire minute of your time." The Mini's sins are threefold: first, it is too easy; it's too obviously mere marketing bait for the paid puzzle; and, most importantly, it's a waste of time.

Graham's complaints about the Mini echo the moralistic finger-wagging of cross Brits in the twenties lambasting this American pastime. The crossword still taps directly into our horror of wasted time, or, that we haven't maximized every minute if it's possible to do so. If we're not working, we should be working on something else: relaxation, exercise, an artistic project, after-school activities, cooking, meditation, a second job, a third. We should be constantly grooming ourselves to be the smarter, faster, better versions of ourselves, motivational books and speeches instruct us.

The crossword proper is now culturally accepted as better than doing nothing with your time: the crossword, even, might actively strengthen your brain, the mental equivalent of crunches or plank pose. Yet the puzzle is still deeply tethered to our abhorrence of wasting time. Even if the crossword is now more typically seen as the opposite of wasted time, the technology itself still has deep roots in this moral question. We use techniques such as memory studies to help ourselves rationalize this addiction to the crossword, or to the routine of opening up the puzzle, but however we react—pride, rationalization, acceptance, rejection—the crossword is an activity that forces us to confront why we waste time, or, rather, why we keep ourselves occupied all the time, even when production produces nothing. The Mini, Graham argued, is not just a nuisance and a disgrace: it's a menace. Unlike the crossword proper, it's a time-suck that's a waste of time.

The following day's Mini replied to *Slate*'s piece, and even Graham had to concede defeat. Though the clues themselves were banal enough, the completed grid spelled out as close to a fuck-you as the family-friendly puzzle would allow:

Figure 3. Mini crossword, Joel Fagliano, 2015.

(That K, U, F, C cluster in that northeast corner is a bit too close for Sunday breakfast, but this is the mild wild world of the Mini, where we can let a little loose.)

2017 marked the 75th anniversary of the *New York Times*'s crossword puzzle, and the *Times* took this jubilee seriously. In March, the *Times* reorganized its A2 and A3 pages to mimic the front of a magazine: shifting the content from corrections and news articles to create a mini-round-up of highlights from the day's paper as well as highlights from online content. The redesign, announced the *Times*'s press release, had "made room for a small and addictive puzzle": now, the Mini appears Monday through Friday on A3 of the print edition. If A2 and A3 are a fractal of the whole *Times*, reflecting the entire paper in capsule form, then the fractal also needed an analogous version of the puzzle. That "made room for" is deceptively passive; after all, there are plenty of things that the redesign did *not* "make room" for, such as the corrections department, now shunted to unspecified hinterlands. The Mini is

not there by accident, nor is it filling a dead space: A3 is such prime real estate that Tiffany & Co. has had an ad in its upper-right corner since 1896. Unlike Wynne's first Word-Cross, built in desperation to fill a vacant spot, the *Times* now actively creates space for its crossword. The crossword, after all, is not only part of the *Times*'s corporate sector, it's one of the most lucrative bits of the paper. In this hall of mirrors, the online edition also began to ape the print edition; in the right-hand corner of the website, every day, if you scroll down roughly the equivalent of flicking the front page open to A3, the *Times* places a link to the crossword, inviting readers to "play today's puzzle." This hand extended in greeting is also a hand extended for cash: to play today's puzzle, you have to pay.

The Mini began life marketed as a gateway drug to the regular crossword, but it's now become a distinct form in its own right. People who were never before crossword solvers have now become followers of the Mini. The "small and addictive puzzle" was introduced to the print paper not as a tease for the main crossword, but as a "small and addictive" puzzle in its own right. To capture the whole of the *Times* in capsule form requires the crossword puzzle's presence: now, the *Times* wouldn't be the *Times* without the puzzle. Paradoxically, just as the digital crossword and the paper parted ways fiscally, the print paper doubled down on the puzzle as a key aspect of its brand. Seeing how much money the crossword brought in for the *Times* highlighted the crucial importance of the puzzle to the paper, and the paper, in return, gave its readers what they were proving that they wanted.

Although the Mini might be regarded as a waste of time by self-identifying cruciverbalists, who have justified their regular puzzle to themselves, non-regular solvers see the Mini in the opposite light: while the crossword itself is too big and too time-consuming, the Mini is not a time-suck but a whetstone, sharpening the mind for the day to come. *New Yorker* staff writer and Princeton professor John McPhee had never been very interested in

crossword puzzles—*I never had time for them*, he told me, or, rather, *I was never willing to give that much time to them*—until the Mini rolled around. Now, he says, he's addicted. He goes out to get the paper every morning to do the mini. I don't have time for the full crossword, but I do have the two minutes for this. A federal judge for the Second Circuit Court of Appeals does the Mini puzzle every morning as a mental check: if he can solve this morning morning's mini, he's sharp enough to serve at his job. The judge would never do a regular crossword—that would be a waste of time—but the Mini acts as a medicinal purpose. He doesn't like crosswords, and he doesn't do the Mini because he thinks it's good for him, or because it'll stave off dementia; less a shot of wheatgrass for the brain but a diagnostic tool to measure his sanity. For this judge, doing the Mini has nothing to do with the crossword qua crossword: it's precisely the right-sized test for the job he wants it to do.

XII. XXWords: Gender and the Crossword

On a Tuesday in June 2016, the answer for 31-Down, HAREM, was located at the direct center of a *Times* grid, where the free space on a bingo card would go. HAREM wasn't a completely random fulcrum for this grid: several clues are spider-related, and the word LEG appears eight times in circled letters that run through the grid in a symmetrical star. The center of the spider's web is a female space tinged with seduction and danger. But getting to the HAREM proved problematic. The clue for 31-Down – "Decidedly non-feminist women's group" – irritated several solvers, who called the clue sexist, awful, and demeaning. "Harem-gate," as moniker-happy wonks labeled the kerfuffle, pointed to a far murkier issue than one tone-deaf clue: why have crosswords become a boys' club?

The gender gap in crossword construction has steadily worsened over the past several decades. In 1993, women constructed roughly one-third of *New York Times*

crossword puzzles. In 2015, that number was closer to fifteen percent. Crossword puzzle editorship is even more of an androcracy. On the one hand, crosswords seem as though they should be inherently gender-blind: the form necessitates abstraction from social context. But crosswords are not divorced from the world—as the complex history of women and the crossword demonstrates, the crossword is fundamentally porous as literary form: though we build crosswords as though we can manage our problems, the assumptions we didn't know we were making continue to creep in.

Some constructors attribute the correlated rise of computer software to the decline of female constructors: as in all technological fields, the men vastly outnumber the women. The widening gender gap is especially weird in crosswords because many of the most prominent early constructors and crossword editors were women; Margaret Farrar essentially made the puzzle what it is today.

The crossword world is open to all, but not everybody enters. On the one hand, getting a puzzle accepted into the *Times* is an egalitarian process. Though many constructors send work frequently, there are no regular crossword constructors. Constructors have to send in hard copies. Every envelope lands in the same pile in Will Shortz's dining room, and Will and his assistant read every submission.

On the other hand, on any given day, a crossword will most likely be by a white male. Race is an issue: of the several hundred constructors who submit, says Will, only a handful are black, and there are few Asians. Gender is an even starker divide. The problem isn't that women can't construct crosswords, or that crosswords are somehow inherently male. Solvers tend to be split fifty-fifty male-female, although that demographic's tricky to track.

Many of the female constructors are the best and most inventive in the field. Liz Gorski has created puzzles in the shape of the Guggenheim museum, with clues for the artwork arranged in roughly accurate order around the famous spiral. For decades, Frances Hansen was one of the most prolific and certainly one of the quirkiest crossword constructors in the country. Hansen, who died in 2004, had a habit of putting her own poetry in grids; in the Times puzzle for Sunday, December 22, 2002, she embedded a four-line poem with *abab* rhyme scheme and regular iambic trimeter in which each of the lines was twenty-one characters long, the length of a Sunday grid:

> HANG UP YOUR STOCKINGS DO /
> BUT PLEASE DO NOT SUPPOSE /
> THAT SANTA YEARNS TO VIEW /
> SWEATSOCKS OR PANTYHOSE.

Nevertheless, young female constructors get attention for being ingénues, not for their ingenuity. In April of 1925, the *New Yorker* featured Ruth von Phul, the fastest competitive crossworder in America, in a "Who's Who"-style column called "The Hour Glass": "Imagine the blow to the Hellenic Shipbuilders' Board of Trade if Helen hadn't had that sort of face. One thousand ship contracts unlet. Then you may consider what manner of hurt the cross word industry would have suffered had its official champion been a lady who didn't photograph well. The disease might have struggled along, but it never could have become epidemic." In 2014, when crossword constructor Anna Shechtman was working as Will Shortz's assistant, Opening Ceremony, the stylish clothing store, profiled her on its blog. Shechtman, described as a "pint-sized stunner," is photographed staring directly into the camera, wearing all black, hands poised over a stack of crosswords. "I met up with Anna at Bubby's in Tribeca," the interviewer writes, "where we talked about OkCupid, ex-boyfriends, and shtupping—though not in the context of getting down so much as Across

vs. Down."[138] Shechtman told me that after the article, "I got a lot of calls from mothers asking me to date their sons."[139]

Almost all of the major crossword editors after Farrar have been male, which made Ben Tausig, the American Values Club crossword editor, suspicious of implicit gender bias. But even in the days of Margaret Farrar's editorship, women constructors still only comprised less than a third of the *Times*'s offerings. Tausig has proposed that like attracts like: once the gender balance had begun to be skewed toward male editors and constructors, they started constructing puzzles for each other, where the clues appealed to a certain aesthetic typically gendered male. So Tausig actively fostered female constructors in his stable at the American Values Club, regularly publishing work by Aimee Lucido, Zoe Wheeler, and Anna Shechtman, among others. Tausig told me he'd been following a teenage female constructor on Twitter, encouraging her to keep writing: "It makes you feel a little creepy sometimes," he admitted, but he wants female constructors to know that if they need guidance and a place to share their voice, the American Values Club will provide an outlet.[140]

The female constructors who do still submit to the *Times* tend to build for the "M-T ghetto," the easier Monday and Tuesday crossword that some constructors sneer at, even though it's actually quite difficult to create an easy but elegant puzzle. The themeless world is almost exclusively a boy's club. As crossword construction software has become more prevalent, it's easier to construct a themeless: now, the bragging rights go to the constructor who can put together the largest and most sophisticated word database, so that you can

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[138] Katie Barnwell, "Meet the 23-Year-Old Making the New York Times Crossword Puzzle Cool," *Opening Cermony* blog, 29 May 2014.

[139] Interview, Anna Shechtman.

[140] Interview, Anna Sheechtman.

construct a grid with as few black spaces and little crosswordese as possible. It's a pen-waving contest: my stack is bigger than your stack.

David Steinberg, suggested another culprit in the twenty-first century gender gap: computers. Steinberg, a teenage puzzle prodigy, published his first *Times* crossword at age fourteen. In June 2012, he launched the Pre-Shortzian Puzzle Project to digitize every crossword in the *New York Times* since the puzzle's debut in 1942, and by 2015, he had finished every available puzzle. (148 are missing, mostly due to newspaper strikes). Steinberg combed the Pre-Shortzian Puzzle Project and Xword Info for data on constructors and discovered that the decline of female constructors correlates exactly with the rise of crossword software. Before 2003, when crossword constructing software became more prominent, women made up about thirty percent of constructors; from 2003 to the present, that figure has slid towards eighteen percent. Shortz told me that this reflects the proportion of submissions he receives: in any given batch of ten, only one or two will be from a woman.

Steinberg's "boysplained" theory about computers didn't quite cut it for Shechtman, Tausig, and others in the field. Shechtman responded that the problem might not be tech, but tech culture:

> A "pastime of privilege," puzzle-making requires very specialized skills and offers very little compensation. In this sense, it's remarkably well suited to the brogrammer culture skewered on shows like HBO's *Silicon Valley*—spaces buzzing with mental agility and free-floating virginity. It's not that women aren't up to the challenge of tech-based constructing (Bennett and Reynaldo also use software to make crosswords), but the decline in female puzzle-makers may be a symptom of the aesthetics of tech culture, not the technology itself.[141]

Crosswords aren't a money-making enterprise for constructors: a *Times* daily puzzle will earn its creator a few hundred dollars, the rate is a pittance relative to the number of hours it takes even an elite constructor to build a puzzle. Tracy Bennett and Amy Reynaldo

[141] Anna Shechtman, "Puzzle Trouble: Women and Crosswords in the Age of Autofill," *The American Reader*, Aug. 2014.

have openly discussed the problems of being a working mother and constructing crosswords: juggling work and family leaves little time for concentrating on grids.[142] If crosswords are going to have any diversity in audience and construction, both editorial bias and economic inequities in all fields need to be overcome.

XIII. Plagiarism and the Battle of the Parkers

The story of the crossword has always been the story of a world in factions. Pen vs. pencil, screen vs. paper, across vs. down. New Wave vs. *les traditionalistes*. Methodical order or scattershot. Themed vs. themeless. British cryptics vs. American-style or "quick" grids. Social solvers vs. lone wolfs, ascetics vs. cheaters. There are crosswords puzzles and crossword puzzles. And then, there are crossword puzzles.

The crossword puzzle world of the early twenty-first century is a Venn diagram, with the crossover section in the middle nonexistent. On one side of the divide is a glut of puzzles, editors, constructors, commentators, and solvers: the *New York Times*, the *LA Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *American Values Club*, Fireball, Brendan Emmett Quigley's puzzles, Matt Gaffney's puzzles, the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament. On the other side is Timothy Parker.

Will Shortz might be the most famous face of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century crossword puzzle, but Timothy Parker is its most prolific. Parker, a pastor, began his career as the crossword writer for Universal Press Syndicate, eventually serving as founding editor for the Universal Uclick line of syndicated crosswords. (Universal Uclick is the renamed synthesis of Universal Press Syndicate's print and online offerings.) In 2000, Parker earned the Guinness World Record for World's Most Syndicated Puzzle Compiler.

[142] Shechtman, "Puzzle Trouble: Women and Crosswords in the Age of Autofill."

Continuing to serve as Universal's editor, in 2003, Parker also became the crossword editor at *USA Today*. Like Fernando Pessoa, the Portuguese writer who published work under over seventy-five different names, at *USA* Today, Timothy Parker released puzzles with the bylines of more than sixty constructors, all of whom were Timothy Parker.

Merv Griffin, television producer of *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune* fame, hired Parker to write puzzles for the last game show that Griffin conceived. On "Merv Griffin's Crosswords," contestants competed to fill in answers one by one to that day's crossword puzzle, earning and losing money based on whether their responses were correct. As the show progressed, contestants called "spoilers" joined the podium, lurking behind the two main solvers; if one of our heroes got a clue wrong and a spoiler got it right, the spoiler could jump in to take over in the front row.

According to a Universal Press Syndicate profile of Parker, Griffin hand-selected the Universal syndicate puzzler to write for the show. "Merv called me on my phone in my home office in Baltimore and invited me out to Beverly Hills to help with his new show," Parker gushed. "I'll never forget getting off the elevator in his building and looking up to see Merv sitting behind his enormous desk. I was even more thrilled when he told me he solves four crosswords a day but the *USA Today* puzzle is his favorite."[143] Griffin died shortly after production began. The show aired in September 2007 to disappointing ratings and was cancelled by May 2008.

In February 2016, crossword editor Ben Tausig smelled a rat. A crossword database had recently been created by software engineer and recreational solver Saul Pwanson, which gave people the ability to cross-check puzzles across many outlets. Tausig learned that a

[143] Kathie Kerr, "Black History Month Profile: The Puzzle Brain Behind Merv Griffin's *Crosswords*," *Universal Press Syndicate*, 10 Feb. 2008.

puzzle he'd written for Universal in 2004 had been changed very slightly by Parker in 2008 and run under the byline "Bruce Manders"; then, in 2015, the puzzle had appeared again, this time under Tausig's name.[144] Tausig did some digging and discovered that the story went much deeper: Parker had lifted over sixty grids wholesale. Oliver Roeder, writing for the statistical website FiveThirtyEight, broke down the story in exhaustive detail, proving Parker's plagiarism beyond much doubt. (One of Parker's less convincing moments: "I'll be quite honest with you," Parker told Roeder. "I'm not a fan of the *New York Times* crossword. I never have been a fan of the *New York Times* crossword. I don't even know how I would access old *New York Times* crosswords, unless they're in some older books. I wouldn't even have access to older *New York Times* crosswords." The entire archive of *Times* crosswords, Roeder pointed out, is available for a small fee online, both at the *Times* website and at the site Xword Info.)[145] On May 10, 2016, after a two-month investigation into the allegations, USA Today and Universal dissolved all ties with Parker.

All literary forms borrow freely from each other, and crossword puzzles are hardly the exception. Because of the strict physical constraints of crosswords, and due to the formal rigors of cluing and of creating themes, a certain amount of borrowing is not only inevitable but encouraged. Certain words—LEE, OLEO, ESSE—appear too frequently to count in grids, and a crossword constructor would certainly never criticize another for using the clue "Actress Thurman" for UMA. Such an accusation would be as ludicrous as claiming plagiarism across two poems that rhyme "moon" with "June," or that both take the theme of a jilted lover mourning his lost beloved.

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[144] Oliver Roeder, "A Plagiarism Scandal is Unfolding in the Crossword World," *Fivethirtyeight.com*, 4 Mar. 2016.

[145] Roeder, "A Plagiarism Scandal is Unfolding in the Crossword World."

Constructor Matt Gaffney broke down the difference between a theme that might get reused without suspicion and a deliberately plagiarized puzzle. For example, a New York Times crossword from 1994 created a theme entry out of an Oscar Wilde quotation broken into three fifteen-letter segments: "TO LOVE ONESELF IS / THE BEGINNING OF / A LIFELONG ROMANCE." A quotation by a famous author that breaks into even segments spanning the width of a crossword grid doesn't immediately smack of direct plagiarism; indeed, the quotation had already run in two *Times* crossword puzzles (in 1987 and 1992). But other copycat grids were much more suspicious. A 1997 *Times* puzzle featured four theme clues in a pinwheel pattern: TABLE HOPPER, SHOW STOPPER, NAME DROPPER, TEENY-BOPPER. Timothy Parker published a puzzle in 2006 that not only featured these four clues in the same pattern, but three of his theme clues were identical. The combination of clever-but-unusual theme answers combined with identical cluing structures reeks not of mere coincidence but of something much more deliberate.[146]

Shortz explained to me that there was no question that the puzzles Parker edited were of inferior quality to the puzzles that solvers talk about online: the clues were simple without being elegant or imaginative, and the grids were indifferent. Puzzles don't need to be hard to be respected, Shortz stressed, but they do need to be constructed with care to be taken seriously.[147]

If Parker had been editing any other widely solved puzzle, his copycat predilections would almost certainly have been noticed right away. Serious solvers constantly complete a wide array of puzzles—the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *LA Times*, *Fireball*, etc.—and robust blogs and comment forums provide a vast network of cross-checkers. But the

[146] Matt Gaffney, "How to Spot a Plagiarized Crossword," *Slate*, 10 Mar. 2016.

[147] Interview, Will Shortz.

USA Today and Universal puzzles exist in a silo from the rest of the crossworld. "I don't ever do the *USA Today* puzzle," said Michael Sharp, author of *Rex Parker Does the New York Times Crossword* blog. "I don't even know people who do the *USA Today* puzzle."[148]

Timothy Parker eschews the *Times* for snobbery; Rex Parker eschews the *USA Today* for shoddiness. The battle of the Parkers represents the bright schism in the crossword world: people who identify the puzzle as an elite status symbol, and the cheap puzzles syndicated rapid-fire that are branded as light and fun. There are some less than comfortable class issues here. Millions of people from a wide array of backgrounds solve crossword puzzles every day, but the leadership in the crossword world on the Shortz side of the crossword divide is predominantly male, middle-to upper-middle-class, and white. The crosswords on this side of the gulf are also overwhelmingly secular and often irreverent. Timothy Parker is an African-American minister. In addition to his mainstream media work, Parker published the Bible-themed *King James Games*, which offers hundreds of crosswords and other word games that teach Scripture lessons through puzzles. Who is the crossword for?

XIV. Memory and the Crossword

The limbic system is a set of brain structures underneath the cerebral cortex and above the brainstem that governs emotion, behavior, motivation, and memory. On each side of the brain, a ridge runs around the floor of the temporal horn of the lateral ventricle, cradling the other structures in the limbic system. In 1564, the Venetian anatomist Julius Caesar Aranzi named this ridge the hippocampus, after the Greek for seahorse, because the structure looks like the fish's tail and head curling around a little sticky-outy belly, which is

[148] Interview, Michael Sharp.

the fornix, a C-shaped bundle of nerve cells that connects the hippocampus's output with the rest of the brain. For a few decades in the early nineteenth century, the hippocampus was a hippopotamus.[149] In 1779, German anatomist Johann Christoph Andreas Mayer mistook the terms, and several other authors followed the bestial mix-up until physiologist Karl Friedrich Burdach figured out the error in 1829. The hippocampus, a part of the brain's limbic system, is crucial to how we create and store memories, and when the hippocampus doesn't function, or can't sync with the rest of the brain, memory loss ensues.

Henry Molaison was born on February 26, 1926. Growing up, he suffered from intractable epilepsy, possibly brought on by a childhood bicycling accident. To find a cure for the seizures resulting from his epilepsy, Molaison was taken to William Beecher Scoville, a prominent neurosurgeon at Hartford Hospital. On September 1, 1953, Scoville resected the right and left medial temporal lobes of Henry's brain, effectively lobotomizing his hippocampi. The medical zeugma took away Henry's seizures and his short-term memory.[150] A mirror-image Dorian Gray, Molaison remained perpetually twenty-seven in his mind but continued to develop and age in the physical world.

Patient HM, as he is known in medical literature, became the most famous amnesiac in history. His anterograde amnesia was perfect: he retained fully functioning language, long-

[149] Medieval theory – as on land, so in the sea – animals on the land mirrored in the sea – marine counterparts of land creatures. Writers of natural history in antiquity and the Middle Ages held the theory that specific marine parallels existed for all land creatures. "It used to be a common belief that everything on the earth had its counterpart in the sea," British author T.H. White (of *The Once and Future King* fame) explained in his translation of a medieval bestiary. "The horse and the sea-horse, the dog and the dog-fish, the snake and the eel, the spider and the spider-crab…What was more, if there were whales on sea and land, why should there not be men in both? Mermen? And if men, why not kinds of men? Why not bishops, for instance?" White continues: "The creation was a mathematical diagram drawn in parallel lines…Things did not only have a moral: they often had physical counterparts in other strata. There was a horse in the land and a sea-horse in the sea. For that matter there was probably a Pegasus in heaven." T. H. White, Appendix, *The Book of Beasts* (New York: Putnam, 1960), 250ff.

[150] A zeugma is a figure of speech in which one word is used to apply in two different senses. "He took my cloak and my honor"; "Eggs and oaths are soon broken"; "[The boys] covered themselves with dust and glory" (this last from Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*).

term memory, cognitive skills, and physical and emotional capabilities, but no ability to lay down short-term memory tracks whatsoever. Scoville had managed to sever the precise portion of the hippocampus that made him the exact figure memory studies didn't know it needed until it had been ghoulishly created for them. HM inspired Christopher Nolan's 2000 thriller *Memento*, starring Guy Pearce as a short-term anterograde amnesiac who is solving a crime. Pearce has to rely on an elaborate system of notes, because he loses his memory every few minutes; gradually, he begins to question whether he can trust his own notes, or trust himself.

Long-term memory can be divided into two parts: explicit, or declarative, memory; and implicit, or procedural, memory. Declarative memory, or "knowing what," involves consciously recalling facts and past events and using them to perform tasks. Procedural memory, or "knowing how," engages the unconscious memory of skills and experience to perform tasks.

HM could remember that he liked crosswords. He did puzzles regularly, and frequently. Suzanne Corkin, an MIT professor with a dubiously firm grip over HM's care[151], supplied him with crossword books, as did his friends and family, and other researchers. In 2004, Brian Skotko, then an undergraduate at Duke, wanted to see what the crosswords could reveal about HM's memory, and what crosswords might show us about the intersection of short- and long-term memory formation. Skotko worked with Corkin and her team to devise tests using crossword puzzles to investigate how short-term and long-term memory worked, and how memory tracks might be laid down, even for a brain that supposedly couldn't create new recollections.

[151] The ethics of Corkin's control over H.M. have been much disputed. Some, including Luke Dittrich, Scoville's grandson who has written extensively about H.M.'s case, consider her care not dissimilar to the particular admixture of kindness and iron that the clones' caretakers have in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. Others, including Brian Skotko, see Corkin as eminently professional.

Five different puzzles were created for the crossword experiments. The Pre-1953 puzzle consisted of clues and answers that only referred to figures and events that took place before 1953. The Post-1953 puzzle consisted of fifteen clues that had historical figures and events popularized after 1953, which HM was not expected to solve, and five clues with the same constraints as the pre-1953 puzzle. The researches then created three Pre-Post Puzzles, with slight variations: The first used post-1953 clues for pre-1953 answers; the second was identical but with clues randomly re-scrambled; and the third had a new set of clues with the same constraints as the original Pre-Post Puzzle.

The experiments gave the same grid but with different clues: how well could HM solve a puzzle with only the pre-operative facts? Was he using post-operative clues subconsciously? For example, for the clue "The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences recognized this male American dancer with a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1989," was HM only using "male American dancer" to solve the puzzle, or had he somehow also absorbed the award, even though it didn't occur until after his memory loss? If HM could form no post-operative memories, he should do well with a grid that used only the pre-operative fragments of the clues—only, for example "male dancer." But if he didn't do well, the result would suggest that HM was using post-operative facts to solve the puzzle. As a control, ten participants from the Harvard Cooperative on Aging in Cambridge, Massachusetts were also asked to solve the puzzles. The healthy volunteers were matched to HM by age (74, on average) and education level (12 years); only two of the volunteers solved crosswords on the regular, giving HM a slight upper hand.

HM performed as expected on the pre-1953 puzzle: he answered well and exactly the same time after time. He consistent omitted "Chaplin" and "Gershwin," but the other puzzlers in the group also agreed that those were among the most cryptic clues, and maybe

HM hadn't ever been familiar enough with those performers, pre- or post-operation, to call them readily to mind. HM was just as consistently bad at the post-1953 puzzle, and didn't improve after repeated tests. (He also failed to get any faster at filling in the grid, suggesting that he also wasn't developing any muscle memory of repeating the same physical action over and over.) [152]

But on the pre-post puzzle—the one with post-1953 clues for pre-1953 answers—HM got significantly better over time. Although he demonstrated no learning on the post-1953 puzzle, he did show learning when he could link information from after 1953 to things he'd absorbed before the operation. When he was given only the clue "male American dancer," he never got "Astaire." On the fifth consecutive day of solving, though, he was able to answer "Astaire" from "The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences recognized this male dancer with a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1989." So HM could have been learning from the post-operative material. Or, the pre-operative information could have been too general to ever support his learning (after all, if he didn't know Chaplin from "famous entertainer in silent movies of the 1920s," arts and leisure might not have been his strong suit to begin with, and "male American dancer" is hardly the most specific cue). HM might also have had such inflexible learning that he required the same clue in the same precise order to learn anything, so the partial clue wouldn't work.[153]

The point is, though, HM *did* learn. From the crossword experiments, Skotko and the other researchers proposed that HM could pick up new semantic information when he could attach it to mental representations from before the operation in 1953. So he was able

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[152] Brian G. Skotko et al., "Puzzling Thoughts for H.M.: Can New Sematic Information Be Anchored to Old Semantic Memories?," *Neuropsychology* 2004 (18.4): 756-69.

[153] Skotko et al., "Puzzling Thoughts for H.M.: Can New Sematic Information Be Anchored to Old Semantic Memories?," 756-69.

to learn solutions to clues when he could anchor post-operative information to something that had been meaningful to him before the operation. Over the course of the experiment, HM successfully associated post-operative knowledge with six pre-operative answers: "polio," "Hiss," "Gone with the Wind," "Ike," "St. Louis," and "Warsaw." The clue for "polio," for example—"childhood disease successfully treated by the Salk vaccine"—contained the pre-1953 fragment "childhood disease" but the post-1953 information about the vaccine. (Although Salk did announce successful tests of his vaccine in March of 1953, it didn't become widely available until 1955, and at the time of HM's surgery, the vaccine wasn't a piece of broadly accepted cultural wisdom.) Even though HM didn't know about Salk, he did know about polio, and so he could link the post-1953 information to the pre-1953 knowledge because of the emotional anchor.[154]

Before the crossword experiments, HM had shown that he could link pre- and post-53 knowledge, particularly with of people. When asked whether President John F. Kennedy was alive or dead, he immediately answered that he had been assassinated; though he could haave known who JFK was before 1953, JFK was inaugurated in 1961 and killed in 1963. The crossword experiments corroborated that through repetition, nondeclarative memory—knowing "how" to do something—could be strengthened without conscious awareness, and could create declarative memories—the conscious recall of facts. Crosswords showed a crossover between apparently distinct functions of memory.

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Crosswords perennially pop up in headlines as a way to keep memory intact. People are desperate to keep their mortality at bay, and crosswords rotate into the panoply of

[154] Skotko et al., "Puzzling Thoughts for H.M.: Can New Sematic Information Be Anchored to Old Semantic Memories?," 756-69.

potential cures. "Do Crossword Puzzles Really Help Prevent Alzheimer's?" one *Huffington Post* headline faux-posited. (The answer, according to the article, is affirmative.) Many people start doing the crossword late in life do so as a vitamin, the Centrum Silver of the intellect.

In a 2011 experiment[155] using participants in the Bronx Aging Study, researchers found that doing crossword puzzles delayed the onset of accelerated memory loss by 2.54 years. However, this study also found that once memory loss did begin for the crossworders, the rate of decline was faster than for the non-crossworders.[156] The finding supports the cognitive reserve hypothesis of dementia—that is, even though neurons in certain parts of the brain might be decaying, the brain could compensate by strengthening and deploying other areas. These reserves, however, are a stopgap: once the reserves have been depleted, dementia proceeds apace. In other words, doing crosswords doesn't stop the mind from losing its marbles, but it does help the brain figure out different pathways to hold dementia at bay.

A longitudinal study[157] published in 2015 analyzed data from over 65,000 adults to examine the connection between cognitive functioning and cognitively stimulating leisure activities such as Sudoku and crossword puzzles. Participants reported how frequently they participated in four types of games—crosswords, Sudoku and Sudoku-type puzzles, brain-training computer games, and non-brain-training computer games—as "more than once a day," "once a day," "once a week," "once a month," "occasionally," or "never." The results showed that the frequency people reported playing these games was positively associated

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[155] Jagan A. Pillai et al., "Association of Crossword Puzzle Participation with Memory Decline in Persons Who Develop Dementia," *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* Nov. 2011 (17.6): 1006-13.

[156] Pillai et al., "Association of Crossword Puzzle Participation with Memory Decline in Persons Who Develop Dementia," 1006.

[157] Nicola Ferreira et al., "Associations between Cognitively Stimulating Leisure Activities, Cognitive Function and Age-Related Decline." *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 2015 (30): 422-430.

with high performance in grammatical reasoning and episodic memory, areas particularly vulnerable to age-related cognitive decline.[158]

Of course, it can be difficult to say definitively whether the crossword itself is the factor that helps reduce memory decline, or whether the fact that a person is doing the crossword is a marker for other types of behaviors that reduce memory decline. In other words, if you're the kind of person who's doing the crossword, especially if you think it's going to stave off dementia, you're also probably the kind of person who's taking lots of other healthy steps to prevent memory loss, and you might also be the kind of person not predisposed to memory loss at all. My grandfather did the cryptoquip and Jumble well into his nineties, and his memory remained intact until the last few weeks of life. Brian Skotko was never really interested in crosswords, even while he was studying HM; however, as he has grown older, he has begun to turn to the crossword as his own form of preventative medicine for his memory.[159] They might not help, but they can't hurt.

XV. Everything But the Crossword

In 2011, the *New York Times Magazine* announced a major shift in its design. A letter to readers explained that to keep the print magazine relevant in the age of digital media, the paper had decided to overhaul the contents and layout of that section, then-editor Hugo Lindgren explained to readers—or mostly overhaul. "With the exception of the crossword, which we didn't move lest a pitchfork-wielding mob (led by my father) assemble down in

[158] Ferreira et al., "Associations between cognitively stimulating leisure activities, cognitive function and age-related decline," 422.

[159] Interview, Michael Sharp.

our lobby, every page of the magazine has been reimagined."[160] (The crossword outlasted Lindgren himself, who left the *Times* after just three years.) The crossword has become such an established piece of intellectual technology that it now has a cottage industry: it is no longer a mania but a piece of modern life.

Crossword blogs have produced a new occupation: the crossword critic. "On any given day, there are five to ten crosswords that are as good or better than the *New York Times*," Rex Parker told me. "You just don't know about them." Rex Parker is the alias of Michael Sharp, a lecturer at SUNY Binghamton who teaches courses on comics, crime fiction, and Arthurian literature. Every night at ten-thirty p.m., after the next day's *New York Times* crossword has been published online, Parker solves the puzzle, which takes a few minutes, writes his review, which takes about an hour, and posts it on a blog called "Rex Parker Does the *New York Times* Crossword." Parker dilates his solution process for readers. He gives screenshots of partially filled grids and explains what he's thinking at that point in the puzzle, often accompanied by pictures and video clips. The tone is typically accurate and sharply critical. For example, Parker eviscerated a puzzle from July 2015 for including BIMBO. Not only is the term offensive, it's offensively bad fill: "Every constructor I know could redo that SE corner inside of five minutes without using a slur against women." Parker illustrates his criticism with a picture of the logo for the Wonder Bread competitor Bimbo.

Several other crossword blogs populate the Internet, such as the *New York Times*'s blog, *Wordplay*; Matt Gaffney's meta-crosswords; and *Diary of a Crossword Fiend*, an omnibus roundup of major crosswords. Crossword puzzles crop up frequently in educational handbooks to help with language acquisition. There are biology and history crosswords to

[160] Hugo Lindgren, "Everything but the Crossword," Editor's Letter, *New York Times Magazine*, 4 Mar. 2011.

study for tests. There are crossword comics, including strips that reinterpret a particular *Times* crossword as a graphic novel. Ernie Bushmiller would be proud.

Just as crossword tournaments and crossword contests of the twenties had provided a layer of camaraderie around the puzzle, by the time Weng took over from Farrar, letters to the editor had become a game unto itself, and another way of providing community through the essentially individual act. Though solving itself might be individual and compulsion-enabling, readers knew that other people were engaged in the same mental activity at the same time. Everyone has entered the same grid, with the same purpose, and the successful have arrived at the same conclusions.

The crossword has become such a well-oiled piece of technology that it's spawned another game for readers particularly deep in their compulsion: finding errors. Finding mistakes, in accuracy and in style, in the tight ship of the crossword became its own meta-puzzle. In the crossword-blog era, solvers could make their private opinions public by posting comments. People who dislike camaraderie around the act of solving puzzle can become part of a crossword community through the blogs. At the New York Public Library's Cullman Center, the fellows typically gather over lunch to do the crossword. Barbara, a Cullman Center fellow, preferred to work the puzzle by herself in the mornings. Instead, she sought fellowship over the puzzle through the blogs. She wrote into Rex Parker to complain about the use of "ENOLA GAY" clued as an "historic plane," citing the tone-deaf-ness: the Enola Gay was a devastating bomber, not a mere jet.

The crossword is no longer just the crossword: it's a culture.

Chapter 2

CROSSWORDS AND LITERATURE

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, crosswords have evolved from one of many word games in the newspaper to a major participant in culture. The crossword has also become deeply influential in the story of modern and contemporary literature. Whether as danger or as respite, the crossword is a limbo space, a spot where people feel comfortable to enter, but also a mode of interacting with words that is necessarily difficult to some degree. The crossword also requires a certain patience and obedience: one has to accept the terms of the game, and that one has the time and inclination to play the game, even though the solution is ultimately less a creation than a completion.

Critics have used the term "crossword puzzle" in reference to writing practice to signal works that appear intellectually difficult but lack emotional sophistication. In other words, these texts present riddles with correct solutions and invite the reader to "solve" them. However, I argue that the "crossword" mode need not carry the pejorative overtones of either surface-level emotions or finite capacity for interpretation. The crossword-puzzle mode invites associations and connection between ideas that appear in the same physical space, even if they're not necessarily connected by any other rationale. Reading a literary text like a crossword asks the reader to find the justification for the juxtaposition.

This chapter will argue that the crossword influences literary practice in three primary ways. I investigate how the crossword interacts with a text when it appears as a character. Then, I examine the crossword as a non-diagetic influence that a writer pursues, that is, a side interest external to that writer's main artistic output. Finally, I explore the crossword as a diagetic participant in another work, that is, a thematic trope within literature.

I conclude my analysis by demonstrating how we might apply the same tactics that crosswords teach us about reading literature and bring them to bear on a crossword puzzle: that is, finding patterns and connections among images and ideas that might not otherwise appear to be linked upon an initial surface observation.

First, I look at the crossword as character. Uncle Meleager leaves a crossword as a clue for inheritors to find his will; a slightly batty old upper-crust fellow can't solve newfangled crosswords. An unfinished crossword lies on a kitchen table; an alcoholic mother does crosswords habitually. A famed Italian professor is tackling a history of crosswords. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the crossword has made myriad cameos. I argue that as a character in literature, the crossword has evolved in usage from symbolic object, as in detective stories by authors like Dorothy Sayers and in satiric fiction by authors such as P.G. Wodehouse, to stylistic mode, as in post-modern fiction and contemporary graphic novels. The crossword deployed in literature often serves as shorthand for cleverness but also for a certain middle-class futility. However, the crossword is no longer confined to its role as a puzzle: it is part of characters' and readers' psychology.

Secondly, I look at the crossword as on-diegetic influence. Building on my claims about the crossword's stylistic mode when it appears as a character in a text, I proceed to discuss the crossword's influence when it appears as a habit or side project, taking Nabokov (whom we've encountered in the Introduction), James Merrill, and Alice Notley as examples. Many modern and contemporary writers have displayed mild to severe cases of crossword addiction. Although they may not choose to write about crosswords, or use the form in their work, the puzzle nevertheless impacts how they approach language. The crossword, for these authors, is largely a non-diegetic influence, in that crosswords are adjacent to but not necessarily directly involved with their poetry or prose. I argue that for authors who engage

in crosswords, even if this involvement is external to their work, the practice that the crossword demands of finding connections between seemingly unrelated ideas seeps into their work, and though their work asks to be interpreted in several modes, a crossword-puzzle style of reading—that is, with an eye to these non-narrative links—proves not only fruitful but crucial to understanding the work fully.

Finally, I examine the crossword as diegetic participant in a text. Writers often refer to the crossword within their work to point directly to the overall stylistic mode. Here, I distinguish from authors who use the crossword as a character in a work of fiction to think about how the puzzle influences poetry, both in content and in thematic mode. I argue that when a crossword appears in a poem, and especially in instructions guiding the reader how to interpret a poem, the author is privileging the "crossword puzzle" mode of reading—that is, this associative method of finding more and more connections among the ideas present—over other methods of interpretation. My case studies in this section are William Empson and Veronica Forrest-Thomson.

My discussion of crosswords as diagetic participants in literature engages with the idea of difficulty, that is, what does it mean for a work to be "difficult," and how does a reader "solve" this difficulty. I argue that the crossword serve as a heuristic of difficulty. The crossword features contingent difficulty (it asks the reader to look up at answers) and tactical difficulty (it asks the reader to determine which strategy to use to arrive at answers). The crossword, however, never engages in modal difficulty (the difficulty of empathy) or ontological difficulty (the difficulty of deciding whether or not the text should exist in the first place). Because the crossword is difficult in certain ways but not in others, we can think of it as *easy-difficult:* it's always difficult, but it's always difficult in the same ways.

I conclude this chapter with an exploration of what crossword-style literary practice might mean when applied to a crossword: I interpret a 1924 crossword puzzle shaped like a pipe by moving both as logically and as associatively as possible.

I. Crossword as Character

Over the past century, the crossword has frequently appeared as a character in literature, from mysteries to Oulipean fiction to graphic novels. In the crossword's early instantiations, the puzzle appeared as a character, a prop that had symbolic resonances within the work: for example, Dorothy Sayers included an actual crossword in a detective story as an element of the mystery, and P.G. Wodehouse satirized aristocrats by showing them bungling a puzzle. As the crossword itself has become more entrenched in daily life over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the crossword has become not only a character but part of the stylistic mode of the work of literature in which it appears. Georges Perec's 1978 novel *Life: A User's Manual*, which is constructed under several rigorous thematic and formal constraints, revolves around a painting that gets turned into a jigsaw puzzle, which the protagonist must try to put together. Perec embeds an unfinished crossword into the novel as part of the description of a character's apartment, yet this crossword is less an illustrative quality of that character and more a symbolic echo of the novel as a whole: just as the protagonist fails to put together the jigsaw puzzle, the novel itself also revolves around incompleteness, with words and clues that provide suggestive hints but are unresolved. Crosswords also appear as both character and formal constraint in William H. Gass's 1995 novel *The Tunnel*. Billy Kohler, the protagonist, describes his mother's crossword habit with sanctimonious disgust as a waste of time, yet when she enters a hospital at the end of the novel, he tries to understand her by doing the puzzle. A crossword grid appears on the side

of one of the pages, which visually as well as thematically blurs the novel and the crossword together. Graphic novelist Paolo Bacilieri takes this blurring exponentially farther in his 2017 book *FUN*, a graphic novel about a professor writing a book about crossword puzzles that uses the crossword as stylistic inspiration as well as content. *FUN* is crossword-like detective yarn and a history presented with constant visual reference to crosswords and grids. The only thing *FUN* never gives us is an actual crossword puzzle to solve.

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"A Couple of Bogus Letters": Inspector Morse and the Crossword

Inspector Endeavour Morse buys the *Times* of London at a bookstall in Oxford, boards the express train to Paddington, and by Didcot, the railway town ten miles south of Oxford, has solved the crossword—except for one damned clue. Morse is embarrassed. His identity is tied to finishing the crossword; after all, his first name was revealed to the public through a cryptic crossword clue: "My whole life's effort has revolved around Eve" is ENDEAVOUR, that is, an anagram of EVE + AROUND. With his dictionary, Morse assures the reader, he could have cracked the puzzle in no time. But Morse isn't thrown off for too long. As Colin Dexter writes in *The Wench Is Dead*, the detective novel in which Morse's little hiccup takes place, he "quickly wrote in a couple of bogus letters (in case any of his fellow-passengers were waiting to be impressed) and then read the letters and the obituaries."[161] Crossword solved—but more importantly, the illusion of the crossword has been solved.

Morse is hardly the first literary personage to earn his clout through crosswords. When the crossword appears in popular media, it is often as a metonym for a particular kind

[161] Colin Dexter, *The Wench Is Dead* (London: Pan Macmillian, 1989), 234-5.

of difficulty: the crossword displays a certain cleverness that often masks deeper emotional truths. The schmaltziest version of the crossword-as-intelligence-indicator appears in the 2009 film *All About Steve*,[162] in which the main character, played by Sandra Bullock, is a crossword constructor. The crossword gets deployed to signal the main character's extreme dowdiness: pity the wit, more nitwit than with it. For the scriptwriters, the crossword functions at once as Zen koan and security blanket, a symbol the main character can use to spout platitudes rather than thinking: "My crossword puzzle is always good news. It enlightens. It entertains. It keeps your grandma's mind alive so she remembers to send you five bucks on your birthday." "In crosswords, as in life, some days are harder than others." The crossword serves as barely disguised symbol for the boxes that the main character has trapped herself in: even though she's great at solving crosswords, she's terrible at facing the real problems of life.

But the crossword can also be a more complex figure in literature. When writers engage not only with the idea of the puzzle but the form itself, the crossword as structure can both complement and complicate content.

Colin Dexter uses the crossword as a sign of Inspector Morse's intelligence, both to himself as well as the people around him in the train car. To the reader, the crossword appears as a marker of both a leisure-class intellect and a mind that arrives at solutions.

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The Butler Did It

Dexter's use of the crossword as a sign of both leisure-class intellect and detective prowess winks to Dorothy Sayers, the British crime writer and poet. Crosswords had only

[162] A writing instructor once warned me against using a pun as a title: would I want to have a pun tattooed on me?

arrived in England a few years before Dorothy Sayers's 1928 short story "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," but the crossword had already embedded itself indelibly in British society, and the crime writer had already pounced on the form as a rich source of dramatic intrigue.

Crosswords reveal the power dynamic between Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers's laconic sleuth, and Mr. Bunter, his deferential valet. Bunter occupies a high enough social stratum that he has the time and inclination to solve a crossword puzzle: we presume that he must have some education to be able to figure out the clues, and that he must have at least a modicum of leisure time in his work day to have physical access to the puzzle and the access to the level of culture needed to solve it. Wimsey and Bunter have a relationship that extends slightly beyond the professional, as Bunter feels comfortable calling upon his employer to ask a question about a pursuit that has nothing to do with Wimsey's requests. Wimsey is serving Bunter's needs, not the other way around, as would be expected in the economic relationship. Yet Bunter is still deferential to Wimsey: the valet is the one stumped, and Wimsey holds the power intellectually. Bunter might, subtly, be very much at work as he performs this apparent leisure task: by asking Wimsey for help, Bunter is giving the aristocratic detective an opportunity to stretch his sleuthing muscles and arrive at the correct answer from limited resources. Wimsey, as is appropriate for a detective, pieces together the solution from clues, rather than a grid.

Crosswords also reveal the inner workings of Lord Wimsey's mind that Sayers does not narrate directly on the page. The crossword serves as a vehicle to demonstrate the sleuth's subconscious mind afoot. To the outside observer, Wimsey is in the bath, and we can see that he is thinking about something, but Sayers presents us with a third-person, not a first-person, perspective: "His song died into a rapturous crooning as he settled into the

verbena-scented water. His eyes roamed vaguely over the pale blue-and-white tiles of the bathroom walls." We see him seeing something, but we don't know what he sees.

Sayers leaves Wimsey soaking and switches narrative perspective to Bunter, who hears Wimsey ring at an unexpected time; Bunter is alarmed at first, but when he attends on his lord, he learns that Wimsey has called because he's alighted on the answer to Bunter's elusive crossword clue. The reader realizes what has been occupying Wimsey's thoughts, or at least part of them, in the bath, and the blue-and-white tiles retroactively recall the crossword's grid; even though Wimsey hasn't actually seen the grid, if he's thinking about a clue that has to fit into a certain number of letters, the tiles on the bathroom walls subliminally echo the puzzle.

Sayers has to establish that Wimsey is excellent at crosswords for the mystery's plot to function. Wimsey's bathtub meditation on the crossword foreshadows the eponymous Uncle Meleager's will. Wimsey's sister, Mary, arrives in Wimsey's bedroom, munching his buttered eggs. Clad in riding breeches, as she ostentatiously points out to Wimsey, Mary literally as well as figuratively holds the story's reins. Bunter has brought Wimsey his test crossword, which Wimsey solves; now, Mary brings Wimsey another puzzle. Wimsey is the star of the show, but he's also at everyone's bidding: he's the highest social class and everyone defers to him, but in terms of the story's structure, Wimsey is very much a servant, solving the puzzle set before him rather than setting the terms of the game.

Miss Hannah Marryat's Uncle Meleager, "the very rich, curmudgeony sort,"[163] has just died, and his new will—written just before he died, and superseding the old one—leaves everything to the lucky Miss Marryat (the tongue-in-cheek surname suggests that she's about

[163] Dorothy Sayers, "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Complete Stories* (New York: Bourbon Street Books, 2013), 38.

to become much more marriageable) and her mother. However, Old Moneybags Meleager has beleaguered his would-be heirs: a wily character who loves games, he's hidden his new will. The old one leaves everything to (gasp!) the Primrose League—a noted Conservative organization, and a direct dig at Meleager's Socialist niece. If Miss Marryat can't find the new one, not only will she remain destitute, her political nemesis will gain at her expense.

Old Meleager, we're told, was a great hand at games. Meleager has left a letter to Miss Marryat instructing her that his will will only emerge through an "exercise in sustained frivolity."[164] Meleager, a caricature of an upper-crust British gent, adapts easily to all the latest fashions: "They say he took up crosswords as soon as they came in," Bunter informs Wimsey, "and was remarkably quick at solving them, my lord, and inventing them. . . . He was a great man for acrostics before that, I understood them to say, but, when crosswords came in, he threw away his acrostics and said he liked the new game better. Wonderfully adaptable, if I may say so, he seems to have been for an old gentleman."[165]

But the crossword isn't just a one-to-one substitute for the acrostic, the latest leisure activity replacing the outdated one. Crosswords, Miss Marryat tells Wimsey, were a different beast: "Poor old man, he went mad over them. He had every newspaper sent him, and in his last illness he'd be trying to fill the wretched things in. It was worse than his acrostics and jig-saw puzzles. Poor creature, he must have been senile, I'm afraid."[166] But Meleager's penchant for puzzles is hardly the harbinger of senility: Wimsey discovers in Meleager's attic a trove of crossword manuscripts, and while some seem simple, "others were difficult, with allusive or punning clues; some of the ordinary newspaper type, others in the form of rhymed

[164] Sayers, "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," 41.

[165] Sayers, "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," 43.

[166] Sayers, "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," 44.

distichs."[167] This is no garden-variety solver: Meleager is a first-rate crossworder, and he's created a meta-puzzle for his will-seekers. Not only is the key hidden in a crossword, the crossword itself is hidden across the house: a set of unusual clues in the attic, it turns out, find their grid in the tiles at the bottom of the house's impluvium. Wimsey's bathroom walls that had earlier turned into evocations of a crossword grid foreshadow the location of the crucial crossword grid that reveals where Meleager's will is located.

Luckily, Wimsey, as we've discovered, is not only an A-1 sleuth but an ace cruciverbalist. The reader doesn't have to know anything about crosswords to get clued in. All the clues are in rhymed couplets, and they read as one long poem, so, unlike most crosswords, we can "read" the clues as though they are a continuous block of text, rather than each clue existing as an autonomous unit[168] connected to the word in the grid. Wimsey and the crew unpack the whimsical poetic clues to solve the grid. There are four darker tiles in the impluvium, which lead the team to a chapter and verse in the Bible, which finally bring us to the will. The crossword itself isn't the will, but the key that points everyone to the hideaway under the stairs where the will has been secreted in a panel in the wall.[169]

Even though it's entirely narratively superfluous, Sayers provides the opportunity for the reader to solve the puzzle. She puts the grid right into the story, along with all the clues; later in the collection, after another Lord Peter story, she gives the answer, so that the reader

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[167] Sayers, "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," 45.

[168] In themed crosswords, each clue isn't exactly autonomous, since many are anchored around a common element; however, the clues themselves can't typically be read as one might read a paragraph or a poem.

[169] Children's book author Ellen Raskin borrowed puzzle-in-the-will-solution for her 1978 Newbery Medal-winning book *The Westing Game*. Sixteen potential heirs of businessman Sam Westing have to crack the wordplay in his will if they want to win his $200 million inheritance. Each pair of would-be heirs knows that they have to figure out clues and solve a puzzle to earn the prize, but they don't know what the clues stand for or what type of puzzle they're solving: the reader, in the privileged catbird seat, gets to see all the clues unfurl, but even the reader isn't given full access to the story until the end.

is welcome to stop and complete the puzzle, should we so desire. Sayers knows that the crossword is addictive, and that it's the hook for the story, and she wants the reader to be able to play along. None of the characters are particularly sympathetic: Miss Marryat's a little money-grubbing, Mary's a little brash, Wimsey and Bunter are their own aloof tag-team, Meleager is dead. The star of the show is the crossword puzzle, and Sayers uses the story as a Trojan horse to show off her own puzzle-making chops. If Wimsey uses the puzzle to exercise his sleuthing prowess, Sayers uses the crossword to demonstrate her agility with the detective story.

Ultimately, "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will" is a story about the crossword's integration into British daily life. The crossword enters the story as both a democratic and hierarchical force: though it provides an avenue for friendly rapport between master and valet, it also reifies the lord/servant power dynamic.

Ouroboros-style, the story ends as it began, with Bunter asking Wimsey for help with a crossword clue: "'If your lordship would be so kind,' said Mr. Bunter, producing a small paper from his pocket, 'I should be grateful if you could favour me with a South African quadruped in six letters, beginning with Q.'"[170] We're back to homeostasis, as signaled by the crossword: the valet provides Wimsey the opportunity to both suggest his collegiality with his servant and to lord his intellectual dominance. The crossword simultaneously brings the two together while cementing their distance.

Colin Dexter also uses the crossword as a space to establish the power, and class, dynamic between Inspector Morse and his partner, Sergeant John Lewis. Morse and Lewis meet in the 1975 novel *Last Bus to Woodstock*, Dexter's first Inspector Morse novel. Lewis initially encounters Morse as the latter is completing a cryptic crossword puzzle. Morse

[170] Sayers, "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," 56.

explains to Lewis the Byzantine, erudite knot he's untangled to arrive at a slightly racy answer—BRA—but Lewis refuses to be embarrassed. He's impressed by Morse's skill, but, as Morse well knows, impatient with games.[171] The crossword encapsulates their relationship: Morse is the one who solves the puzzles, but he also leaps to conclusions, and likes to demonstrate his knowledge flamboyantly. Lewis is the sidekick, less intellectually gifted but steadier, neither prone to leaps nor to flaunting his intelligence. Morse uses the crossword as barbell, flexing his intellect; his solving prowess shows that he's clever, but also that he's a show-off.

Just as Sayers uses the crossword to cement the hierarchy between Wimsey and his valet, P. G. Wodehouse also uses the crossword as a metonym for intelligence, but instead of affirming the balance of mental power in favor of those who hold financial heft, Wodehouse deploys the crossword as a mechanism to reveal the daftness of the upper class and the intellectual superiority of the economically inferior. In Wodehouse's 1937 novel *Summer Moonshine*, Lady Abbott finds herself stumped:

> Lady Abbott lay on the settee in her boudoir with her shoes off - her habit when at rest. She was doing a crossword puzzle. Through the open window at her side, the cool evening air poured in, refreshing to a brain which had become a little heated as it sought to discover the identity of an Italian composer in nine letters beginning with p. She had just regretfully rejected Irving Berlin because, despite his other merits, too numerous to mention here, he had twelve letters, began with an i, and was not an Italian composer when there was a sound outside like a mighty rushing wind and Sir Buckstone came bursting in. [...] He picked up the paper and scanned the crossword puzzle which his Toots had been trying to solve. [Bringing] to the problem the full force of his intellect, he took the pencil and in a firm hand wrote down the word "Pagliacci." Each helping each, was the way Sir Buckstone looked at it.[172]

Pagliacci, an Italian opera by the composer Leoncavello, is no more right than Irving Berlin, but if Toots and Sir Buckstone are satisfied, then the crossword has done its job: placating the upper classes while poking fun under their very noses.

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[171] Colin Dexter, *Last Bus to Woodstock* (London: Pan Books, 2017), 17.

[172] P.G. Wodehouse, *Summer Moonshine* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 236.

In his 1957 novel *Something Fishy,* titled *The Butler Did It* in American release, Wodehouse's upper-crust characters again struggle with a crossword puzzle, as they typically do. Often, the butler will come in and provide the correct solution, and the society person with the leisure to play the game will immediately co-opt the answer given to him as though he had arrived at it through his own mental prowess. Near the beginning of *Something Fishy*, we meet Lord Uffingham in distress. He barks to his niece, Jane:

> "[D]on't bother me now, my dear girl. I'm doing my crossword puzzle, and it's a stinker this morning. Run and ask Keggs what the dickens 'Adventurer goes in for outrageous road-speed' is supposed to signify. Tell him it's urgent. And I want some more coffee."
> "You drink too much coffee."
> "Yer can't drink too much coffee. It bucks you up. It stimulates the mental processes."
> "All right, I'll get you some. What a lot of trouble you do give, to be sure."
> Jane returned with the coffee.
> "I've made just one cup," she said. "I disapprove of you poisoning your system with caffeine. And that 'road-speed' thing is an anagram, Mr. Keggs says, and the answer is 'desperado.' Bung it down."[173]

Even though the butler is not in the scene, he makes his presence seen by smoothing over Lord Uffenham's problem; Lord Uffenham need not bother himself longer than necessary with pesky intellectual hurdles.[174] He continues to Jane:

> "I will. Desperado, eh? Capital. Now, go and ask him what the devil 'So the subordinate professional on trial gets wages in advance not without demur' means."
> "He's not here."[175]

Lord Uffenham demands that his servant complete the solve, yet he then takes all the credit, both socially and internally for having finished the puzzle. Uffenham has no intention of solving the puzzle on his own: the point is to have the butler come in sequentially to solve it, clue by clue, so that Uffenham can *pretend* he is solving the puzzle on his own. He tries to reap all the self-congratulatory and social benefits of having a completed crossword puzzle while doing none of the actual labor himself. The crossword thus become a metonym for

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[173] P.G. Wodehouse, *Something Fishy* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2008), 27.

[174] A proto-Siri?

[175] Wodehouse, *Something Fishy*, 27.

society itself: a token of the leisure class accomplished by the actual engine, that is, the servant class.

The crossword shows that times have changed. The crossword is supposed to be an anchor, a continuous routine that exists outside trends, but even the stalwart puzzle has gone beyond Uffenham. Lord Uffenham represents the English aristocracy of a bygone era, clinging to prewar customs while the rest of the world has zoomed by, as though, in the twenty-first century, he used a landline rather than a cell phone. The seismic shift in the institution of the crossword puzzle becomes a clear aspect he can point to as the harbinger of a world that has moved past him:

> [Jane] found him in his study having difficulties with 'Tree gets mixed up with comic hat in scene of his triumphs,' and for a while listened sympathetically while he spoke his mind on the subject of the smart alecks who compose crossword puzzles these days. Lord Uffenham had been brought up in the sound old tradition of the Sun God Ra and the large Australian bird Emu, and he resented all this stuff about subordinate professionals and comic hats.[176]

Yet Uffenham is fooling no one but himself. The crossword is also a trivial realm, a Tinkertoy version of mastery that keeps the doddering uncle occupied. Niece Jane wields much more power in their relationship than Uffenham, even though she's younger, does not have his title, and is a woman to boot. Though she lets him complain, she organizes his world around him. Uffenham is witless, hapless, and helpless. After Uffenham complains vigorously about the newfangled crosswords—which serves as his way of complaining about modern life—Jane changes the subject:

> "And now touching on dinner tonight. Would you like caviar to start with, followed by clear soup, roast chicken with bread sauce and two veg, poires Hélène and a jam omelette?"
> "Capital."
> "Well, you won't get them," said Jane brutally.[177]

[176] Wodehouse, *Something Fishy*, 56.

[177] Wodehouse, *Something Fishy*, 56.

Tantalus Jane dangles the old-timey meal in front of Lord Uffenham and snatches it away, demonstrating yet another way that society has moved on from the Sun God Ra. Just as Uffenham craves the old-style crossword that has disappeared, the old-fashioned dinner he once could rely upon is no longer on the menu, and there's nothing his power, which belonged to another era, can do about it. Lord Uffenham's "capital" cultural capital has been whisked away from him. The old-school style of crosswords favored a certain breed of education, knowledge that one could only achieve through a particular pedigree. The old crosswords also required the solver to be familiar with the world of crosswords themselves. Lord Uffenham loves crosswordese because it signals an elite club, but the crossword now reflects a different kind of hierarchy: a meritocratic aristocracy is taking hold of the crossword. The cryptic requires an elite status, but one borne out of cleverness, not out of knowledge only available to people with access to a certain education. Bill Hollister, a visitor at Lord Uffenham's house, is startled to see an Edwardian-era butler in full duds and the humility of a generation ago. Uffenham asks Bill about the crossword clue that's been plaguing him, but when Bill doesn't know the answer, Uffenham disavows the whole enterprise, rather than admitting ineptitude: "Well, what the hell? These bally crossword puzzles are just a waste of time. Forget the whole thing, I say."[178] Uffenham would rather maintain his illusion of power and disclaim the whole franchise than admit what he knows deep down: like a currency that no longer has any economic heft, Uffenham's status has no authority in the current world. Crosswordese that was once prized is now useless. The crossword, like society itself, has moved forward.

In 1937, Wodehouse's aristocratic and idiotic crossworders didn't ask the servants for help: they blithely filled in their own answers willy-nilly, punching in something that was

[178] Wodehouse, *Something Fishy*, 58.

aesthetically pleasing, and were pleased as punch with their prowess, never bothering to imagine that they might be wrong. Twenty years later, Wodehouse's cruciverbalists are still just as inept, but now, a surface solution is no longer enough: the crossword must be correct, not merely have the appearance of a filled-in crossword. Gilt will not entirely cover over guilt. Lord Uffenham pretends he doesn't care, but he's baffled and befuddled as he watches his world pass him by.

In 2013, the *Guardian* ran a contest to solve the six unsolved cryptic clues in *Something Fishy*; with varying degrees of confidence, entrants succeeded. As with the deliberately bungled clues in *Summer Moonshine*, the unsolved cryptic clues in *Something Fishy* aren't voids that thrust readers out of the novel, but enigmas that invite us in. We are in on a joke that's going on directly under the characters' noses: we are implicitly equated not with the oafish upper class but with the wise butler, smoothly aware of everything behind the scenes. The unsolved crossword is a mechanism of frustration in the novel's text, but an inviting lure in the novel's paratext.

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Les Mots-Croises

In 1960, Raymond Queneau and Francois Le Lionnais founded Oulipo, short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* ('workshop of potential literature'), a group of mainly French-speaking writers and mathematicians who create work using constrained writing techniques. Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* ('*One Hundred Thousand Billion Sonnets*') contains ten sonnets, one on each page. Each page is split into fourteen strips, with one line per strip, and any line from the first group can work as the first line of the poem, any line from the second group can be in that position, etc. There are ten options for each of the fourteen slots, hence 10^{14} sonnets in the one poem. Writers in the Oulipian school combine the capacity for

infinitely complex wordplay with a rabid appetite for detective novels. And Oulipian wordplay, though extravagant, is hardly devoid of emotions. Loss, trauma, repetition, joy, sadism, madness, revenge: the passions drive the invention of these language machines.

Georges Perec was one of the most prominent original members of Oulipo. *La Disparation*, translated into English as *A Void*, is a lipogrammatic novel that never uses the letter 'e.'[179] In contrast, Perec's univocalic *The Exeter Text: Jewels, Secrets, Sex*, translated into English by Ian Monk[180], depicts the "e's retern" via a successful jewel heist during an orgy in Exeter Cathedral. As Ian Monk writes, "Hence the *e*-text (glee engenders wretchedness) represents the *e*-less text's (wretchedness engenders glee) perfect reverse."

Perec also famously created complex *mots croisés*, challenging himself to build larger and larger squares with no blank spaces. (This is an easier task in French than in English; there are more words in French that use the same letters of the alphabet.) To Perec, the crossword is not a flattened version of a poem or story: the crossword is a petri dish of the creative process. In the introduction to his collected crosswords, Perec describes the process of creating a crossword as two tasks, entirely in opposition with each other, yet equally vital.

> The filling of the diagram is a tedious, meticulous, maniacal task, a sort of letter-based arithmetic where all that matters is that words have this or that length, and that their juxtaposition reveals groupings that are compatible with the perpendicular construction of other words; it is a system of primary constraints where the letter is omnipresent but language is absent. Contrariwise, the search for definitions is fluid, intangible work, a stroll in the land of words, intended to uncover, in the imprecise neighborhood that constitutes the definition of a word, the fragile and unique location where it will be simultaneously revealed and hidden. The two operations imply mental faculties that could almost seem contradictory: in the first, one proceeds by trial and error, starting over twenty or thirty times a grid that one always deems less than perfect; in the second, one favors intuition, fortuitous finds, sudden illuminations; the first is done at one's table, with obstinacy and tenacity, groping, counting, erasing; the other is rather done at any hour of the day or night, without thinking about it, strolling, letting one's attention float freely in the wake of the thousand and one associations evoked by this or that word.[181]

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[179] Except the four in the author's name.

[180] Or, "E.N. Menk."

[181] Georges Perec, "Thoughts on the Art and Technique of Crossing Words," trans. Henri Picciotto with Arthur Schulman, *The Believer*, Sept. 2006 (4.7): 33-4.

In Perec's description, the crossword marries an anal retentive tendency with the mindset that pop psychologists might call the "flow" state. Perec sets up the comparison between creating the grid and finding the clues for the words as though pitting these two acts in competition against each other: we expect to find one victorious over the other, superior in both the imagination it demands and the pleasure it provides.

Perec's depiction of crossword construction seems initially as though creating the diagram is a mere mechanic's work and the cluing of inspiration is where true genius lies. Why bother with the grid's grunt labor? Why not exist purely in the Baudelairean forest of associations? Yet the description plays a road-not-taken trick: though structured as a competition, there isn't a winner. In "The Road Not Taken," Robert Frost deliberates between two paths in the woods, and although syntactically, the reader might assume that he is judging the routes against each other, in fact, "the passing there / Had worn them really about the same"; indeed, "both that morning equally lay." Frost's rhyme scheme helps persuade the reader's ear that the narrator is making a judgment call: each five-line stanza has an abaab rhyme scheme, which convinces our ear that one path is the winner, because one rhyme is the winner every time. However, the poem is not about choosing the better path, but about simply making a choice. "All the difference" is ambiguous tonally: is Frost optimistic, pessimistic, ironic, sarcastic, diffident? All we know is that he moved forward.

The wood requires paths so that the imagination doesn't get lost; without the words to tether the crossword constructor, there would be no world at all. "This or that word" evoke the associations, but these associations would never exist had the parameters for each word not been carefully, and correctly, plotted. The diagram might seem to exist merely as a backdrop to support clues, but this diagram provides the way that these associations can arrive at all. Without the clues, the crossword would be letters jailed on the page, but without

the letters, the associations that give rise to the clues would never have existed. The mechanical act of diagramming might be maniacal, but this arithmetic is what creates inspiration. Extreme freedom requires extreme cages; true surprise can only arise out of the most predictable tedium.

Though Perec's 1978 novel *Life: A User's Manual* is based on a jigsaw puzzle, crosswords make a cameo that is at once superfluous and essential. The novel features a painter named Bartlebooth,[182] who makes watercolors and sends them to a puzzle-maker, Winckler. Winckler then cuts the paintings into jigsaw pieces and sends them back to Bartlebooth for the painter to put back together. The re-fastened painting is then sent back to a craftsman who re-binds the paper, making it virtually indistinguishable from the original version. Painter, puzzlemaker, and binder all live in the same apartment building. Perec tells the story spatially, rather than temporally: the entire novel is set in one moment of time, and the story jumps from room to room in the apartment block.

Winckler's puzzles are too hard, and Bartlebooth does not finish. He gets about as far as Mr. Ramsay in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, who believes that the progress of human thought goes from A to Z, but he cannot reach R. "A shutter, like the leathern eyelid of a lizard, flickered over the intensity of his gaze and obscured the letter R. In that flash of darkness he heard people saying—he was a failure—that R was beyond him. He would never reach R. On to R, once more." Bartlebooth is supposed to solve five hundred puzzles, but in the middle of the four hundred and thirty-ninth of the five hundred puzzles, he dies. "On the tablecloth, somewhere in the crepuscular sky of the four hundred and thirty-ninth puzzle, the black hole of the sole piece not yet filled in has the almost perfect shape of an X. But the ironical thing, which could have been foreseen long ago, is that the piece the dead

[182] A portmanteau of Herman Melville's Bartleby and Valery Larbaud's Barnabooth.

man holds between his fingers is shaped like a W." Why? Bartlebooth seems to be asking. The only answer is to ex him out. And perhaps there's hope after all: both a W and an X are composed, graphically, of two V's: the W overlaps the V's, and an X lays the V's nose-to-tail against each other.

The novel's plot proceeds spatially rather than narratively, leading the reader from apartment to apartment in the building. When we enter one apartment, that of the Altamont family, for the second time, Perec walks us through a still life of a dining room in slow panorama. The description gives each detail poised as though the inhabitants had just stood up, half-eaten canapés perched under the electric lights, the evening paper spread out under wine barrels to catch the wine before it starts to drip. "On one of the pages you can see a crossword puzzle. . . . the grid has not been filled in completely, though progress has been made,"[183] Perec writes, and then presents the unfinished crossword grid he has just described. The grid presses the scene from reality to hyper-reality: the saturation of detail become over-saturated, forcing us to notice more than the naked eye would generally take in on first glance. That unfinished crossword becomes a meta-symbol for the novel itself: though the structure has been set since the beginning, all of the gaps are not filled in. The novel is explicitly about jigsaw puzzles, and the jigsaw puzzle provides the puzzle metaphor for how the characters experience the book's content. In other words, the characters receive the world jigsaw-style, one piece at a time. But the grid of the unfinished crossword gives a structure for how the reader experiences the book's content.

Perec uses crosswords to create an Oulipian reality effect. As per Roland Barthes, the reality effect of a story or novel arrives through seemingly gratuitous background details, such as a barometer in Flaubert's "A Simple Heart," that are only present to provide a

[183] Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, trans. David Bellos (Boston: David R. Godine, 1987), 106.

realistic backdrop, not for symbolic or narrative import.[184] The barometer isn't a Chekovian gun; rather, it serves the purpose of forcing the reader to occupy a three-dimensional world. Perec's crossword is the equivalent of Flaubert's barometer. In a novel built as a jigsaw puzzle, the unfinished crossword is the detail that reminds the reader that reality, here, is not the real world but a jigsaw puzzle.

In 1987, David Bellos translated Perec's novel, and he had to face the problem of making the crossword grid work in English. How do you translate an unfinished crossword grid? The grid entails certain letters: how do you achieve the same constellation of assumed words when you cross languages? Two of the clues in the French grid—ETONNEMENT and OIGNON—are critical to the novel's wordplay, so Bellos used ASTONISHED and ONION as the English cognates for these, but filled in the rest somewhat more freely. Bellos re-organized the spaces in the grid itself to be more friendly to English-language words, though he follows Perec in including two-letter words, and in indulging in an asymmetrical grid rather than constraining himself to a symmetrical space.

II. Crossword as Nondiegetic Influence

Many modern and contemporary writers are inveterate crossword solvers. T.S. Eliot developed a habit of doing the crossword alone, which contributed to his image as a person of somber and serious spiritual disposition.[185] W.H. Auden did the crossword as part of his daily ritual; Dorothy Sayers built crosswords into her mysteries. Vladimir Nabokov, James Merrill, Alice Notley, Jon Stewart, TV writer Megan Amram, cultural critic Molly Young: all

[184] See Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA: U of California Press, 1989), 141-8.

[185] David Donovan, *Spiritual Selfhood and the Modern Idea: Thomas Carlyle and T.S. Eliot*, Dissertation, 2002, 202.

addicts. Dexter and composer Stephen Sondheim were part of a coterie of solvers who received the annual Christmas puzzle by cryptic crossword constructor Apex. Eric Chalkley, a carpenter from Croyden, named himself "Apex" because he styled himself after legendary setter Ximenes: Ape-X. From 1971 through 2002, Apex created A Puzzle Every Xmas, a fiendish cryptic, as mentioned earlier, that he mailed to a small band of solvers each year.[186]

In 1934, according to a letter to the *Times* of London, MP Austen Chamberlain—better known today as ghost-story writer M. R. James—allegedly "measured the time required for boiling his breakfast egg by that needed for the solution of your daily crossword – and he hates a hard-boiled egg." In disgusted response to this humblebrag, satirist P. G. Wodehouse wrote in defense of crosswordese: "To a man who has been beating his head against the wall for twenty minutes over a single anagram it is g. and wormwood to read a statement like that one about the Provost of Eton and the eggs. We of the *canaille*, now that the Sun-God Ra has apparently retired from active work, are intensely grateful for an occasional emu."

Works by writers who are doing crosswords and thinking about crosswords *around* but not *in* the text also invite a crossword approach to reading, that is, one that looks for clues and associations, but this is not the only or even the primary mode of reading that the text invites. The crossword style of reading is one among many ways to approach these writers' works: a necessary component to understanding, but one of several ways in which the poem asks the reader to participate. The solution is only the beginning.

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The "Crossword-Puzzle School"

[186] In a telephone interview, Geoff Chalkley, Apex's son, told me, "He was forging a cricket team from different counties," spread around the country and the world: "all really just corresponding, not that much contact."

In 1977, James Merrill received the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for *Divine Comedies*, his seventh full-length collection. The cornerstone of *Divine Comedies* is "The Book of Ephraim," a long poem that Merrill composed through Ouija-board sessions with his partner, David Jackson. "Ephraim" became the first section of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, his epic opus written through decades of séances, that garnered the National Book Critic Circle's Award. Critics could fault neither Merrill's impeccable technique and poetic form, nor his prodigious facility with language. Yet these very qualities were also perceived by some to be his flaws. Louis Simpson, who reviewed *Divine Comedies* in the *New York Times,* needed a particular way to both acknowledge and censure Merrill's skill, and came up with a descriptor that in critical parlance could do both. Of "Ephraim," Simpson writes: "J. M. and his friend arrive at their ideas of the afterlife by using a Ouija board; a teacup moves from one letter of the alphabet to another as Ephraim speaks. In this manner the universe is assembled—rather like a crossword puzzle."[187]

Simpson's comparison isn't a compliment. "Crossword puzzle" serves as shorthand to imply that Merrill's poem is overly clever but lacks raw emotion, relying on surface-level difficulty rather than drawing on riskier depths. Simpson wasn't the first critic to use the term "crossword puzzle" in reference to a literary work, and he wasn't the first to do so in this pejorative cast. During the twenties and thirties, several critics began to disparage the formation of what they sneeringly dubbed a "crossword-puzzle school" of literary theory. In *American Poetry Since 1900*, his 1921 survey of recent work, Louis Untermeyer dismisses the pleasure of "The Waste Land" as "the same sort of gratification attained through having solved a puzzle, a form of self-congratulation."[188] In a 1935 review of B .E. C. Davis's

[187] Louis Simpson, "New Poetry," *The New York Times Book Review,* 21 Mar. 1976.
[188] Untermeyer, *American Poetry Since 1900*, 153.

Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study, critic Ray Heffner censures Davis's book as failing "to differentiate between the broad political intention. . .and the minute matching of patterns of the crossword-puzzle school."[189]

"Crossword" as a descriptor of writing and reading practice persists into the present, and still drips with derision. In the introduction to his 2015 biography of T. S. Eliot, *Young Eliot: From St. Louis to the Waste Land*, Robert Crawford assures the reader that

> "the verse is nowhere here treated merely as a crossword puzzle or source-hunter's labyrinth. Consciously crafted artistic work, it nonetheless transmutes personal agonies, treasured images and insights. While some of it can bristle with learning, it can also scald. However much he might have resisted the idea, knowledge of his life heightens a sense of Eliot's finest work as fusing finessed artifice with unmistakable *cri de coeur*."[190]

Crawford's description gives a double jab to the crossword. As an art form, the crossword is pitted as clever for cleverness's sake, lacking the sensitive richness of Eliot's verse. As a mode of reading, the puzzle here signals a fact-finding mission, conjuring a reader in pith helmet and blinders who enters the poem as archaeological dig, rather than emotional experience. In other words, the crossword becomes a yardstick against which both the text and the reader measure themselves. Is the piece of literature merely crosswordy? Is the reader merely reading as though solving a crossword puzzle? What does that mean, and what is involved in the gap between solving a puzzle and reading a work of literature?

Critics might use crosswords as a disparaging yardstick to other forms of writing, but readers are also reminded just as frequently that humans love patterns, and crave puzzles. Platitudes noting humans' interest in puzzles proliferate. "We require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable," wrote Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*.[191] According to

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[189] Ray Heffner, Review of *Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study, Modern Language Notes* 50.3 (1935): 193.

[190] Robert Crawford, *Young Eliot: From St. Louis to the Waste Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2015), 8.

[191] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 298.

Henry Dudeney, one of England's foremost mathematical puzzle creators during the Victorian era, "Puzzles, like virtue, are their own reward."[192] Historian Marcel Danesi observes, "Puzzles emerged at about the same time as mystery cults—right at the dawn of human history. . .For some truly mysterious reason, human beings seem to need this kind of catharsis on a regular basis—as the popularity of mysteries and puzzles across the world and across time attests."[193] In *The Crossword Obsession: The History and Lore of the World's Most Popular Pastime*, Coral Amende alliteratively observes: "Human beings have a passion for puzzles: we love giving our mental musculature vigorous workouts with perplexing posers and scintillating stumpers—particularly those with a goodly dose of wicked wit."[194]

Wordplay is as deeply rooted in the pleasure principle as foreplay. Puzzles, as writer Helene Hovanec notes in *The Puzzler's Paradise*, "simultaneously conceal the answers yet cry out to be solved," demanding that solvers match "their own ingenuity against that of the constructors."[195] One cover of Hovanec's book features Adam and Eve playing Scrabble in the Garden of Eden, the serpent hovering between them to kibitz. The game's mechanics and erotics are clear: this is a two-person game, and there's no room in the relationship for the serpent; yet the Scrabble board is, already, a stand-in for something, a means of communication that is neither conversation nor conjugation. The scene is probably post-lapsarian, as Eve and Adam sport well-placed fig leaves, and Eve has the knowledge to be Adam's worthy opponent. But neither of them is paying much attention to the serpent,

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[192] Quoted in Marcel Danesi, *The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2002), 1.

[193] Danesi, *The Puzzle Instinct*, 2.

[194] Coral Amende, *The Crossword Obsession: The History and Lore of the World's Most Popular Pastime* (New York: Berkley Books, 2001), 3.

[195] Helene Hovanec, *The Puzzler's Paradise: From the Garden of Eden to the Computer Age* (New York: Paddington, 1978), 10.

which begs the question: could a good enough game have slaked Eve's curiosity? Or is the desire to play games a sign of humanity's fallen nature? What is clear, however, is that desire and puzzles have been intertwined since the beginning.

While "crossword" might, when it appears in critical parlance, seem like a condemnation, authors know that puzzles in works are catnip for readers, especially the very critics who loudly deride them. The *Libro de axedrez, dado e tablas* (Book of Chess, Dice and Tables), a sumptuously produced thirteenth-century compendium commissioned by King Alfonso X of Castile and Léon, gives rules for chess, checkers, and card games, and serves at once as practical manual and an allegory for how to lead one's life. James Joyce declared of *Ulysses*, "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality."[196] "Crossword-like" might be code for literature-lite, an easily seductive way of writing that turns to surface-level puzzles to hook readers in—but is this necessarily a detriment? Millions of people are comfortable both doing the crossword and thinking of themselves as crossword-solvers, but millions of people don't think of themselves as poetry-lovers, or the type of people who would read poems. Why not use crossword-like techniques to attract these readers? Why *not* draw on the elements of puzzle-solving that make a crossword so enjoyable?

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Merrill's Crossword Universe

What, exactly, is Simpson accusing Merrill of when he claims the universe is put together as a crossword puzzle? In his comprehensive biography of Merrill, critic Langdon

[196] Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, Revised Edition (New York: Oxford UP, 1982), 521.

Hammer observes that Merrill used combinatorial wordplay obsessively throughout this writing process. Merrill's marginalia teems with the stuff.

> He played with the letters of the alphabet as if with a pack of cards: the kinds of game associated with both of them entail the same sort of process—the recombination of elements within a fixed set. Using block capital letters, Merrill would take a word or phrase or, more, often, a proper name and, working systematically down the page, sometimes using a typewriter, rearrange the letters to produce new words and phrases. The common expression or familiar name, "SELF SERVICE" turned into "SILVER FECES," and "POSTAGE" into "GESTAPO," while "PROUST" induced "STUPOR," and "MARCEL PROUST" revealed "PEARL SCROTUM. The name of Mary McCarthy hid a poignant demand: "CRY AT MY CHARM." Sometimes the wordplay made for a piece of naughty light verse, as in this epigram:
>
> THE MODEL'S CONFESSION
>
> RICHARD AVEDON'S
> HARDONS I CRAVED.
>
> The author presiding over the anagram and other wordplay in Merrill's work is "Vivian Darkbloom"—the anagram of his own name that Vladimir Nabokov embeds as an alter ego in *Lolita*. Merrill began a page of anagrams with "Vivian Darkbloom" at the top of it, below which he rang changes on "Irma Brandeis" and "David Jackson." "JAMES MERRILL," allowing for a missing "E," yielded "RIMER J. SMALL."
>
> Anagrams felt like a mildly shameful addiction to Merrill. To us, they might seem like a diversion from writing, or a finger exercise, occasionally producing, at best, a nugget of wit. But Merrill's anagrams and other forms of combinatory play show his drive, even as he seemed to be wasting his time, to make something of it. They show his hunger for meaning, for motivated rather than arbitrary signs. They show him keeping in shape—for poems and for Ouija dictées. They show his faith that, for anyone who is patient and clever enough, meaning is there to be discovered in the alphabet itself.[197]

As an example of Merrill's hyperliterate mind, consider "b o d y," a poem from Merrill's final collection, *A Scattering of Salts*:

> b o d y
>
> Look closely at the letters. Can you see
> entering (stage right), then floating full,
> then heading off—so soon—
> how like a little kohl-rimmed moon
> *o* plots her course from *b* to *d*
>
> —as *y*, unanswered, knocks at the stage door?
> Looked at too long, words fail,
> phase out. Ask, now that *body* shines
> no longer, by what light you learn these lines
> and what the *b* and *d* stood for.[198]

[197] Langdon Hammer, *James Merrill: Life and Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 294-6.

[198] James Merrill, *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 646.

Look closely at the letters. OK. Merrill turns the spotlight back to the title of the poem, "b o d y." Two more full "o"s hides in "b" and "d," partially eclipsed by the mirroring upright lines. These two lines, lowercase *l*'s or uppercase *i*'s, stand ramrod, sentinels, Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum. Notice how many double oo's are in the poem, and how so many are actually triple o's. "Look closely"; "moon / *o"*; "so soon"; "too long"; "stood for": the next vowel immediately preceding or following the double "o" is also an "o."

Puns are rampant throughout "b o d y." "Phase out" refers to both words and the phases of the moon. In "phase" we can easily substitute an "r" for an "h" and read "phrase." The poem itself is a play on the melancholy Jacques's "All the world's a stage" speech in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. "Lines" puns on lines of a poem (indeed, of *this* poem), lines of the letters themselves, lines a character must learn in a play.

But if it's a play, it's a closet drama. These aren't stage directions. "Looked at too long, words fail, / phase out." We all know this effect: if we stare at a word for too long, or we say a word over and over and over, it becomes a nonsense word. When we just look at the letters, the words and the phrases phase out. The "kohl-rimmed moon" turns the moon into an eye, as the "kohl" cues us to see the circular image as an eye. The eye, of course, then, is also the "I" hidden in the upright lines of the "b" and "d." *O* is an orgasm, the big *o*, the little death.

A curious syntactical shift occurs at the end of the poem. The final sentence begins in the present tense: "Ask, now that *body* shines / no longer, by what light you learn these lines" writes Merrill, a direct injunction to the reader. The hortatory voice commanding us to "Look" is the same commanding us to "Ask." But the poem's final line puts us in the past tense: "and what the *b* and *d* stood for." The triple *o* in "stood for" might be reason enough for the past tense: rather than ending in an *an*, Merrill lands on the moon. But astronautical

justification doesn't trump syntax. Merrill zooms in on the letters to let each one lead him to associative leaps: only by constructing his universe as tightly as a crossword can he surprise himself.

The notoriously crosswordy "The Book of Ephraim" opens with an ars poetica explaining why Merrill chooses verse to set his tale. Plain prose, he writes, might seem best suited for so outlandish a tale, but

> The more I struggled to be plain, the more
> Mannerism hobbled me. What for?
> Since it had never fit, why wear
> The shoes of prose? In verse the feet went bare.[199]

Cinderella Merrill does not ascribe to theory that plain style is best suited, through juxtaposition, for wild content; instead, he marries extravagant content with elaborate form. The bald pun of physical feet / metrical feet emerges from the shoes of prose, though Merrill contradicts himself somewhat: why does Mannerism "hobble" if the "shoes of prose" are what constrains him, not the bare feet of poetry? "The Book of Ephraim" is in iambic pentameter, sometimes lurching in rhymed couplets, other times mellowing into blank verse. Merrill divides the poem into sections labeled by alphabet, creating an arbitrary order rather than a narrative skeleton.

The crossword-puzzle-like universe for which that critic Louis Simpson takes Merrill to task emerges early in The Book of Ephraim:

> Properties: A milk glass tabletop.
> A blue-and-white cup from the Five & Ten.
> Pencil, paper. Heavy cardboard sheet
> Over which the letters A to Z
> Spread in an arc, our covenant
> With whom it would concern; also
> The Arabic numerals, and YES and NO.[200]

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[199] James Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 4.

[200] Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, 5.

The entire poem occurs within this grid. The milk glass tabletop becomes a fey Milky Way, with the blue-and-white cup as the globe floating through the constellations of the alphabet. "Properties" suggests a dissection, splaying out the world as a still life, but also real estate. The Ouija board and the Monopoly board are closely related.

Like a Mannerist painter painting the artist as well as the subject of a portrait, Merrill portrays the tools he uses to construct his universe as he launches into the poem. The method is as much the subject of the poem as what the voices in the séance present. The universe is indeed as plotted as a crossword puzzle, in that he has a ritual he uses to enter into a dialogue with letters and words. The board reduces the universe to a grid, and the messages received get transcribed as code that must then be deciphered: "We were too nice / To pause, divide the alphabetical / Gibberish into words and sentences," Merrill notes, waiting instead until after the séance to decode the communiqué.

As Langdon Hammer observes:

> Play of this kind implies a vision of life in which everything makes sense, even the failure to make sense—which is the perspective Merrill had discovered through the Ouija board, where the twenty-six letters of the alphabet worked like the fifty-two cards of the playing deck to generate the voices from the Other World that spoke to JM and DJ. The Ouija board taught Merrill to think of *people* as anagrams. They are subject to cycles of reincarnation on earth during which, as in a game of Patience, the soul takes one form after another, "some few / Triumphant, the majority / Blocked" and obliged to start over.[201]

The universe is artificial, and the means by which Merrill constructs the universe is artificial. Night after night, Merrill and Jackson return to the same space, with the same basic form, write down the letters given to them in this space, and then tease apart the words within to unveil the connection they've received. Merrill then takes these communications and fashions them into a poem that presents both the transcript as received and the experience of receiving this transcript. If this is a crossword, it's a three-dimensional one: the poem's narrator is neither constructor nor solver, writer nor reader, but an amanuensis

[201] Hammer, *James Merrill: Life and Art*, 296.

depicting both the messages and the medium. Each night's séance, like each crossword, is inherently consumable, a one-time occurrence, done when it is over; yet the form is infinitely recyclable, yielding different results each time. Merrill also finds himself addicted to the séance, yearning for familiarity of the ritual as well as the thrill of the unknown. Yes, the universe is hyper-plotted, just as a crossword; but like a crossword, it's also obfuscated, an unknown frontier that must be deciphered to be understood. The "crossword-puzzle" nature of this universe might seem like something that's overly safe in its comfort and confidence, but it's also a ritual of strangeness, a way for the writer to get outside himself and into a space he doesn't control.

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Crosswordese and Nabokrossvordese

Language that enters the crossword grid doesn't exit the grid as the same language. In 2013, using a data set of all *New York Times* crossword clues and answers from 1996-2012, Web developer Noah Veltman calculated the "crosswordiness" of each word that appeared as answer by comparing its relative usage in puzzles to its frequency elsewhere, measured by its Google Books N-gram, which gives the frequency of that word in an enormous corpus of texts:[202]

$$\text{crosswordiness}(w) = \frac{|\text{ clues with answer } w \text{ }|}{|\text{ all clues }| \times \text{Google Books Ngram}}$$

Figure 4. Crosswordiness formula, Noah Veltman, 2012.

The crosswordiest words are ASEA, SMEE, and URSA. ERA, AREA, and ERE are the most frequently used words in crosswords answers during that time, but they're also

[202] Noah Veltman, "About the Data: *New York Times* Crossword Puzzle," *Crossword Puzzle Linguistics,* noahveltman.com.

common in quotidian usage. Veltman also tracks the strength of clue-answer pairs, charting the clue words that point most frequently to certain answers. Some answers can be signified using a wide range of clues: words that can be multiple parts of speech and have a low crosswordiness percentage, yet also contain many useful letters (AIR, RAIN, NEAR), have clues that draw from a vast swath of knowledge. The top clue keywords for AIR, for example, ask the solver to think about AIR in a variety of contexts: AIR is a lungful, a broadcast, a melody, laundry hung to dry, a vacuum's need, epitome of lightness, seventy-eight percent nitrogen, inspired stuff. AERIE, on the other hand, a word in the ninety-seventh percentile of crosswordiness, is almost always an eagle's nest.

Even the narrow bandwidth that AERIE proffers affords room for creativity, as we find in the complete database of *New York Times* clues: "Where the eagle has landed" (1993); "High-rise apartment" (1983); "Where a kite might alight" (1981). Because AERIE is such a familiar piece of crosswordese—the word has appeared in over four hundred and twenty *New York Times* crosswords—constructors can assume that even casual solvers will be on the lookout for AERIE. Clues play with crossword clichés, pushing against crosswordese even as they embrace it. A clue like "Where the eagle has landed" is the mystery-novel equivalent of the butler actually committing the murder. In a mystery novel, readers are so primed to see the butler as an obvious red herring that they congratulate themselves on being clever enough to look to other suspects, whereas the real murderer hides in the safety net of the cliché the whole time. "Where the eagle has landed" relies on readers to know that an eagle's nest is an aerie, something that any casual solver will know. The clue then invites the reader to dispense with the obvious answer and focus instead on "the eagle has landed." In 1967, when Apollo 11 landed successfully on the moon, Neil Armstrong announced, "The Eagle has landed"; the five-letter solution might let readers alight on LUNAR, CRUST, or CLIFF

before realizing that the "eagle" is lowercase, and that we're not meant to read it as a proper noun. So "Where the eagle has landed" forces solvers out of one cliché and back to the first, that is, alighting on the crosswordese AERIE for a place where an actual eagle might land.

In *Nabokov's Favorite Word Is Mauve*, statistician Ben Blatt identifies authors' favorite and fallback vocabulary, that is, the words that writers employ time and time again, regardless of context, at a much higher rate than the word appears in the Corpus of Historical American English. This vocabulary is both fingerprint and scaffolding: the shorthand by which these writers represent the world to themselves, but also the workhorses that authors can use to make the rest of their thoughts possible and legible. These favorite and fallback words, I argue, are an author's crosswordese.

Blatt distinguishes between favorite, or "cinnamon" words, and fallback, or "nod" words.[203] (Ray Bradbury wrote that one of his favorite words was "cinnamon" because of a childhood memory; the novelist Michael Connelly had an editor who pointed out that one of his characters "nodded" 243 times in a single book.)[204] Blatt defines authors' favorite words as words that must be in half an author's books in his study at a rate of at least once per 100,000 words. Nabokov uses "mauve" at a rate forty-four times greater than the word's rate in the Corpus of Historical American English.[205] Given Nabokov's synesthesia, we might well expect that he would be particularly sensitive to color, and to have a rich palette at play in his writing, and indeed, Nabokov's use of color words in general far exceeds the standard: 460 color words per 100,000, compared to 115 times per 100,000 in the Corpus of Historical

[203] Ben Blatt, *Nabokov's Favorite Word Is Mauve* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 166.

[204] Blatt, *Nabokov's Favorite Word Is Mauve*, 167.

[205] Blatt, *Nabokov's Favorite Word Is Mauve*, 170.

American English.[206] Blatt also finds authors' fallback words, which he defines as words that must be in all the author's books in his study and that appear at a rate of at least 100 per 100,000 words.

Much of the crosswordese Blatt identifies for each author gives a compelling, succinct summary of that author's *oeuvre*. Over twenty Henry James novels, James's favorite words are *recognize, oddity,* and *afresh*; his fallbacks, *herself, mean, moment*. Marilynne Robinson's favorites, across four novels: *soapy, checkers, baptized*; fallbacks, *laughed, father, child*. Charles Dickens, twenty novels; favorites: *hearted, pinch, rejoined*; fallbacks: *sir, dear, am*. James Joyce, three novels; favorites (which could also be actual crosswordese): *tram, bello, hee*; fallbacks, *old, your, his*. Elmore Leonard, forty-five novels; favorites: *fucking, shit, bullshit*; fallbacks, *saying, looking, said*.[207] Nabokov's favorite words, Blatt finds, are *mauve, banal,* and *pun*; his fallbacks: *black, my*, and *old*.

Solving a crossword puzzle relies on the brain's simultaneous abilities to create seemingly disparate associations and to put together clues into a logical pattern. The crosswordese an author uses can give a flavor of the way the author's mind works, and helps us understand the types of links the author is making. Through the unconscious crosswordese, we can get a glimpse of how this writer puts together the world: what patterns emerge in the writer's mind, what connects to what. A solver can get from crossword clue to crossword answer through a wide variety of associative pathways, some perhaps more regularly apparent than others. Similarly, an author might trace patterns that don't at first reveal themselves.

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[206] Blatt, *Nabokov's Favorite Word Is Mauve*, 171.

[207] Blatt, *Nabokov's Favorite Word Is Mauve*, 174-5.

Blatt's work provides a map, not a reading, of that writer's work, but the map can help illuminate how the author puts together the world. Consider *mauve, banal,* and *pun*. Mauve is the first fake color. In 1856, chemist William Henry Perkin, was searching for a cure for malaria when he noticed a startling purple residue. He began marketing the color, the first synthetic dye ever created, as "mauve" in 1859. The 1890s became known as the "mauve decade" because of the color's popularity, particularly among aesthetes, artists, and dandies. Early mauve dyes faded quickly, particularly suggestive to a synesthete, yoking artifice and nature: fey, crafted romance inevitably fading due to inexorable nature.

During the 1940s, Nabokov was a butterfly curator at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. He specialized in Blues, a group of small butterflies found on every continent except Antarctica. Nabokov's most famous contribution to lepidopterology is the Karner Blue in 1943, naming the insect and identifying it as a rare subspecies of a western Blue, a theory finally corroborated in 1999 by DNA evidence. The Karner Blue, an endangered species, relies on the life cycle of the wild blue lupine to survive: the only food for Karner blue larvae comes from these delicate purple stalks, and their pupation is tied to lupine blooming season. If the lupine's wild blue fades too fast or doesn't emerge soon enough, the Karner blue will perish. Blues aren't all blue—they range the cool-toned spectrum from sky blue to cornflower to violet. The Karner blue isn't blue so much as lilac, edged in white; the female is browner, a pigeon-gray mauve.

As we have seen in the Introduction, Nabokov's passion for words and his passion for butterflies were hardly separate. Indeeed, Nabokov's lepidopterology is analogous to Emily Dickinson's botany. Emily Dickinson was a prodigious gardener: she spent much of her days tending her plants, and over a third of her poems and nearly half her letters refer to flowers, both literally and metaphorically. Dickinson frequently slipped gifts into the

envelopes with her letters—a poem, a pressed flower, a cricket—just as Nabokov slides butterfly drawings, crosswords, and butterfly-shaped crosswords into his letters to Véra.

Nabokov's favorite words marry the lepidopterist with the linguist, the butterfly-collector's eye for the exact color with the language-lover's penchant for turns of phrase. "Banal" is telling, as both a supercilious depiction and a doth-protest-too-much insult showcasing his own insecurities. Both colors and letters might, in some ways, be banal—one-dimensional, flat—but the banal, in Nabokov's handling, becomes extraordinary.

Nabokov's fallback words—*black, my, old*—similarly suggest a story about the wiring behind the writing. "Black," again a color word, reveals a synesthetic propensity to describing the world via hues. "My" reveals a penchant toward writing in the first person, even when the narrator is not Nabokov himself, suggesting that the novels are highly interested in portraying a single person's conscious mind, and the ways in which that brain interprets the world. "Old" is both a subjective and objective descriptor: a tree might objectively be old, but is Lolita "old" if she is fifteen? This adjective's value depends on knowing the state of the narrator who uses it. Nabokov's favorite and fallback words reveal an author obsessed with depicting a very precise view from a very particular standpoint: the scientist as well as the romantic.

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Alice Notley Solves The Puzzle

"Anselm is sleeping; Edmund is feverish & / Chatting; Alice is doing the *Times* Crossword Puzzle," begins Ted Berrigan's poem, "Small Role Felicity."[208] "Alice" is the poet Alice Notley; Anselm and Edmund are their sons. Poems can use real names and refer to

[208] Ted Berrigan, *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, ed. Alice Notley (Berkeley, CA: U of California Press, 2005), 522.

real relationships without being entirely factual, of course, but Alice Notley does do the crossword. Notley told me, "I have a completely overactive mind. If I want to relax, I have to be working with words. I either read or do crossword puzzles."[209] She prefers hard, themeless puzzles to either British-style cryptics or puzzles with themes (too "cutesy, boring, distracting.") Notley uses the ritual around the crossword as a way to maintain a pattern in her life. "I will do one every single night in the apartment here in my apartment. I have a routine, and the reason I have a routine is that I have a life that is potentially without order at all. I've hardly ever gone to work, so I have to make it up. I have a schedule. It involves getting up, having coffee, checking the news, either going jogging or not. The international New York Times, which I detest now but I buy it anyway, read it, write. In afternoon, I buy Le Monde. That's my schedule. I have lunch. I have dinner. And sometimes I do the puzzle." Puzzles, for Notley, are "a way for me to pretend that I'm in the ordinary world. A wedge in my brain goes out towards everybody." Notley described doing the crossword not as a poem, but as a sort of social engagement: "Crossword puzzles I do with the masses, collages I do for myself. I do poems for the masses, but I'm the only one who can do my poems. With the crossword, I'm participating in the mass poem. I like to keep in touch with what everyone else is thinking about. It's partly a conversation with other people."

The Descent of Alette, Notley's 1993 book-length epic poem about the travels of a woman named Alette through the underworld of the subway system, does not borrow in tone from the crossword, but it does ask readers to use some of the same strategies that the crossword employs. *Alette*, like the crossword, breaks language into chunks of unfamiliar but regular size.[210] Notley punctuates phrases of one to a few words in length with quotation

[209] Interview, Alice Notley.

[210] See Alice Notley, *The Descent of Alette* (New York: Penguin Poets, 1996).

marks, creating pauses slightly more frequently than the speaker would pause for breath naturally, yet slightly less frequently than word-by-word divisions. The artificial punctuation around vivid, sensory language mirrors the crossword's frequent clash of mannered form and unexpected content. The subway itself is a popular locus for the crossword; the crossword is not indigenous to the subway, but it has colonized this space so thoroughly as to become, in effect, a native species.

Notley claimed, "I think I don't care about whether I do the puzzles or not," but her work belies the brush-off. Although Notley's deeply personal, passionately committed poems seem to go against everything that crossword's critics would pin on the puzzle—a narrow commitment to trivia without a capacity for emotional intelligence—Notley herself admits that the crossword might be an influence on her work. "If you can really get inside the alphabet, you might really approach the secret of everything," Notley told me. "It's a very metaphysical place. Crosswords are the alphabet. They're not about anything else. They're pure. I've been working on these poems lately where I spell out words vertically. I have a terrible feeling I'm being influenced by crosswords."[211]

III. Crossword as Diegetic Participant

If the crossword is a potent influence on both composition and interpretation when it only occurs off the page, it is all the more powerful when it takes center stage. William Empson and Veronica Forrest-Thomson employ the crossword in their poems to cue the reader that their work does not only contain what appears on the surface, but that its associations need to be solved through associations and links, as one might solve a crossword puzzle. In a note to his readers, William Empson invites them to approach his

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[211] Interview, Alice Notley.

book as though it were a crossword puzzle. Veronica Forrest-Thomson, whose critical and creative work very much follows Empson's legacy, directly writes about crossword puzzles in a mock-epic autobiographical poem that asks the reader to follow and connect many allusions that are not resolved on a surface-level reading. By using the crossword as a figure directly in the poems, Empson and Forrest-Thomson embrace the mode of reading that crosswords connote: digging beyond a surface to unearth more and more connections. In putting crosswords into their verse, Empson and Forrest-Thomson employ crossword-logic in reverse from puzzles themselves: rather than terminating the serach for allusions in a single, correct answer, the poems set a crossword engine in motion to create a linking mechanism that can continue infinitely. Just as the crossword can put any ideas into the same space through juxtaposition, in a poem that demands a crossword-style of reading, we can find links between anything if we dig long enough for a possible association between them.

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Poetry in Crosswords

To begin, however, let us briefly consider the opposite: rather than a crossword puzzle in a poem, poetry in crossword puzzles. Jacob Stulberg, as we have already seen, impressively imported an entire William Carlos Williams poem into a puzzle, coercing solvers to become both readers and—in a sense—writers of poetry by drawing this verse into the grid. Each word was clued in a way that had nothing to do with the other words in the poem, but when put all together, these seemingly disconnecte allusions were made, as though through a magical illusion, to form a poem.

In March 2017, a puzzle by veteran constructor Peter Gordon appeared in the *New York Times* that confounded some solvers. The puzzle itself was doable enough: a Thursday

Times puzzle, the hardest themed puzzle the paper would run that week, but not as challenging as a Friday or Saturday themeless. The clue's theme answers in the grid read: WHAT FAMOUS POET / HAS A NAME THAT'S / A DOUBLE DACTYL / EMILY DICKINSON. (The clues: "Start of a question is…" / "More of the question is…" / "End of the question is…" / "Here's what the answer is…"). Every clue is rendered as a double dactyl: "Oompah-pah instrument"; "Speak indecisively"; "Footwear with lozenges"; etc.[212]

The conceit is clever, and Gordon executes it flawlessly, but the unanswered question is: why marry a double dactylic puzzle with a poet who didn't write in double dactyls? EMILY DICKINSON makes for a beautiful center to a higgledy-piggledy poem, that is, an eight-line poem in dactylic dimeter ("Emily Dickinson" by Wendy Cope: *Higgledy-piggledy / Emily Dickinson / Liked to use dashes / Instead of full stops. // Nowadays, faced with such / Idiosyncrasy / Critics and editors / Send for the cops.*)[213] Rather than drawing from Dickinson's own poems either as inspiration or as content, Gordon riffs syllabically. The puzzle is more bravura stunt than homage, a theme built on wordplay rather than a tribute to Dickinson. Poetry, here, is thematic, rather than substantive: it's interchangeable with any other theme. The poetry in the theme is subordinate to the cleverness of making the puzzle's logic work.

The crossword that takes poetry as its subject is not a poem, just as the story that includes a crossword is not a crossword. The crossword is playing with the idea of poetry, using the content to expand into modes of wordplay that are not typically accessible within the standard conventions of the crossword. When we're solving a crossword, the clue's structure is typically functional, not aesthetic; the mode of writing a clue is a combination of

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[212] Peter Gordon, "Untitled," ed. Will Shortz, *New York Times*, 2 Mar. 2017. Gordon enjoys engaging with clues that force the reader to think outside conventions; in another Gordon puzzle, for examples, all the clues end with the letter "t."

[213] Wendy Cope, "Emily Dickinson," *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986).

elegant deflection combined with efficiency, since the constructor wants a phrase that will perfectly evoke a single answer yet simultaneously provide some sort of blockade for the reader.

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"God arkitect": William Empson and the "Puzzle Interest" in Poetry

Crossword puzzles emerge at the intersection of an acrostic and a detective story, requiring a desire for both multiplicity and solution. If there is any writer who marries a mathematical yen for taxonomy with a deeply intuitive passion for ambiguity, it is William Empson, the literary critic and poet who defined close reading for the twentieth century. William Empson was born in Yorkshire in 1906. A talented student, young Empson won an entrance scholarship to the preparatory school Winchester College and then to Magdalene College, Cambridge. Empson began his studies at Cambridge reading mathematics, but soon pursued a second degree in English. Empson studied with celebrated critic I. A. Richards, under whose tutelage Empson would write the essays that became *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, published in 1930 when Empson was twenty-four years old. But when a servant found condoms in his room, Empson ignominiously had his scholarship revoked and was banished from the city. During the nineteen-thirties and forties, Empson taught in Japan and then China, with a brief stint as a foreign correspondent during World War II. He eventually returned to England and, in 1954, became head of the English department at the University of Sheffield, where he taught until he retired in 1972. Empson was awarded an honorary fellowship by Magdalene in 1979, fifty years after his expulsion; he died in 1984.[214]

[214] See John Haffenden, *William Empson, Vol. I: Among the Mandarins* and *William Empson, Vol. II: Against the Christians*.

In the late nineteen-forties, Empson taught at the Kenyon School of English, an intensive summer literature program, alongside many of the most prominent writers and critics at the time, including Jacques Barzun, Eric Bentley, Cleanth Brooks, Alfred Kazin, Robert Lowell, Arthur Mizener, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Yvor Winters. The Kenyon school helped spread the school of literary theory that became known as New Criticism, a movement that took its name from Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*. New Criticism's biography has been thoroughly chronicled, not in small part by the "new critics" themselves.[215] These critics turned away from an emphasis on historical context to focus instead on form, interpreting the text as a self-contained aesthetic object rather than as predominantly a product of a particular cultural moment. Prior modes of literary study emphasized the historical context or the author's biography, but new critics focused on the form and content of the text itself. New Criticism dominated critical studies until the nineteen-seventies, when reader-response theorists argued that the reader's experience completes the work's meaning through interpretation.

As Empson the critic championed a mode of criticism that devoted its energies to reading for form, Empson the poet frequently found himself accused of being too crossword-puzzle-y. "Critics have from time to time accused Empson the poet. . .of being over-intellectualized, of compiling crossword-puzzle poems of such a brainy order that they seem virtually divorced from true lyric feeling," John Haffenden notes in his magisterial biography of Empson. Haffenden tries to correct this narrative by pointing out that "much of the poetry is driven by such emotions as fear and courage."[216] Haffenden paints the

[215] For one of many examples, see Cleanth Brooks, "The New Criticism," *The Sewanee Review* 87.4 (Fall 1959).

[216] John Haffenden, *William Empson, Volume I: Among the Mandarins* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 8-9.

puzzle and the passion as two poles: on the one hand, the coldly mathematical Empson; on the other hand, the hothead.

But rather than interpreting the crossword puzzle label as derogatory, or arguing that his work should not be lumped in this category, Empson complicates Haffenden's binary interpretation. Rather than rejecting the term, Empson embraces the comparison to crosswords as a compliment and a challenge. Why is the crossword puzzle, he wonders, a pejorative hermeneutic, and why is it criticized as the opposite to an impassioned lyric? Can a lyric be puzzled out, or a puzzle be filled with emotion?

In 1940, Empson published *The Gathering Storm*, his second and final collection of poetry.[217] He presented the poems with a set of notes, which he prefaced with a coyly pedantic "Note on Notes." In this "Note," Empson writes:

> No doubt the notes are partly needed through my incompetence in writing; they had better have been worked into the text. I do the best I can. But partly they are meant to be like answers to a crossword puzzle; a sort of puzzle interest is part of the pleasure that you are meant to get from the verse, and that I get myself when I go back to it. It is clear that you try to guess the puzzle before you turn to the answer; but you aren't offended with the newspaper for publishing the whole answer, even when you had guessed it. There would be no point in publishing a puzzle in a newspaper, if it were admittedly so simple that there was no need to publish the answer. And the comparison to poetry is not quite a random one; the fashion for obscure poetry, as a recent development, came in at about the same time as the fashion for crossword puzzles; and it seems to me that this revival of puzzle interest in poetry, an old and natural thing, has got a bad name merely by failing to know itself and refusing to publish the answers.

What Empson describes as a "puzzle interest" sounds, in many ways, like New Criticism by another name, a year before Ransom had given New Criticism its name. Empson treats the poem as a self-contained object and presents a deep close reading of the text, de-coding ambiguities and tracking symbols. He also explicates many of the more obscure references in the poems. The poems, in Empson's presentation, are objects that Empson has created with

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[217] Empson's *Collected Poems*, first published in 1949, presents the poems in Empson's first volume, *Poems*, with his second volume, *The Gathering Storm*; the latter volume represents his last complete new body of poetic work that he published. See William Empson, *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2000). See also William Empson, *The Gathering Storm* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1940).

the intention of mystifying the reader in order that he might then de-mystify them: a clever reader will not mind that such an answer key exists, because the answers do not spoil the fun but only help unlock what might otherwise be frustrating barriers to comprehension. Empson wants to create poems with the patina of difficulty, but without total obscurity, so that readers can become as immersed as they are in a hard puzzle, but are sucked in by the challenge, not excluded. Empson wants poems, in other words, to be *easy-difficult* just like the crossword. Difficulty and intimidation need not be synonymous.

To understand how Empson's claim might or might not work, let us take Empson at his word, and read Empson as Empson claims he wants us to read him: what happens when we read Empson's poetry as we would solve a crossword puzzle? What does this hermeneutics illuminate, and what does it leave unresolved? And if a poem is a puzzle, does this excise emotion?

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"Bacchus": A Case Study in Puzzling a Poem

On the contrary: not only does the crossword-puzzle mode of reading not excise emotion, it paves the way to empathy. The best way to get at other forms of difficulty is to ease into them through the easy-difficulty the crossword mentality reading provides.

To understand how a puzzle reading of a poem might unlock, rather than foreclose, logical and emotional interpretation of the poem, let us take Empson to his own task. The first poem in *The Gathering Storm* is "Bacchus," a ninety-two-line opus that took Empson seven years to construct. He provides a six-page prose note to the poem. In the preface to *The Gathering Storm*, Empson writes, "I put [Bacchus] first because it is a style I felt I ought to get out of."[218] Written between 1933 and 1939, "Bacchus" was published in several

[218] Empson, *The Gathering Storm*, 9.

installments,[219] the first and only of Empson's poems to be printed serially.[220] The first stanza (ll. 1-17) appeared as "Bacchus" in *New Verse* (March 1933) and reprinted in *Poems 1934* and *Poems*. "Bacchus Two," the second stanza (ll. 18-42), was published in *Criterion* (July 1935). "Bacchus Four," lines 73-92, with an additional stanza that was later cut, appeared in *Poetry* magazine (January 1937); "Bacchus Three," the third stanza (ll. 43-57), appeared in *Poetry* (April 1940), and lines 58-72 of the final poem were published as "Bacchus Four" again in *Poetry* (February 1942). The publication of "Bacchus Four" before "Bacchus Three" indicates, as critics Philip Gardner and Averil Gardner observe, that Empson had conceived the overall pattern of the whole poem before filling in the lines themselves.[221]

The dissection of "Bacchus" into which we're about to launch might seem excessive, even obsessively indulgent: why not touch on more texts? But the single attention to the way the crossword-method is at play in this particular instance does not build a reading of Empson's work in general, or even his poetry in general; rather, this tight focus is intended to be illustrative, even exhaustive, of the method Empson suggests.

For a poem that Empson called his "great poem about drink,"[222] every aspect of the composition is painfully sober. The poem describes gods testing out the first distillation of alcohol.[223] In the first stanza, Bacchus sets up a distillation apparatus, with the Frankensteinian gleeful terror of releasing enormous energy upon the world. In the second

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[219] Publication information from Haffenden, ed., *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, 289.

[220] Philip Gardner and Averil Gardner, *The God Approached: A Commentary on the Poems of William Empson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978), 152.

[221] Gardner and Gardner, *The God Approached*, 152.

[222] Quoted in Haffenden, ed., *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, 293.

[223] I have distilled Empson's descriptions of his poem, which he gave at various times and to various audiences, into this summary; see Haffenden, ed., *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, 293-6.

stanza, Neptune or Noah is inside the flask, ruling the boiling liquid through the power of his imagination; the cloud of vapor becomes the cloud that Ixion mistook for Hera. The third verse describes the fire under the distilling retort, which Prometheus provides. In the fourth stanza, Mercury brings a thermometer to try and control the operation, but it breaks. Finally, Empson turns to a description of an unnamed woman, who seems both to be a mythological figure and an actual, physical person who feels the complicated mixture of exhilaration and terror building throughout the poem. The final twenty lines of "Bacchus" formally enact the distillation that the first four stanzas describe: words that are repeated throughout the course of the poem (cloud, cope, arches) concatenate, ringing out in what Gardner and Gardner call "incantatory sestina-like permutations."[224]

Empson gives several layers of meaning for his lines, which might seem to foreclose the need for the reader at all: if everything is interpreted fully in his Notes, what work does the reader have left to do? Although Empson presents his Notes as comprehensive, they do not exclude the possibility of further interpretation; rather, his thorough delineation invites the reader to continue the analytical work.

"Bacchus" is nothing if not elaborately over-determined. The first fourteen lines are in couplets, but since the first stanza is seventeen lines long, the couplet form breaks; the final couplet enfolds the only unrhymed end word in the stanza, "blood." But blood is thicker than end rhyme; the word appears four times in the final three lines of the poem, spread across the lines like the four points of a compass. Blood pumps through the veins of the stanza's final tercet. "Blood" does resolve itself into an end rhyme: the first line of the second stanza ends in "Flood," enacting a transformation of blood into water. The "Flood" shifts the rhyme scheme at the end of the first stanza: *axa* is resolved into *abab*. The second

[224] Gardner and Gardner, *The God Approached*, 153.

stanza then resumes the couplet pattern of the first stanza until line 33, which shifts both the rhyme scheme and the meter.

Like Spenser, who frequently used orthography to layer additional significance into the words (e.g., "mirrhour" for "mirror," visually inserting time into the reflection), Empson deploys spelling to cue double meanings. In the note to "Bacchus," Empson writes, "*Cymbal* – 'symbol,' *whirled* – 'world.'"[225] This key cues us that the poem is using spelling for double purposes throughout. Some puns are presented baldly: the first line of the second stanza, "The god arkitect, whose coping with the Flood" tells us that this "god" is the architect of the ark, thus the ark-itect, and thus Noah. This wordplay is so evident that Empson doesn't bother including it in his notes: yet he does explicate the bridge between the *arkitect* of the ark and the *arches* throughout the stanza:

> *Cope* – coping-stone and to manage, *groynes* – breakwaters, the meet of Gothic arches, the sex of the horses. The same kind of control is needed inside your head, a place also round and not well known (*miner* – 'minor'), and it requires chiefly a clarifying conbection with the outside world, e.g. by the arches of the eye, whose iris (rainbow) promises safety as to Noah.[226]

The ark-itect become arch-itect as we introduce the arches into the poem. The arches of one's eyes echo the porches of Hamlet's ears: we are in a world of the constructed, architectural body. Iris is the goddess of the rainbow, and as such, guardian of the rainbow's arch, and teacher to pupils who might seek the rainbow; the iris is also the colored portion of the eye, and thus the arches around the eye's pupil. The "dome of the brain" is another arch containing not only the arches of the eyes but the architectural map of the whole body.

A close examination of the five lines at the end of the poem's second stanza will demonstrate how a crossword-like examination of the various layers at play helps unpack the image in order to put it back together again:

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[225] Empson, *The Gathering Storm*, 57.

[226] Empson, *The Gathering Storm*, 57-8.

Helled to earth's centre Ixion at the wheel.
(He boxed the compassing of his appeal.
Her centaur, born thence, schooled
This hero, the paunched baker, ether-cooled)
Still makes go round the whirled fooled clouded wheal.

In Greek mythology, Ixion, king of the Lapith tribe, killed his father-in-law and was shunned from society. Zeus took pity on him and invited the outcast king to Olympus, but Ixion lusted after Hera, which made Zeus jealous. Zeus made a cloud in the shape of Hera and tricked Ixion into coupling with it. Centauros, the son of this ill-fated alliance, coupled with a mare, thus creating the Centaurs. Zeus expelled Ixion from Olympus and ordered Hermes to bind him to a burning solar wheel that spins constantly around the heavens.

We know from Empson's note that we are to read *world* for *whirled*, giving both the globe itself and the motion of Ixion's inexorable spinning. Empson glosses "He boxed the compassing of his appeal": "*Boxing the compass* is going in all directions but also putting all space in your own box; then *compassing his appeal* is getting what he wanted."[227] Yet by providing such a clear explanation of some of the double layers of meaning, Empson leaves it to the reader to find more compositional intricacies. Empson begins catalysis, but the reader gets to continue the satisfying work of puzzling through the poem. In addition to the paradox that the word "box" encapsulates—that is, the act of going in all directions yet simultaneously being contained in a single space—the box also obstructs the wheel: instead of a circle, we get a square. The clash between the box and the circle echoes the ill-matched dalliance between Ixion and the cloud, and the awkward hybrid of two shapes that are not supposed to fit together—that is, the horse and the human—spliced in one creature. Ixion might have attempted to dupe Zeus and square the circle by copulating with the cloud that he thought was Hera, but he learned the hard way that the a human believing he could defeat

[227] Empson, *The Gathering Storm,* 59.

Zeus is the hubristic equivalent of believing that one could fit a square peg into a round hole. *Compassing*, too, is saturated with a false sense of purpose and direction: no matter which way the compass points, Ixion is doomed to go around and around his wheel, endlessly whirling the world. "Hera" nearly appears in *Her* and *hero*, yet not quite; just as Zeus creates the illusion of Hera through a cloud of near-Hera, so Empson creates the sense that Hera is almost, but not quite, here.

Helled does triple work for Empson: the spelling encapsulates Ixion's state of being held to the physical hell at Earth's center, and it captures the mental hell that plagues him as well.[228] Just as Ixion is burned by the hell that holds him to the earth's core, so the earth itself is a burned world. As Ixion is helled to hell, so Ixion himself is hell. "Fooled clouded" does not pack quite so many puns into the orthography, but the phrase does place several meanings in the same space. "Clouded" refers to the cloud that Zeus makes in the shape of Hera, so Ixion is "fooled" and "clouded" physically and mentally when he copulates with the cloud. "Cloud" becomes a weighted word over the course of "Bacchus"; at the end of the poem, clouds clot the lines, suggesting a mythological profusion of false Heras amid the abundant byproducts of distillation swirling in the air.

Wheel is a perfect rhyme with *wheal*. As Empson explains in his note, "As the earth was once molten its firm surface can be called *wheal* as the scar of a burn, as well as 'weal' in commonweal"[229]; "wheal" can also refer to a Cornish mine, yoking the "miner deeps" in the "dome of the brain" to the hell at earth's core. Ixion's wheel whirls around the world's wheal. Though *wheel* and *wheal* are homonyms, not synonyms, their mirrored placement in

[228] "Helled" also recalls Milton's Satan: Which way I fly is hell, myself am hell.

[229] Empson, *The Gathering Storm,* 59.

the stanza combined with the capacity to read doubly that Empson has cultivated compels the reader to hear the *wheel* in *wheal* and vice versa.

The *wheel* / *wheal* rhyme encloses the parentheses, creating a wheel that circles the parentheses' two arcs, which, when taken together, almost continue to create the circle. The doubled rhyme and the circular syntax thus enact a double wheel that relies on both visual and auditory paranomasia. If we read the sentence without the parenthetically enclosed statement, we get, "Helled to earth's centre Ixion at the wheel still makes go round the whirled fooled clouded wheal." Empson unpacks the wheel at the center of this image to explicate two of its meanings: "Thus Ixion on the wheel of torture in hell is at the tiller-wheel of the turning earth."[230] Ixion is at once Sisyphus, Atlas, and Ahab: the tortured man doomed to an eternally regenerating struggle; the figure responsible for holding up the earth; the captain at the helm of a doomed ship. The geological strata of mythology throughout "Bacchus" are no accident, nor is it an accident that a poem about torture and an almost mythically cruel world leader appear as the first in a book called *The Gathering Storm,* written just as war has broken out in Europe. Though the poem's overt references are from Greek mythology, the poem, according to Empson, "was really meant to be about Hitler and similar victims of the enormous sense of power occasionally offered by the modern world."[231] Mythology collapses the past into the present, and the use of mythological rather than historical time allows us to read the present into the imagery via allegory.

The three lines inside the parentheses separate *wheel* and *wheal*, yet the words are also bound together through the parentheses. The rhyme scheme in these five lines—*aabba*—

[230] Empson, *The Gathering Storm,* 59.

[231] Quoted in Haffenden, ed., *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, 293.

creates an asymmetrical set of interlocked wheels.[232] The rhyme continues into the first line of the parentheses—"appeal" creates a couplet with "wheel." Indeed, if we read the syntax as continuing *through* the parenthetical content, rather than *around* it, and we insert a comma at the natural pause of the line break, the sentence reads "Helled to earth's centre Ixion at the wheel [,] he boxed the compassing of his appeal." If we read the parenthetical statement without the encasing sentence, we have to add a period at the end of the sentence, but the grammar otherwise functions beautifully: "He boxed the compassing of his appeal. Her centaur, born thence, schooled this hero, the paunched beaker, ether-cooled[.]" Because the second sentence does not have a full stop, we can also read all five lines straight through as two sentences, if we disregard the parentheses entirely: "Helled to earth's centre Ixion at the wheel he boxed the compassing of her appeal. Her centaur, born thence, schooled this hero, the paunched beaker, ether-cooled still makes go round the whirled fooled clouded wheal."

These five lines thus weave several possible sentences into each other. The sentence strapped around the parentheses emphasizes Ixion's role as the engine rotating the tiller-wheel of Earth. The three lines inside the parentheses emphasize Ixion's role as the progenitor of the centaurs. And when the five lines are read together, stretched through the parentheses, the poem places the emphasis of the image not on the wheel/wheal, nor on the strange chemistry that created the centaur, but on the portrait of Ixion himself. Ixion appears, then disappears, then reappears again, his endless, tortured turning and re-turning alchemically mirrored in the rhyme and syntax.

The Ixion image is also subordinate to the alcohol imagery. "The flask is being cooled by dripping ether over it, a process only used for urgently rapid cooling; if the flask is a man he is given an anaesthetic; and the other kind of ether can be taken as the empty space

[232] A limerick also uses this AABBA rhyme structure. Though Empson's tone is serious, rather than joking, a limerick also often uses the rhyme nested within the rhyme to create an infinite loop.

the round earth cools into," writes Empson in his note to the poem.[233] That "beaker" suggests that Ixion himself is but a metaphor for the actual subject of the poem, which is the creation of alcohol through distillation. Ixion's torture turns into a metaphor for distilling alcohol.

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Empson on "Bacchus"

Empson had a complicated relationship with "Bacchus." Though he seems to have a special fondness for the poem, he also recognizes it as flawed, and he frequently finds himself justifying his own attachment to the poem. He selected "Bacchus" for inclusion in the 1962 anthology *Poet's Choice*, edited by Paul Engle and Joseph Langland. "I am afraid I like 'Bacchus' best of my own poems, maybe as the traditional mother dotes on the imbecile,"[234] Empson claims sheepishly. Yet in the next sentence, he reveals that the sheepishness might be a guise: "Dylan Thomas approved of it more than my other poems too," he writes, thus turning a seemingly apologetic statement that indicates his own bashfulness about the poem into an affirmation of its greatness by virtue of the stamp of the admittedly greater poet. Empson seems to confess an endearing, affectionate foible on his part, but then reveals that his supposed lack of taste also coincides with that of a fellow genius poet. In 1973, for the Morris Gray Poetry Reading at Harvard, Empson later repeated this claim: "Dylan Thomas used to describe it as my good poem: he thought it was the only one that had come off. I must respect his judgment there."[235]

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[233] Empson, *The Gathering Storm,* 59.

[234] Quoted in Haffenden, ed., *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, 294.

[235] Quoted in Haffenden, ed., *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, 295.

Whenever Empson introduced "Bacchus," either in writing or in lecture, he apologizes for the poem's "tricksy," "difficult," "clotted" style. He presents the poem as difficult—difficult in both its composition and its interpretation—and as a poem that wears this difficulty on its sleeve. The difficulty manifests itself in lines with multiple possible interpretations, wordplay that require decoding, images with specific and perhaps not commonly known referents, and syntax that could be read in multiple directions. Empson declared of "Bacchus" that "you can't possibly get all the points on a single hearing; in fact you need the printed page to tell you how to pick up the grammar again, after three or four lines in brackets."[236] Readers might not be able to get everything from "Bacchus" on two readings, or five, or twenty. However—crucially—the reader is able to get *something* out of a *first* reading of "Bacchus." This first impression is not intended to go away over time, but rather to be deepened and complicated by a crossword-like puzzling through the poem.

"Bacchus," agreed, is thorny, and to find every rose embedded in the thicket is a potentially infinite enterprise. But the poem does not hide the fact that we are in a rose garden. In other words, "Bacchus" perpetually yields more and more clarity about the connections underlying the poem as we look closer—we can track each rhizome, discovering where and how they all connect to each other. But the poem also does not need to be puzzled to function as a poem. For example, nowhere in the seemingly exhaustive note to "Bacchus" does Empson explain who the unnamed woman is in the final stanzas. Indeed, the woman goes unmentioned entirely in the note. Empson lavishes mythological and etymological attention on the poem, but personal and emotional introspection he leaves conspicuously untouched. Part of the heartbreak of the poem's unnamed narrator appears to

[236] Quoted in Haffenden, ed., *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, 293.

be that he believes that the poem can be "solved" through explanation, yet his solution, by avoiding the true mystery, leaves a void at its core.

The final stanzas are about Phyllis Chroustchoff, who killed herself at age thirty-eight in 1938, and to whose memory Empson dedicates *The Gathering Storm*. "The end of the poem goes back to a personal situation about a lady who was feeling the entire background to this thing," Empson noted in *Contemporary Poets Reading Their Own Poems*.[237] Yet this unstated story is complicated when we consider that Empson published a version of the final lines of the poem in 1937 as "Bacchus Four," a year before Chroustchoff's suicide, and there were originally ten more lines in the poem that dealt explicitly with pagan sexuality. The lines certainly relate to the tragedy of this specific woman, but we cannot reduce their significance to one single specific cultural figure. The lines have specific biographical valence, but they also serve as depiction of a mythic or slightly unidentifiable figure. Puzzle logic will take us infinitely far, but not everything can and should be reduced to one single solution.

Empson was a notoriously dramatic performer of his own work. At a September 1943 reading at the Wigmore Hall in London, held to benefit Aid in China, which featured a constellation of England's literary luminaries—T.S. Eliot, Kathleen Raine, Louis MacNeice, Osbert Sitwell, Edith Sitwell, among others[238]— Empson's "Bacchus" brought down the house. Poet Anne Ridler marveled at Empson's performance, "accompanied by his extraordinary dance of the limbs, which Louis MacNeice compared to a satyr."[239] According to a letter Eliot wrote describing the event, "the hit of the afternoon was Bill Empson's reading of BACCHUS (the more obscure Bacchus of the two, with that stuff about the

[237] Quoted in Haffenden, ed., *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, 306.

[238] Haffenden, *William Empson, Vol. II: Against the Christians*, 97.

[239] Anne Ridler, letter to John Haffenden, 6 Oct. 1986. Quoted in Haffenden, *William Empson, Vol. II: Against the Christians*, 97.

Arkitekt): the house reverberated with applause."[240] "Bacchus" brought down the house not because of its intense density of allusions, nor because of the elaborate endnote's elucidation, but because of the passionate performance that the poem evoked from Empson.

A poem is as much about what it conceals as what it reveals. By comparing his poetry to crosswords, Empson creates the impression that this poem is a puzzle with an answer key in the form of his note. However, Empson's notes do not provide a comprehensive "answer" to the poem: the notes suggest a hermeneutics, not a singular solution to the problems that the poem poses. That is, the detailed interpretations that Emption provides for the reader offer us a way of digging into each element, but they open rather than close possibilities: the note cues us how we are supposed to read, not that one person—even Empson himself—would, or should, be able to explicate possible aspect of every moment in the poem.

Passion and wordplay, crosswords and vibrant response, are not at odds; rather, the crossword-puzzle reading is where the poem's heart lies. And by obsessively detailing every aspect of the poem save the central one, Empson demonstrates that crossword-puzzle reading can amplify passion. Cracking through easy-difficulty creates emotional intensity.

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Seven Types of Crosswording

Empson's critical work corroborates some of the principles of reading crossword-wise. The seven types of ambiguity that Empson maps in his iconic book on the subject are, in brief, as follows: The first type of ambiguity occurs when a word or grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once, without any puns, or double syntax. The second type of ambiguity occurs when two or more meanings are resolved into one. In the third type, two

[240] T.S. Eliot, letter to John Hayward, 25 Sept. 1943. Quoted in Haffenden, *William Empson, Vol. II: Against the Christians*, 97.

ideas connected through context are given simultaneously in one word. In the fourth type, two or more meanings that do not agree with each other combine to clarify a more complicated state of mind in the author. The fifth type of ambiguity occurs when the author discovers his idea in the act of writing, or not holding it all in his mind at once; for instance, when a simile refers to nothing in particular but lies halfway between two statements. The sixth type occurs when a statement says nothing and the reader is forced to identify of statement of his own. And in the seventh type of ambiguity, the two meanings of a word are shown as opposites in context, thus displaying a fundamental division in the author's mind.

There aren't necessarily one-to-one overlaps between how to solve a crossword and Empson's ambiguities; myriad taxonomies based on seven basic categories exist.[241] A crossword is in a much more isolated environment than the poem; the petri dish to the poem's field. Each answer gets slotted into its isolated space in the grid, and each clue spits out an answer fitted to that particular slot, like an object in a vending machine. The parts are incredibly complex to figure out, and require many different lenses to uncover their meanings. But unlike vending machines, the answers don't exist in completely isolated compartments. Although there might not be thematic links to help connect answers—though there might well be—the grid offers a way to create a whole that helps the reader figure out the component parts.

Critics Gardner and Gardner describe a dual vision necessary to read "Bacchus":

> One looks at the poem as it were through a pair of binoculars of which one lens is microscopic, the other telescopic: it is possible, with many readings, to grasp individual pieces of the puzzle, closely seen; it is also possible to discern some kind of over-all structure – images of the human predicament, followed by the 'tragic exultation in it'. What one cannot do is bring the two lenses to a common focus, since there is too much to keep in mind for too great a space. One reads the poem for meaning (in smaller units) or for sound and general impression (in rather larger ones), and in practice the nearest one comes to total illumination is the random flash where two separated

[241] The Linnaen system of biological classification (kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species); the seven habits of highly effective people; seven days of the week; etc.

> passages suddenly touch, suggesting yet another possibility [.][242]

The reader can follow an endless labyrinth of cross-tracking references and codes, and the poem can yield new meanings from these ventures. But the emotional impact of the poem can be obtained through an experience of the poem that does not involve tracking and puzzling. In one way, the poem is an elaborately coded, braided mythic allegory with several stories woven atop each other; at the same time, the poem is about drink.

A crossword and a poem rely on the same activity of putting together both parts and whole. But the poem offers a mode of reading that is both more immediate and more protracted than the crossword. In a cryptic crossword clue, once the reader has figured out the answer and how the solution and the clue relate to each other, the puzzle is complete. In a poem, the reader might intuitively have a sense of a line, or might delve into meaning after meaning infinitely: the initial frustration and the satisfying click of conclusion can themselves recur over and over.

A puzzle reading of the poem is not intended to substitute for an intense investment in the poem's emotions, nor is such a reading intended to guarantee a more authentic experience of the poem. The crossword puzzle aspect of the poem does not entail emotional detachment from the poem, nor does an emotional connection with the poem cancel out a dense network of complex associations. Rather, investing in the poem in a puzzle-like fashion is one way to engage with the world that the poem offers. Working through all the clues of the poem—immersing in each code, and cross-checking each reference—demands that the reader enter into the poem through a telescope and through a microscope. The intentional, self-stylized difficulty around "Bacchus" creates a statement about the way poetry operates. Poetry, "Bacchus" suggests, is complex, dense, and worthy of our

[242] Gardner and Gardner, *The God Approached*, 153.

immersion. Yet this does not mean that poetry needs to be intimidating, self-important, or aggrandizing. Crossword puzzles require our focused concentration, and the willingness to adopt a myopic stereoscopic vision to enter into the game. But crossword puzzles do not demand an emotional investment; rather, they offer emotional respite from the daily concerns that they share print space with in the newspaper. Poems require an emotional investment, but this does not mean that poems are intended to turn the reader away if they appear difficult on the surface. A poem might, rather, deploy the crossword to guide the reader into empathy.

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A Crossword Should Not Mean, but Be: Veronica Forrest-Thomson

Poet-critic Veronica Forrest-Thomson lifted the mantle of the crossword school of poetry from Empson. To Forrest-Thomson, poetry thrives in the interstices between communication and symbol: the poetic space arises from the tension between one-to-one representation of the world in language and language as detached figures. Like a crossword, which positions itself as both a semantic blank and a necessarily solvable space, Forrest-Thomson's view of poetic artifice is that language must not announce its intentions literally, but rather evoke a forest of correspondences. A Wittgenstein acolyte,[243] Forrest-Thomson's critical and poetic work draws much of its inspiration from ordinary language philosophy.

Veronica Elizabeth Marian Forrest Thomson[244] was born in Malaya in 1947 to rubber planters John and Jean Forrest Thomson. She grew up in Glasgow, earned a BA in

[243] For more on Forrest-Thomson's influences, see Alison Mark, "Veronica Forrest-Thomson: Toward a Linguistically Innovative Poetics," *Poetics Today* 20.4 (Winter 1999), 655-672.

[244] For much more on Forrest-Thomson's biographical and intellectual background, see Gareth Farmer, *Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Poetic Artifice and the Struggle with Forms*, Dissertation, University of Sussex, September 2011.

English from the University of Liverpool in 1968, and received a PhD in English from Girton College, Cambridge, in 1971, where she studied with poet J. H. Prynne, and, later, with Graham Hough, who supervised her thesis. In 1967, at age twenty, she published her first poetry collection, *Identi-kit*, and in 1971, she published a second collection of poetry, *Language-Games*; at that time, she inserted the hyphen into her surname. The hyphen is in homage to Wittgenstein's concept of the "language-game",[245] or the idea that language consists of language and the activities into which it is woven. *Language-Games*, Forrest-Thomson's first book published under her hyphenated moniker, features poems that not only draw on some of Wittgenstein's favorite concepts, like the duck/rabbit optical illusion, but also extract passages wholesale from his work. On April 26, 1975, Veronica Forrest-Thomson choked on alcohol and prescription drugs and died in her sleep. *On the Periphery*, her third full-length collection of her poetry, was printed posthumously in 1976, and *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry,* her first and only full-length book of criticism, was published in 1978.

In her poetry, Forrest-Thomson often re-works language like Play-Doh for her own purposes. "Variations from Sappho" is the first of fourteen poems that appear in a self-published collection from 1970 called *twelve academic questions.* (This is the last collection published under "Veronica Forrest"; by the time *Language-Games* appears, she is writing under the hyphenated name that she will use for the rest of her career.) In it, a Sappho line instigates a mobile-like wordplay machine:

> mingled with all manner of colours
> mingled withall manner of colours
> mingled with allmanner of colours
> mengladwith all mingled of colours
> man glad withall mangled of colours

[245] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

manglad with all mingle of call ours[246]

Rather than present Sappho's content faithfully, Sappho provides the occasion for Forrest-Thomson to set a language game into motion. The engine could continue indefinitely: *amen with our mingle of collards*, *ma gland with all colour of mingle*, *all glam with our glad man of collars*, and so on.

Forrest-Thomson lays bare her propensity to put words into a grid and cross them back and forth in her posthumously published, mock-epic poem "Cordelia: Or 'A Poem Should Not Mean, But Be." Throughout draft stages, the poem had at least two other titles, both of which point to different types of parody that the poem employs.[247] An early typescript was entitled "Pain Stopped Play or 'The Twilight of the Gods' / for the Star." "Pain Stopped Play" mimics the type of language typically seen in journalism about cricket,[248] but by drawing this phrase out and isolating it as a title, Forrest-Thomson calls our attention to the accidental profundity in its banality: "pain stopped play" encapsulates loss of innocence, the moment of transition from childhood to adulthood; Adam and Eve never needed to know pain before the Fall. By isolating this single phrase from its content, Forrest-Thomson highlights the importance of context in the language-game. In ordinary language philosophy, language does not "mean" in a vacuum; rather, significance relies on context. The phrase "pain stopped play" can be technical and precise with reference to a cricket match, but an existential crisis when isolated and spotlighted as a title. The "play" could also be a theatrical play.

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[246] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Barnett (Exeter, UK: Shearsman Books, 2008), 68.

[247] David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy, "Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Wendy Mulford: Lyric Transformations," in *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970-2010: Body, Time and Locale* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool UP, 2013), 62.

[248] Kennedy and Kennedy, "Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Wendy Mulford," 62.

A later draft manuscript was called "Tradition and the Individual Talent."[249] Here, the parody speaks for itself. By stamping her poem with the name of Eliot's iconic essay, Forrest-Thomson yanks Eliot into dialogue with her, and compels the reader to put the two pieces in a diptych. Forrest-Thomson also compares the nature of poetry with criticism by yoking her poem to Eliot's essay through this shared title: if Eliot's essay tells readers about his theory of poetry through explication, Forrest-Thomson shows how they work or crumble through implementation.

"Cordelia" begins with a seven-line proem in which, unlike the rest of the poem, each line has a space in between. The main part of the poem proceeds in a single, unbroken stanza until the last four lines, which are separated by a line break and form a pendant that closes the poem. The opening section is in monorhyme, with the end words again / again / contain / train / refrain / again / refrain:

> To those who kiss in fear that they shall never kiss again
>
> To those that love with fear that they shall never love again
>
> To such I dedicate this rhyme and what it may contain.
>
> None of us will ever take the transiberian train
>
> Which makes a very satisfactory refrain
>
> Especially as I can repeat it over and over again
>
> Which is the main use of the refrain.[250]

These lines parody the opening of Eliot's "Ash Wednesday":

> Because I do not hope to turn again
> Because I do not hope
> Because I do not hope to turn

[249] Titling directly from Eliot is its own familiar poetic trope; cf. John Beer's collection of poems, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (Canarium Books, 2010).

[250] Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems*, 152.

> Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
> I no longer strive to strive towards such things
> (Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
> Why should I mourn
> The vanished power of the usual reign?[251]

The single rhyme in Forrest-Thomson's first seven lines seems both musically and logically clear, since the introductory proem is all about refrain and return. The lines ironically mock their own insistent rhyme scheme, which puts the reader at ease. This is a speaker who is clearly in control of the poetic process: *yes*, the speaker seems to say, *I know that I'm going over the top*. The rhyme comments on itself: "again" returns in three out of seven opportunities, and "refrain" twice, proving that this thudding is deliberate and ironic rather than just a tone-deaf repetition.

Forrest-Thomson writes early in "Cordelia":

> Even I know about cross words—
> Something. The word you want is Dante.
> He said he loved Beatrice. Whatever he did
> He didn't love Beatrice. At least the
> Beatrice Portinari whom history gives.[252]

For Forrest-Thomson, an expert of interstices, the space between "cross" and "words" is no accident. There are many different ways to read "cross words." "Cross words are crosswords: "Fill in the crossword grid," suggests critic Gareth Farmer, "and you get an epic."[253] "The word you want" suggests that the reader is solving a crossword puzzle, searching for an answer to an unseen grid. The omniscient speaker creates a blank, then fills it in for us: "Even I know about cross words — / Something. The word you want is Dante." That dash creates an ambiguous space in the sentence. Is the dash a blank that needs to be filled with a missing piece of content? Semantically, the sentence is complete, not a fragment;

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[251] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974).

[252] Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems,* 152.

[253] Gareth Farmer, "Veronica Forrest-Thomson's 'Cordelia,' Tradition, and the 'Triumph of Artifice'" *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 1.1 (2009), 63.

a period at the end would function grammatically. "Even I know about cross words." However, Forrest-Thomson inserts a blank where we don't logically require one, creating a pause that implies that the sentence has not ended, even though it technically could be done. She creates a lack for something we didn't know we needed to be lacking. Nothing is said, but the space of the nothing is voiced very powerfully.

For the nothing that is not there, we get something that is. The speaker fills the silence with Dante. The first line after the seven-line opening gambit nods to the opening canto of Dante's *Inferno*. "I with no middle flight intend the truth to speak out plain," the speaker declares, echoing Dante's *Inferno*: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita [In the middle of our journey of life]." Dante is thirty-five, that is, in the middle of his Biblically-allocated seventy-year lifespan. Dante is in the middle of the forest, trying to find his way physically; he is also on earth, in the middle between heaven and hell, trying to find his way spiritually. The poem also opens on Good Friday, between Jesus's death and his resurrection. Epics traditionally begin *in medias res*, that is, neither at the beginning nor the end but in the middle of the tale.

Veronica Forrest-Thomson's echo of Dante is an infernal parody. She is not in the middle of her journey of life: she is poised at the beginning of her career, yet also very near her death at age twenty-seven. Forrest-Thomson doesn't have a true middle flight; the period of life that is traditionally the longest and most fruitful gets truncated. Dante is in the middle of everything; Forrest-Thomson is in the middle of nothing.

When she turns our attention to Dante, she quickly turns away from Dante himself. "The word you want is Dante," she says, and the word prompts a litany of facts about the deaths of Renaissance-era Florentines. ("Dante" and "want" nearly rhyme with each other, and cross each other out.)

The dash here is the only dash that ends a line, and only one of two dashes in the poem. The second comes in the middle of a line and serves as a grammatical pause to twist a phrase into a pun: "Read John Donne—the memorable dun." This is not a poem that uses a limited syntactic vocabulary; on the contrary, Forrest-Thomson deploys semicolons, hyphens, parentheses, and other punctuation freely. Since Forrest-Thomson activates the full panoply of pauses, each has its own specific music. The dash in the middle of the line creates a caesura that emphasizes both halves of the line equally. A colon would create the appearance of analogy, and a comma or a semicolon would not emphasize the appositive phrase. "Memorable dun" is a description of John Donne, but it is also a pun on Donne. The sentence creates the logic of a crossword clue and answer in reverse. "Memorable dun" could be a cryptic clue for "John Donne." So "Read John Donne—the memorable dun" turns the metaphysical poet into a cheap pun. Putting the epithet after, rather than before, the name emphasizes the joke and spoils the puzzle. The dash emphasizes that there is a relationship to be uncovered between the two halves of the sentence.

"Cross words" is a direction for reading the poem, which gets played out in the next two lines. "He said he loved Beatrice. Whatever he did / He didn't love Beatrice." The chiastic structure makes the words cross each other out semantically: Dante says he loves Beatrice, but he doesn't. "Loved" and "love" cross each other on the line; "did" becomes "didn't." There's a double knot in the line. If we isolate the words across the line break, we get an exact cross that effects a cancellation: "he did / He didn't." All that is done is undone. Language means both itself and its opposite.

Cross words are words that cross each other out. Words mean both themselves and their opposite. The statement directly cancels itself at every moment, like a child pulling petals off a flower: he loves me, he loves me not, each action followed by its equal and

opposite reaction. There's a break between words and actions here: what is *said* versus what is *done*. Words and actions go at cross-purposes to each other.

Cross words are also cross—i.e., angry—words. The "Cordelia" of the title is, at least in part, the Cordelia of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Cordelia, Lear's youngest daughter, famously refuses to acquiesce to her father's egoistic demands that his daughters proclaim their love for him when he is deciding how to divvy up his kingdom. While Reagan and Goneril drip lavish exhortations of praise and devotion, Cordelia says nothing, because true love reveals itself through actions, not empty promises. Lear is furious. He hurls epithets at his daughter and banishes her, and she is silent for most of the play. That Cordelia "knows something" about "cross words" is an understatement; Cordelia is deeply wounded by her father's anger, and his words transform her position from the favored daughter of a triumphant king to the exiled child in disgrace.

"Cross words" are false words, or words at cross-purposes to actions. Cordelia is no stranger to words that say one thing and mean another, and to words that contradict reality. Reagan and Goneril are consummate double-crossers. Cross words are also words on the cross. The poem backs away from committing itself to a single belief system—"I may not know much about gods," the speaker warns us—yet even in its reluctance to yoke itself to a specific religious narrative structure, the poem engages indirectly but inevitably with religion.

"Cordelia" is a world turned upside-down, an artificial linguistic kingdom in which words and their meanings are fungible. In the poem's parodic lexicon, language means both itself and its opposite. If Forrest-Thomson has no middle flight, she is also directly in the middle of her flight. Having no middle means that there is no beginning and no end. Beginning in no middle flight is exactly the same as beginning in medias res. Black is white;

up is down; antonyms are synonyms. Language is meaningless, because the poem does not *mean*: the poem *is*.

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Poetic Artifice: The Puzzle of Poet-Critic

Like the Roman philosopher Ennius, whose writing has survived through quotations in other authors' works, Forrest-Thomson's work has largely been noticed over the past few decades through her influence on late-twentieth century poets and critics. Charles Bernstein, a prominent critic and member of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, quotes Forrest-Thomson extensively in his influential verse essay "Artifice of Absorption."[254] Bernstein turns Forrest-Thomson's analysis into prescription: "Content never equals meaning," he asserts. But Forrest-Thomson is less interested in polemic aphorisms about what a poem is; rather, she is invested in teasing apart the complex layers of how and why a poem works.

Poetic Artifice, Veronica Forrest-Thomson's only full-length work of criticism, argues that we have to read for the intersection of form and content. *Poetic Artifice* teaches readers to engage not only with the content but with the composition. The process is something like breaking a broken nose back into place. Poems use the intersection of form and content to create what Forrest-Thomson calls "image-complexes." If we value a poem as more than just a straightforward thematic statement, she writes, "we must pay attention to formal pattern, metrical demand, rhythmical pattern of sound and syntax" to arrive at a "thematic synthesis."[255] It is through image-complexes, she writes, that "meaning and external reference are absorbed and changed." When poets such as Ashbery dissolve syntax,

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[254] Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992).

[255] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1978), 3.

"breaking of the links between words and the world," the disjunction "must be accompanied by assertions of continuity with the reader if the poem is to remain powerful and intelligible," and these assertions "can best be made on the level of theme at one end and of convention on the other."

In a particularly droll segment of *Poetic Artifice*, Forrest-Thomson demonstrates the difference between prose and verse by rearranging a paragraph from the *Times* about the appointment of a new chairman for the BBC. She neither adds nor eliminates content, but re-lineates the prose passage into a two-column free verse. Her new version begins:

> At the 'head' of the BBC
>
> The Government
> have taken their 'time'
> in appointing the
> 'new chairman' of the BBC
> which is a measure both
> of the 'importance'
> now 'attached'
> to the 'office' and the difficulty
> of persuading
> *somebody* of the 'necessary quality'
> to take it on a 'part-time basis' at
> £6,000 a year
> BUT
> In choosing Sir Michael Swann
> they have made a
> 'good selection' and
> a very much better one
> *than might have been expected*
> *after such a delay.*[256]

Once the prose enters into a different relationship with its form, we begin to analyze it as a poem. The new shape evokes the original newspaper format while nodding to T. S. Eliot's verse plays. Under Forrest-Thomson's tailoring, the selection of Michael Swann as head of the BBC becomes a terribly fraught decision, and the easy reports of his competence shift to

[256] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, 23.

descriptions of a fragile, unstable figure. Indeed, the BBC is but the ABC with a new "head": if the new "head" of the BBC isn't A-plus head, the alphabet itself is in grave danger. Forrest-Thomson has done nothing to alter the words that form the content itself. Rather, she deftly deploys poetic alterations like a magician. She appears to saw the magician's assistant in half, but in reality, the lady is still curled in the box. Poetry isn't what we see, but how we see it.

Though *Poetic Artifice* wears its academia-ese very comfortably—"Discursive imagery is characteristic of the more abstract passages while empirical imagery appears most frequently in the narrative," to pick a random sentence that demonstrates its dense style—Forrest-Thomson chooses examples that let her deadpan while she makes her point. Describing how the image-complex works in a poem by Prynne lets Forrest-Thomson get away with sentences such as "Pie stands for the disillusioned imagination facing its own inadequacies while Outwash stresses rather the robust physical world asserting its independences." This is Punch and Judy at the critics' table, a profoundly prodigal doll tea party: on the one hand, Forrest-Thomson's language is as obtuse as the genre demands, but on the other hand, the pillars of this close reading are Pie and Outwash. And this friction between content and form is precisely to Forrest-Thomson's point. A poem isn't supposed to be a place that's so seriously tethered to reality, nor is it supposed to be a place that's totally divorced from the real world. The image-complex ignores neither the real nor the imagined, but is an augmentation of both.

Poetic Artifice is a screed against poets who champion "Naturalisation" and plain, direct speech to the exclusion of all other forms of poetic convention. In her view, poetry should not merely direct the reader back to the real world. On the contrary, a reader should engage with the form and content to create a "thematic synthesis," or a way of living in the

poem. Poetry does not mimic reality; it creates the imaginary. As one example of the Naturalisation she can't stand, Forrest-Thomson coolly eviscerates Philip Larkin. A poem such as "Mr Bleaney," she claims, communicates openly with the reader, but doesn't ask the reader to engage beyond passive attendance. "Mr Larkin is not a bad producer of verse," she concedes; "his technique is exact if unexciting; it fulfills the reader's expectations, leading him out towards the world and inviting him to think of it once more. But it does no more than that. It leave poetry stranded on the beach of the already-known world, to expand and limit itself there." Reading Larkin, for Forrest-Thomson, is like sitting in a car and playing the radio instead of putting the keys in the ignition and taking the machine for a drive: it's perfectly nice to hear the music, but the machine itself is capable of far more, and the driver is also capable of having much more agency, if the machine would only present its full range of possibilities.

But artifice does not function as a blanket permission statement for any kind of non-ordinary language to pass itself off as "poetry." Obscurity for obscurity's sake excites Forrest-Thomson nearly as much as the Naturalisation of Larkin, Sexton, et al. Concrete poetry irritates Forrest-Thomson. Although she attempts several concrete poems in her collections, she considers most of what was then in vogue as "Concrete Poetry" as carrying the concept too far: "Concrete poetry is a regression rather than a liberation." Unlike Pound and other poets who break the poetic line yet still employ rigorous technique, concrete poets use language as material for making patterns. If readers have nothing to offer when they read a "naturalised" poem, they similarly have nothing they can offer, but on the opposite end of the spectrum, with a concrete poem. Concrete "poets"—the quotes are Forrest-Thomson's—turn words into objects, and language into noise, leaving no room for interpretation, and therefore making it "totally impossible for a thematic synthesis to take place."

Robert Lax's "ik/ok," which Forrest-Thomson refers to as a "poem" (again, the quotes are hers), typifies the "pseudo-simplicity that tries to deny meaning."[257] Lax's poem consists entirely of "ik" and "ok" marching in columns across the page. Other contemporary critics try to express some sort of justification for "ik/ok": Forrest-Thomson cites Stephen Bann's valiant attempt to read "ik/ok" as an echo of the Latin "hic/hoc," and this extreme simplicity as "a kind of ultimate in equivocation." But Bann's reading is basically a Hail Mary pass. To my ear, ik/ok is no more hic/hoc than the lyric "Oh oh oh oh oh" in Ke$ha's song "Tik/Tok" is a re-writing of the line "No, no, no, no, no" from *King Lear*, a bit of deadpan interpretation that poet Paul Muldoon put forward in a 2010 interview for a Princeton humor magazine.[258]

If all this sounds like a baroque way of saying something very basic about poetry—form and content merge to use language in a non-narrative way—that's all part of Forrest-Thomson's plan. *Poetic Artifice* sounds complex, but it's not: it's a way of reading that takes into account form as well as function. Forrest-Thomson isn't offering a scientific measure of poetry, but a mode of interpretation, and she's just as susceptible to personal preference and whim as anyone. The book's prickly, authoritative style makes it seems like a fussy, prim tome, but *Poetic Artifice* is both an objective academica manifesto and a highly subjective, elaborate justification of her favorite poets. As critic Peter Howarth observes in the *London Review of Books*, one of the ironies of *Poetic Artifice* is that Forrest-Thomson concludes with a rousing re-reading of Sylvia Plath, a poet famous for her apparently directly confessional speaker.[259] Forrest-Thomson does not reject content. Of "Daddy," Forrest-Thomson

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[257] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, 45.

[258] "Princeton Prof Critiques Ke$ha," *Huffington Post*, 6 Jun. 2010.

[259] Peter Howarth, "Snap Me," *London Review of Books* 38.9 (6 Oct. 2016).

declares, "I do not mean (and may I say this for the last time) that the 'content' is not important, that Miss Plath's suffering, the invocation of concentration camps, the lack of telephonic connection, even the vampire myth, are of no importance." Content still signifies, but that's not the whole point. "The 'message' in the old sense is not what is important; message in the new sense is a product of the re-creation of the old orders, primarily through non-semantic levels," Forrest-Thomson writes; in other words, the meaning is more than the message. Plath uses confession as another form of poetic convention. The last line of *Poetic Artifice* could be about Forrest-Thomson: "But like all true artificers 'I' remains enigmatical, presenting only the words on the page."

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Crosswords both require and create an absorptive state, a kind of flow that both intensifies concentration while loosening certain habits of thought. The crossword demands you know how to think about it, but it makes you think how you think the constructor is thinking. The crossword slips you into an empathetic role: you have to fill in the thought patterns that somebody else has laid down. Solving a crossword—an essentially un-creative act—makes you enter into a state of sympathetic thought with the constructor. A crossword mentality of reading and writing employs surface-level difficulty as a ploy to hook the reader into the work. Once the reader's been hooked, it's up to the writer to use the opportunity to explore further depths that might not have been possible without cracking this easy-difficulty, or whether the writer chooses to stop at clever for cleverness's sake.

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On Difficulty

W. H. Auden wrote in 1960, on obscurity in poetry: "Sometimes I think that what [critics and readers] regard as obscurity in poetry is the riddle, that you do not call a spade a

spade. It is evident that people enjoy solving riddles, because otherwise crossword puzzles would not have the popularity they have. It is odd that some of the people who spend hours doing crossword puzzles, and love doing them, are the first to raise objections because they do not understand a line of poetry."[260]

What does it mean to say that a poem, or an aspect of a poem, is like a crossword puzzle? As a critical term, "crossword puzzle" is code for "overplotted," or "too clever by half," or "brainy but emotionless." "Crossword puzzle" carries a twinge of the déclassé, as though the poet had resorted to shell games for his magic rather than channeling a higher power. There's a strong whiff of the crossword as a second-fiddle medium: the crossword is technician, rather than artist; Salieri, not Mozart; the perfect yet perfunctory maestro, not the tortured, inspired genius.

Scholar Leonard Deipeveen observes, "One of the things that this accusation of crossword puzzles did was make the difficult text, paradoxically, easy. The text was completely explainable through a mechanical procedure of finding a cypher, of filling in the blanks. The difficult crossword puzzle text had none of the resonance of the great work of art."[261] As Deipeveen's description illuminates, there's another critical term hiding under the code of "crossword," one that's the secret crux of this comparison: difficulty. To understand what is meant by the term "crossword," we have to understand what it means to be difficult.

First: what is "difficulty"? Difficulty, as a term, has an overworked, tortured life in literary criticism, spawning myriad debates. For our purposes, we'll focus not so much on the controversy but on giving a clear definition of the term, so that we can provide insight into how difficulty works in both texts themselves and reading practices. In his seminal essay

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[260] Quoted in Peter Edgerly Firchow, *W.H. Auden: Contexts for Poetry* (Newark, DE: U of Delaware Press, 2002), 28.

[261] Deipeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism*, 258

"On Difficulty," critic George Steiner identifies four major categories of difficulty: contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological.[262]

Contingent difficulty is one that asks the reader to look up the answer. (Steiner is aware of the paradox in the phrase: "look up," with its exhortation to a higher power, is the exact opposite of the physical movement that your eyes have to make when you look something up; that is, to look up is to look down.) Contingent difficulties might operate on many levels—the Shakespearean crux, say, which asks you to hear both *solid* and *sullied* in Hamlet's "To be or not to be" monologue, and which invites you to hold both meanings simultaneously—but, ultimately, these difficulties operate under the assumption that they can always be wholly solved.

Modal difficulty asks the reader to enter empathetically into another person's worldview. Readers might comprehend modal difficulty intellectually and aesthetically, but remain unmoved emotionally: that is, we might get what's going on easily, but experience a blockade in feeling a response. Say a poem poses a comparison between a beloved and an animal. But say that this animal—a hart, perhaps—also has theological overtones, which might have been even more apparent and available in the time when the poet was writing. Are we meant to feel seduced by the beloved, the animal, and the god, as the writer appears to be? On what levels does the love operate, and with what amount of sincerity? When is the poet winking, when is the poet deluding himself, and when is he hoodwinking us? These judgment calls cannot be found in any reference book: you know it when you see it.

Tactical difficulty occurs as the result of creating new modes of expression out of the language: by dislocating syntax and grammar, or by coding the way we speak in a novel fashion, the writer poses a tactical challenge. Tactical difficulty can range from bombastic to

[262] George Steiner, "On Difficulty," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36.3 (Spring, 1978): 263-276.

quite subtle—and often, the quiet tactical maneuver is just as effective, if not more so, than the loud one. The penultimate line of Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar"—"It did not give of bird or bush"—is tactically difficult, even though the vocabulary is simple and the mode does not present thorns. What does it mean to "*give of* bird or bush"? What does "give of" signal as a phrase? It creates a feeling, but not a succinctly parse-able one, or one that can be translated easily into traditional syntax. Even though the sentence is grammatically correct, it's tactically difficult.

Ontological difficulty confronts the reader with existential questions about the nature of human speech, and of reality. "Difficulties of this category cannot be looked up," Steiner writes; "they cannot be resolved by genuine re-adjustment or artifice of sensibility; they are not an intentional technique of retardation and creative uncertainty."[263] Ontological difficulties in a text don't ask what, or why, or how we're saying anything: they turn to the meta-question of whether any linguistic utility is possible. Contingent, modal, and tactical difficulties all participate, Steiner writes, in "the contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility between poet and reader, between text and meaning"; that is, all three operate on the principle that even the most difficult text can, and should, use language to communicate between the author and the reader. Ontological difficulty, however, questions the ability of human speech to say anything at all.

Contingent and modal difficulties are both, as critic Vernon Shetley notes, phenomena of response—that is, their nature plays out fully via the reader's reception—whereas tactical and ontological difficulties are products of the author's intention, that is, the

[263] Steiner, "On Difficulty," 273.

author engineers these types of difficulty.[264] Contingent and tactical difficulties both operate based in *objective* and *epistemological* difficulty: that is, the obstruction here is one of knowledge, or of strategy, or of logical pattern. Contingent difficulty present barriers to understanding because the reader must translate the meaning of the text on the page, or must unearth various layers of meaning, to achieve full comprehension. Modal and ontological difficulties, on the other hand, are both *subjective* and *phenomenological,* experience-based difficulties. To arrive at comprehension, these difficulties ask the reader to undergo questions that have to be answered subjectively; the answer doesn't exist in a research file, nor can the difficulty by resolved by de-tangling a thorny use of language.

Every crossword, no matter how easy, is, by definition, difficult: there are clues, there is a blank grid, and there is a deliberate obfuscation that the solver has to overcome to resolve the full text. All solution is resolution: the Platonic ideal of each crossword has been created already, and must be re-created through the reader's efforts.

The crossword as a descriptor provides a clear heuristic for which type of difficulty is at play. All crosswords are difficult, but all crosswords are difficult in predictable ways. Crosswords participate in *objective* difficulty in both the reader's response and the author's intention—in other words, both contingent and tactical difficulty—but not in modal or ontological difficulty.

The crossword is always difficulty, but it's easy-difficult. By its nature, the crossword is always going to have a certain level of obscurity: the form requires the reader to find something that isn't presented on the page. But the crossword is *not* difficult in terms of what *kind* of difficulty it presents to the reader. You know that you're getting yourself into a

[264] Vernon Shetley, *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), 8.

difficult situation when you enter a crossword—those are the terms of the agreement—but you also know precisely what flavor of difficulty you're bargaining for.

This isn't to say that crosswords always present their trick for solving upfront. You may have no idea whether you're doing a puzzle with rebus clues, or one with algebraic wordplay, or one that relies on puns. And even crosswords where you know you have to look something up might not be as straightforward as turning to a search engine or reference book.

Consider BACON. When you enter a puzzle, you don't immediately know that that particular string of five blank squares is going to be filled in with the letters in BACON—any five-letter string is possible—so, there's an initial blockade: the tactical difficulty inherent in the form of the puzzle. Within the puzzle, an answer such as BACON provides the constructor with a wide variety of options. Clues such as "'Novum Organum' author" or "Breakfast sizzler" rely on fairly straightforward contingent difficulty to lead the solver to "BACON": in the first instance, you have to look up the author of this work, but a quick search will set you on the right track; in the second, you have to understand that bacon is a common breakfast food that makes a sizzling sound while cooked, but again, is only difficult in that it requires a certain cultural knowledge, not challenging because it presents an empathetic dilemma, or poses a new syntax, or posits the breakdown of language itself.

When clued as a "Strips in a club," BACON presents both tactical and contingent difficulties. The tactical difficulty lies in realizing that "strips," here, is a noun, not a verb; the contingent difficulty rests in understanding "club" as a type of sandwich, not a burlesque show. However, the contract between solver and constructor in a crossword puzzle does not extend to modal or ontological difficulty; indeed, the crossword as a form typically rejects these genres.

This isn't to say that the crossword as symbolic force is always immune to modal or ontological difficulty. When the crossword appears as an aesthetic symbol—something that a character is doing in a novel, or poem, or film, or as a formal inspiration—the crossword then becomes a part of the primary text. The crossword does carry emotional weight: the servant solving the crossword for the master in a Wodehouse novel is funny, but it's also a perfect encapsulation of the strained relationship between the upper and lower classes. The crossword, symbolically, may also present ontological questions about the futility of language at all—we trap ourselves in an absurd and fruitless grid to solve a puzzle that has already been conceived. But the crossword itself doesn't pose existential dilemmas, as a formal matter. If you've entered into the crossword, language is already doing something specific and defined, so the layer of ontological difficulty is suspended.

Crosswords might provide certain modal difficulties when they appear in a book or film. If a character is doing a crossword while the beloved is waiting in bed, is the character using the crossword as foreplay, equating the act of crosswording to the act of making love; or is the crossword a sign of a drift between the characters? Or crosswords can present modal difficulty in interpretation on a meta level. Why, for example, might someone become so invested in solving a crossword puzzle? Or why might the constructor be so obsessed with a particular subject, or a particular flavor of wordplay, that she builds a whole puzzle around it? But the crossword itself only operates within a very limited bandwidth of emotions—from the jokey punster to the serious fact-finder to the sadistic metapuzzle—and these emotions are not part of the primary difficulties facing solution.

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Puzzles That are Not Crosswords: Riddles, Enigmas, Nonsense

The crossword serves as a heuristic for *certain* modes of difficulty. A crossword engages with contingent difficulty. A crossword also engages with tactical difficulty. The puzzle doesn't tell the reader how it bends the language.

Other types of puzzles do use subjective types of difficulty. Enigmas[265] exploit ontological difficulty: if an enigma poses a conundrum as if it's a riddle, but defies solution, is language working? Oral riddles often require performance and tone-based modes of understanding, drawing on modal difficulty: if a speaker is winking, the answer to a seemingly innocuous riddle on the page might suddenly get a bawdy undertone.

Reading nonsense verse is like solving a puzzle, but not like solving a crossword puzzle. Nonsense verse requires the solver to recognize that even though a conundrum might pose in the shape of a solvable puzzle, it may offer no answer or further clarity. When you look at a nonsense poem, like looking at a crossword, you immediately see that there is a barrier to immediate comprehension: nonsense is difficult, in the sense that it plays with language's capacity for obfuscation and ambiguity. Nonsense verse actively engages with blockades to understanding, but, unlike crosswords, nonsense can equally employ subjective as well as objective types of difficulty. If we try to solve a nonsense poem as though we're solving a crossword puzzle, we can only get so far. Similarly, if we try to read a crossword as a nonsense poem, there will be vectors that won't land anywhere.

For an example of how reading with an eye to puzzles differs from a crossword-puzzle mode, consider "Jabberwocky," one of Lewis Carroll's nonsense poems. "Jabberwocky" appeared in Carroll's 1875 novel *Through the Looking-Glass*, thirty-eight years before the first crossword puzzle appeared. But because "Jabberwocky" is such an iconic piece of nonsense verse, and because Carroll's word games are direct ancestors of the

[265] See Eleanor Cook's analysis on the difference between riddle and enigma. Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006).

crossword puzzle, examining this poem is useful as a way to parse the modes of difficulty in which puzzling verse in *general* can engage versus the types of difficulty that crosswords in *particular* employ. By understanding what modes of difficulty a crossword puzzle uses, and what modes it does not see, we can clarify how to understand texts that present themselves as puzzle-like without providing clear modes of entrance.

Alice, the first reader of "Jabberwocky," encounters "Jabberwocky" in *Through the Looking-Glass* when she goes through the eponymous looking-glass and enters the world inside the mirror. She sees a book lying on a table and reads:

> YKCOWREBBAJ
>
> sevot yhtils eht dna ,gillirb sawT'
> :ebaw eht ni elbmig dna eryg diD
> ,sevogorob eht erew ysmim llA
> .ebargtuo shtar emom eht dnA[266]

The puzzle at this point is purely tactical: the words are presented as letters in a book, but what are the letters supposed to mean? Eventually, Alice solves the first tactical difficulty, which, it turns out, is tactile: she holds the poem up to a looking-glass and begins to read:

> JABBERWOCKY
>
> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe.

As Alice reads, we read: Carroll prints the entire text of the poem for readers to follow along. Once we're done, Alice, who has a convenient habit of talking out loud, sums up the experience:

> "It seems very pretty," she said when she had finished it, "but it's *rather* hard to understand!" (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are! However, *somebody* killed *something*: that's clear, at any rate—".[267]

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[266] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass,* ill. John Tenniel, ed. Peter Hunt (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 134.

[267] Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass,* 136.

Reading "Jabberwocky" itself, once she's figured out how to translate the indecipherable symbols into a legible reading experience, is thus still difficult for Alice. Contingent and modal difficulties both appear in Alice's response. Alice doesn't get what's going on in terms of content, that is, contingently. "Somebody killed something" is the best summary she's got, which isn't wrong, exactly, but also misses whole swaths of the poem—who the characters are, who specifically killed what, etc. She also doesn't fully understand why the poem is trying to do what it's doing. "It seems very pretty" is the closest she gets to expressing any emotional impetus, but she hasn't cracked a sense of a quest narrative, or of the need for the son to prove his worth to his father.

The difficulty underlying Carroll's intent is both tactical and ontological. The poem's structure tells us how to read the unfamiliar words: we know where the emphasis is allowed when the poem is read aloud, because the familiar ballad structure gives the reader clues as to how to pronounce the made-up words. Carroll's neologisms phonetically and morphologically make sense in English; these are pronounceable, if not semantically intelligible, clusters.

As Alice travels through the looking-glass world, Carroll eventually provides some tactical and contingent solutions to his puzzle through the medium of Humpty Dumpty, who analyzes the mystifying first stanza of "Jabberwocky" for Alice. Humpty defines each unknown word for Alice after explaining grandly his philosophy of language: "When *I* use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."[268] Carroll initially wrote this opening stanza long before *Through the Looking-Glass* as a parody poem in *Mischmasch*, a private magazine he created for his family. In *Mischmasch*, the quatrain is framed as "A Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry," and Carroll glosses each word as though he were

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[268] Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 190.

translating Old English, providing faux etymologies in deadpan academia-ese. Though Humpty Dumpty's explanations employ a similarly pedantic, clarifying style, his definitions are different than the gloss in *Mischmasch*, underscoring the idea that the stanza poses contingent difficulty in its nonsense words, but also defying the expectation of one correct solution. The apparent setup of a contingent difficulty which yields multiple results suggests ontological difficulty at work in the construction of this verse: if language, as Humpty Dumpty proudly proclaims, can mean whatever he wants it to mean, what authority or truth-value can speech have at all?

"Jabberwocky" is somewhere between a puzzle and a poem. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, it first appears as a simple puzzle: a string of indecipherable text becomes legible in the mirror. Then, we read the full poem, which is presented to the reader in full as Alice reads it in the narrative. Alice and Carroll both treat the poem like a puzzle—Alice doesn't quite understand it all, but operates under the assumption that the poem is something that should be deciphered. Carroll plants a "solution" later in the book, when Alice encounters Humpty Dumpty, and he explicates the befuddling words in the first stanza. By some accounts, the "puzzle" is solved. But understanding what's going on objectively is only half the difficulty. Alice is stymied as what she should *feel,* which is a modal difficulty, which a crossword puzzle doesn't care about. And the ontological difficulty of whether or not human speech has any single meaning at all—that's also a concern that's beyond the traditional scope of the crossword's domain. Puzzles may, as we have seen, blur this line—for example, Jacob Stulberg's puzzle with the embedded William Carlos Williams poem—but these crosswords are the exception to what the medium typically does.

Reading "Jabberwocky" like a crossword, therefore, would allow us to access half of the puzzle-like nature of what's going on, but wouldn't provide a compelling way to enter

into the poem fully. A crossword is not nonsense. If nonsense is sense made so literal as to make it meaningless, a crossword is sense rendered so abstract as to make it obfuscated. The crossword is the world pixelated; nonsense is the world inside out.

IV. Crossword Mode of Interpretation

La trahison des images is René Magritte's famous 1928-9 painting depicting an image of a pipe captioned with the sentence "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." A pipe, as Freud knew, is never just a pipe; a painting of a not-pipe is never just a painting. Magritte's image has become an icon, over-examined to the point of banality. But by opening this case study yet again to explore the phenomenology of the painting in which Magritte invites the viewer to participate, I will demonstrate through exemplum the type of interpretation that crosswords demand: both the literal and the associative, the banal and the sublime.

In 2016, while describing a recent Magritte exhibition at the Centre Pompidou to the press, museum curator Didier Ottinger said, "Magritte wanted to cross swords, meaning to engage in a theoretical combat with the philosophers, to prove to them that images can express thoughts in the same way that words can."[269] Magritte does more than cross swords: his paintings do what crosswords do, demand that we see both what is explicitly there and what is precisely *not* there. When we look at a grid of crossword plus clues, the "image" is complete, but the meaning is not. Magritte tells us the thing that we're looking at is not the thing we're seeing. The crossword tells us that the thing we're looking at is not the meaning of the thing itself.

La trahison des images ["The Treachery of Images"] features a large briar pipe in profile, floating without context against a cream background, as though on a vocabulary

[269] ""This is not a pipe': Magritte's 'Treachery of Images' beguiles Paris," *Reuters*, 22 September 2016 http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-art-magritte-idUSKCN11R308

flashcard or a billboard. Underneath the image, where one might expect a word defining the object, is written, in neat cursive, the sentence *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* [This is not a pipe]. Magritte has signed "Magritte" in very small writing in the bottom right-hand corner. The image is a visual joke on a schoolroom lesson: we anticipate "une pipe," so much so that we can't even help but see it already, even before we read what's written. But when we cross the liminal space between pipe and words, we read the exact opposite of what we expect to see.

In 1968, Michel Foucault wrote a slim book, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, that dissects Magritte's painting to explore the alienness under the surface familiarity. Tracing what we see when we see *La trahison des images*, Foucault parses how we process the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. In the gap between text and image, Foucault writes, the pipe that was never there disappears:

> The 'pipe' that was at one with both the statement naming it and the drawing representing it—this shadowy pipe knitting the lineaments of form with the fiber of words—has utterly vanished. A disappearance that from the other side of this shallow stream the text confirms with amusement: This is not a pipe. In vain the now solitary drawing imitates as closely as possible the shape ordinarily designated by the word *pipe*; in vain the text unfurls below the drawing with all the attentive fidelity of a label in a scholarly book. No longer can anything pass between them save the decree of divorce, the statement at once contesting the name of the drawing and the reference of the text.
>
> Nowhere is there a pipe.[270]

All of Magritte's pipes are pipes, and none of them are. None of the pipes are pipes because they are all representations: the sign is not the thing itself. Yet all of Magritte's pipes get us to think of a pipe irrevocably. By being told exactly what not to see, Magritte sharply defines what we think.

These layers of contradictory perception that *La trahison des images* compels the viewer to enact help us to break down how we solve crossword puzzles, and what it means to read with crossword logic: we need, simultaneously, to be literal and not literal, to follow our

[270] Michel Foucault, *This Is Not A Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 29.

intuitions yet deny them, to free-associate as widely as possible but also to reject multiple associations in favor of solution. We need to hold all possibilities at once in order to settle on one.

Figure 5. René Magritte, *La trahison des images* (Ceci n'est pas une pipe), 1929.

"This is not a pipe" is true; we don't smoke a painting, just as we can't walk up to a billboard for a soda and have a sip from the picture of the bottle. (Huffing paint, or rolling up the canvas into an enormous joint, are unlikely.) "This is not a pipe" is also false. We know that the image represents a pipe, so to be told that it is not a pipe contradicts what we know it is intended to bring to mind. "This is not a pipe" is related to ironic process theory, or the psychological process in which deliberately suppressing a thought will inevitably make you more likely to think it. If I tell you, "Don't think of a pink rhinoceros," I know what you are thinking about; if I tell you that something is not a pipe, while showing you a picture of something that is very clearly a pipe, you're going to see a pipe.

La trahison des images, at least in part, responds to *Vers une architecture (Towards an Architecture*), Le Corbusier's 1923 collection of essays championing an architecture based on function and an aesthetic of pure form. In *The Shock of the New*, Robert Hughes calls Le Corbusier's pipe "an emblem of plain functional design" and defines Magritte's painting as a

"riposte" to Le Corbusier.[271] *Vers une architecture* concludes, "Architecture ou revolutión? On peut éviter la révolution." Le Corbusier then gives a stock image of a pipe, labeled "A briar pipe." The pipe is in profile, with a straight shank and a bowl pointing upward at a ninety-degree angle such that it resembles the letter L lying on its back, as if Le Corbusier were about to write his name in a pipe alphabet. Magritte takes Le Corbusier's pipe, rotates it one hundred and eighty degrees, gives the neck an elegant, swan-like curve, and writes that it is not a pipe.

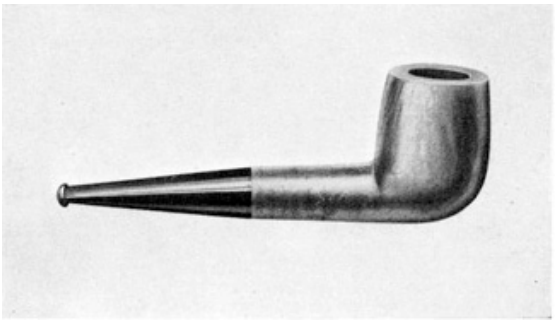

Figure 6. Le Corbusier, *Vers un Architecture*, 1923.

The birthplace of the briar pipe is St. Claude, France, a small town nestled in the Jura mountains of eastern France. In the eighteen-fifties, craftsmen in St. Claude started manufacturing pipes out of briar, which proved more durable than cherry or clay. By the nineteen-twenties, ninety-five percent of pipes in France were made of briar, and the majority of pipes today still use this wood. An enormous statue of a pipe stands outside the Smoking Pipe and Diamond Museum, a museum dedicated to St. Claude's two historic industries. The statue of the pipe is a pipe, but is no more a pipe than Magritte's pipe that is not a pipe.

[271] Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: The Hundred-Year History of Modern Art: Its Rise, Its Dazzling Achievement, Its Fall*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 1990), 244.

Figure 7. Musée de la pipe et du diament, Saint-Claude, France.

Foucault speculates that Magritte's pipe recalls "Fumées," a calligram by Guillaume Apollinaire.[272] Published in 1918 in *Calligrammes: poèmes de la paix et de la guerre (1913-1916)*, "Fumées" features a pipe made from words:

Fumées

Et tandis que la guerre
Ensanglante la terre
Je hausse les odeurs
Près de couleurs-saveurs

Et je fu
m
e
du
ta
bac
de
ZoNE

Des fleurs à ras du sol regardent par bouffées
Les boucles de odeurs par tes maines décoiffées
Mais je connais aussi les grottes perfumes
Où gravite l'azue unique des fumées
Où plus doux que la nuit et plus pur que le jour
Tu t'éntends comme un dieu fatigué par l'amour
Tu fascines les flames
Elles rampant à tes pieds
Ces nonchalantes femmes
Tes fuilles de papier.[273]

[272] Foucault, *This Is Not A Pipe*, 60.
[273] In English translation:

Smoke

And while war
Bloodies the earth

Apollinaire's calligrams are concrete poems that feature, either in part or in whole, a poem that is in the shape of the thing it evokes in content. The section of "Fumées" shaped like a pipe describes the speaker smoking tobacco from "the zone," that is, the free area where tobacco would have been available during World War I, when the poem was written. And the pipe-shaped section of "Fumées" is only one of the pipes: even though the middle part is explicitly a concrete poem, the text underneath carries the rough shape of the pipe, as though it is a cloud of smoke emerging and sinking from the bowl of the "zone," or a long shadow of the pipe itself. Once the pipe has been evoked both in form and content, the reverberations of the pipe are found everywhere.

The word "pipe" never appears inside Apollinaire's calligram. The form describes the experience of smoking, which makes the poem function as a pipe, not as a description of a pipe. As we travel down the neck of the pipe to the bowl, we follow the smoke to the

---

I hoist odors
Near the taste-colors

And I sm
ok
e
tob
ac
co from
the
ZoNE

Flowers barely touch the ground glimpse in whiffs
The ringlets of odors tousled by your hands
But I know too the perfumed grottoes
Where smoke's unrivaled azure spirals
Where softer than night and purer than day
You sprawl like a god wearied by love
You bewitch the flames
They crawl at your feet
Those nonchalant women
Your leaves of paper

Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War (1913-1916),* trans. Anne Hyde Greet (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 114-116.

tobacco from the zone. The elongation of the line into the curve of the pipe emphasizes the simultaneously quotidian and rare relish that the speaker takes in smoking. Initially, the gesture of describing smoking in the shape of a pipe seems over-the-top. But creating a pipe on the page is a poignant bit of magical thinking. In the war, normalcy turns upside down. What used to be the background of existence—daily routines like smoking whenever you want—become rarities, and horrors of air raids and battlefields that are unthinkable in times of peace become bedrock in war.

Nearly forty years after painting *La trahison des images*, Magritte painted a sequel, *Les deux mystères*. This painting depicts an easel, propped on a stand, that displays a framed image of a pipe with *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" written underneath. Here, the pipe-not-a-pipe appears against a black background with the text in white cursive, as though on a chalkboard. Magritte's painting has gone from existential question to academic paradox. Above the painter's easel, a larger version of the pipe floats against the wall. *Les deux mystères* is a funhouse mirror. The first mystery begets the second mystery, which, it turns out, is exactly the same mystery. Is the second specter of a pipe a pipe, or is it another pipe dream? The bigger pipe floating on the wall has fewer details than either the original painting's pipe or the pipe in this representation of the original. The "original" in the new painting isn't only different in color; the period at the end of the phrase is gone, turning the definitive sentence into a slightly less definitive suggestion, and Magritte's signature at the bottom of the painting is gone. The image in this painting isn't meant to be the original, but a representation of the original. This is not "This is not a pipe.".

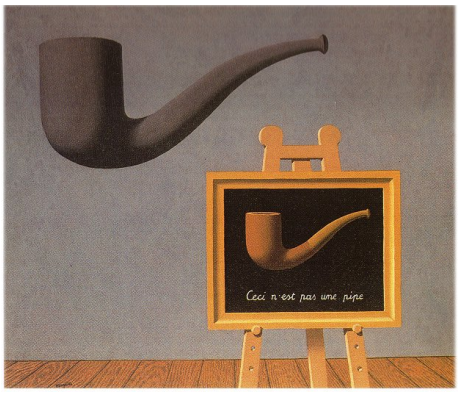

Figure 8. René Magritte, *Les deux mystères*, 1966.

Yet it's not a shadow of the pipe in the framed canvas. There's no visible light source, and the pipe cast upward on the wall can't be the shadow of the pipe in the canvas. Nothing else in the painting has shading: notice that the easel's legs rest on the ground without a shadow. And it would make no sense physically for a two-dimensional representation of an image within a painting to cast an enormous shadow on the wall behind it. Indeed, the pipe on the wall has more dimensionality than anything else in the painting, since it has a smooth texture and a body distinctly shaded as to appear rounded. If anything, the pipe on the wall looks like a projection through a magic lantern, or as though the original portrait were taking a photograph of a pipe. Or the first pipe has become so iconic that the image of the pipe has taken on pipe-like status of its own.

In crosswords, we're not meant to hold the instability forever. For each clue, we're presented with a statement, and we're asked to come up with the word or phrase that that particular clue wants us to arrive at in that particular moment. We're also helped by the visual logic of the crossword's grid; we know the size and shape of the thing that's not seen, and once other unseens come into vision, we can discover what is not there by virtue of inference from what is. Notable exceptions are found in Schrodinger puzzles, or ones in

which certain clues can have two different and completely correct answers. The *New York Times* crossword on the eve of the 1996 Presidential election famously featured a center clue that could either be CLINTON or BOB DOLE. Ben Tausig's "gender fluid" *Times* crossword of 2016 features several answers that could either begin with an M or an F. But on the whole, what clues ask for is not ease but clarity, not simplicity but correctness. Crosswords get you to *not* think of something so precisely that the answer is, ultimately, the only possibility.

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Charles Layng, a Chicago-based reporter and editor, published *Layng's Cross-Word Puzzles: First Book* in 1924; with that "first" we see that Layng ambitiously anticipated success and sequels. The publishers of Layng's book tout his collection as the public's much-needed "relief" from the "solid block idea" of crosswords, calling to mind an image of solvers trapped inside a grid, banging helplessly on the sides. But Layng was hardly the first to release crosswords from the square's tyranny; on the contrary, the crossword wasn't even definitely a square yet. Eventually, the crossword's iconic square shape became part of the puzzle's lexicon: "This puzzle is one" is a clue for "square" from a 1979 *New York Times* crossword. The first crossword puzzle, published in the *New York World* on December 21, 1913, is in the shape of a diamond, and soon, puzzles in the shape of the letters F, U, and N appear. Layng offers a crossword cornucopia: The Liberty Bell, The Elephant, The Pin Wheel, The Ice Cream Cone, The Snow Man, The House That Jack Built, etc. The majority of clues don't have too much to do with the puzzle's shape, but some do: "Minor chess-men" is 2-Across in a puzzle called "The Pawn Shop."

One of Layng's puzzles is "The Pipe," a crossword grid in the shape of a briar pipe. This is not a pipe: the puzzle resembles its title in the loosest way possible, like a poorly

pixelated doodle of a pipe in profile, and none of the clues are about pipes or piping hot pies or Pan or the Pied Piper or corncobs or Sherlock Holmes. "The Pipe" is not a pipe.[274]

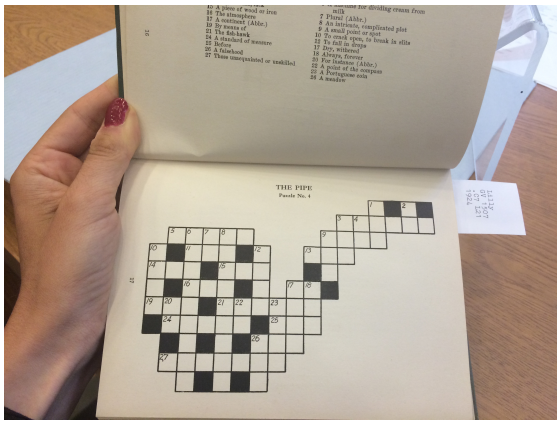

Figure 9. Charles Layne's "Pipe," 1924.

"The Pipe" begins by demanding that we see this crossword as a pipe. Then, it asks us to ignore the fact that we're seeing a pipe and instead asks us to see the puzzle as a crossword to be solved. Once we've figured it out, we get to step back and again see the crossword as a pipe. There's no reveal that unveils a metapuzzle about a pipe, or a pipeline of pipe-specific knowledge buried in the clues. The puzzle looks like a pipe, and it calls itself a pipe, but this is a pipe in form only, not in content. And yet, this puzzle has never *not* been a pipe.

According to *Xword Info*, a site that analyzes every *New York Times* crossword puzzle from the puzzle's inception in 1942 to the present,[275] "pipe" has appeared as an answer over

[274] Charles Layng, *Layng's Cross-Word Puzzles: First Book* (Chicago: The Stanley Company, 1924).

[275] Nearly every *New York Times* puzzle to date is now online and analyzable, thanks, in large part, to the Pre-Shortzian Puzzle Project, a project spearheaded by crossword prodigy David Steinberg, that digitally optimized all crosswords published before Will Shortz took over as that newspaper's puzzle editor. (All the puzzles that have appeared in the paper from 1993 onward, when Shortz began his tenure as editor, had been digitally optimized, but digitization for the earlier puzzles had been extremely haphazard until Steinberg took over.) Volunteers converted PDFs of the puzzles, clue by clue, into digitized Across Lite puzzles that can be searched

one hundred thirty times. When "pipe" is the answer in a crossword, the clue doesn't want to make us think of "pipe" immediately. A crossword clue is the inverse of *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*: rather than tell us explicitly what not to think about, the clue's goal is to send us down a series of associations until we arrive at the pipe, that is, the place the clue has been leading us all along. Trying to get to "pipe" in a completely linear fashion dredges up too many other possibilities. Without eliminating the smoke surrounding the idea of "pipe," you move in a fog.

A pipe might be straightforward: "Appurtenance for Santa or Sherlock Holmes," "Corncob." Before Will Shortz took over as *Times* crossword editor in November 1993, "Meerschaum" was used thirteen times as a clue for "pipe"; in the Shortz era, "Meerschaum" has yet to appear. Pipe means "speak": "____up (speak)" and "don't speak": "____ down! ("Quiet!")." Pipe can be an adjective, a "kind of organ or dream." Describing a pipe by its function gets trickier. "Water bearer" is ambiguous, on first glance, as we might think initially of something we can see (a ewer, a vase). "It might need a fitting" might lead the solver into a different category at first, like "suit." But why, on closer inspection, would a "suit" need a fitting? Though we think of clothes when we think of fitting, it's not the suit itself that needs to be fit, but the person in the suit that needs the suit fitted to her. A suit goes instinctively into the context of things-in-the-world-that-need-fittings, but the suit, here, doesn't exactly fit. A pipe, on the other hand, often requires fittings to function—envision a pipe that's part of the plumbing, rather than one that Holmes might smoke. A pipe inspires William Blake's "Introduction to Songs of Innocence," piping down the valleys

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and tracked. There are still 142 missing puzzles, mostly due to newspaper strikes in New York, but otherwise, the database is complete and can be analyzed.

wild.[276] There is no debate over the existence of the pipe; the poem only exists if the pipe exists. There's the Pied Piper of Hamelin, whose pipe lures the rats out of the city; when the mayor refuses to pay the piper, the piper comes again, this time leading the children away. No pipe, no piper; no piper, no rats gone; no rats gone, no children.

Crossword clues can play against initial reactions, but the tug between what you immediately feel to be right and what you discover to be true relies on deeper intuitions than surface assumptions. As crossword constructor and editor Ben Tausig put it, puzzles "put you in a place of confusion, and you have to figure out how to get out of that confusion, as opposed to being tempted by a wrong direction." You learn which gut instincts you can trust, which you know you should never trust, and which you should set aside agnostically, waiting and seeing until you have more context.

Crosswords are magnetic because they tease forward several types of desire at once: the yearning to solve a riddle, the desire to fill in a blank space, the obsession with perfection yet also the ability to trust our guts and go with the thing that instinctively feels right. Crosswords are also magnetic in the opposite direction. Their very artificiality and the patina of rigor without depth can repel us. Walled gardens can be Edens, but they can also be prisons: the mind can make a hell of heaven, a heaven of hell.

[276] William Blake, "Introduction to Songs of Innocence," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *Poetry Foundation*.

Chapter 3

CROSSWORDS: A FIELD GUIDE

American-Style and Cryptic

How does a crossword operate? Crosswords pose a conundrum that wants to be solved, and one in which all the components for solution are baked into the body of the crossword itself. But the paths that the solver must take from any given clue to any given answer, and the logic at the heart of any given crossword, may vary radically. To understand how crosswords work, we have to understand how they think. And to understand how they think, we have to examine why they do what they do.

The crossword evolved in America and Britain in different paths. The American crossword has favored increasingly sophisticated grids, privileging interlocking and intricate symmetry. American crosswords employ many different types of obfuscation, and can generally be subdivided into puzzles with themes and puzzles without, but even the most gnarly ones have some toehold definition-style clues to make the grid work. British newspapers have favored the cryptic crossword. Grids are much simpler, and much more filled with black squares, rather than getting words to overlap with each other. On the other hand, the cluing language has become more and more precise. Cryptics rely on coded wordplay and exact phrases: every element of the answer is somewhere in the clue, but you have to know how to read it to know what to solve, and because the grids are so much simpler than the complex American-style grids, joined letters will rarely help you.

The taxonomies here let you can spot different types of American-style crosswords and different varieties of cryptic clues as they appear in the wild. Think of this not as a how-to for solvers or constructors, but rather as a classification system: more Dewey Decimal

than Audubon, my aim is to think about how these branches have evolved, and what the evolution says about how the form wants to work.

A Guide to American-Style Crosswords

My goal in this guide is illustrative, not comprehensive: not to illuminate all specific crosswords in the past, present, and future—a project as futile as Causabon's attempt to create a "Key to All Mythologies" in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*—but rather, to highlight and explore patterns of behavior. This taxonomy of crosswords gets us inside the puzzle's anatomy and its psychology: what is the main engine driving the puzzle? What is it asking the solver to do? How do different crosswords tap into various operations, and what do they have in common?

My taxonomy is indebted to T. Campbell, a crossword constructor, comic-book artist, and lay Linnaeus, who has combed through thousands of puzzles to put together a heroically detailed taxonomy. From 2010-2011, Campbell wrote a long series of guest columns for Amy Reynaldo's "Diary of a Crossword Fiend" blog that laid out definitions for scores of types of crosswords.[277] Campbell later expanded these columns into a monograph, *On Crosswords*. If categorizers can be categorized into lumpers and splitters, Campbell is the most granular of splitters: though Campbell provides extremely useful guidelines for each subgroup, and sub-sub group, of the crossword, his treatise ultimately functions more as a bestiary than a taxonomy, highlighting individual characteristics of specific puzzles rather than emphasizing similarities and familial connections across types.

[277] For the columns on Reynaldo's blog, Campbell organized his taxonomy more explicitly than in the book, where the categories emerge more discursively.

Using *On Crosswords* as a launch pad, I have streamlined and clarified Campbell's classifications to create a clear, cohesive guide to the logics in operation within American-style crosswords. My guide isn't comprehensive, as I am confident that crosswords will continue to break the mold. Also, this guide does not attempt to absorb the many different ranges of possible associations between clues and answers, which are endless. Instead, this taxonomy aims to illuminate the structure behind how crosswords think. Some of the category names are Campbell's, some originate with other crossword constructors, editors, and authors of puzzle-related material—notably, Michelle Arnot, Margaret Farrar, Eugene Maleska, Will Shortz, and Ben Tausig—and some are my own.

Any one crossword might take on traits from several of these categories. However, at the heart of most crosswords, we can typically trace the puzzle's genesis to one type of conceit. Parsing the ways in which crossword-logic functions illuminates what our brain is doing when we're inside a crossword, and the type of reading and association that we're being asked to do might vary widely. Even though the format—grid plus clues—may look exactly the same from puzzle to puzzle, the relationship between the form and content can vary tremendously.

This guide is specifically for American-style crosswords, not British cryptics. The cryptics have their own very particular vocabulary, and their own behavioral patterns. While all cryptics rely on certain types of wordplay, the codes are quite different from the logic of American crosswords, and thus merit their own taxonomy.

Think of this as a sort of psychology-of-the-crossword field guide: when you're in the wild with something crossword-shaped, you should be able to use this taxonomy to help you figure out what it might be asking you to do. The taxonomy also allows solvers to think

neither inside nor outside, but from the other side, of the box, approaching the puzzle from the point of view of the constructor.

American-style crosswords can be divided into two main types: themeless and theme.

Themeless

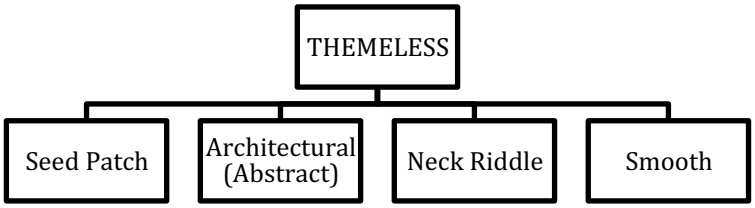

Figure 10. Themeless Crosswords: Schematic Chart.

Themeless crosswords commonly highlight particular words and phrases. Without the constraints of a unifying thematic core, constructors can stretch the limits of their word databases. Because the clues aren't supposed to relate to each other, anything can be juxtaposed against anything else. Themeless puzzles fall into four broad categories: seed patch, architectural (abstract), neck riddle, and smooth.

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Seed patch

Campbell defines "seed patch" puzzles as crosswords that begin around one or two entries—the "seeds"—and let the fill words grow around those. Seed patches can turn loosely thematic, often by dint of accidental associative reflex. But they don't begin as

themed puzzles, and they don't concern themselves with sticking tightly to their constraints. Seed patch constructing can be a way to build a puzzle around buzzwords and phrases swimming in public consciousness. Since seed patches rely on a few extremely loud, robust clues, seed patches create crosswords in which a few flashy answers steal the show, then the rest of the grid gets typically polished to become as clear and clean as possible to maximize and highlight the effect of the marquee clues.

Seed patch construction can give crossword puzzles an easy avenue to riff on the latest news cycle. For a few weeks in early 2018, a "Tide Pod Challenge" fad flared: Twitter users began posting riffs about eating Tide Pods, a laundry detergent packaged in little gel pouches; soon, a few intrepid but ill-advised YouTubers consummated the joke by actually popping the pods, leading to a mini-outbreak of viewers who tried the stunt for themselves, with disastrous results. Also in early 2018, in an unrelated news story, Pepsi's CEO described, in an interview, the company's vision of a version of Doritos marketed to women: the snack that would be less noisy and less prone to leaving messy orange dust on one's fingertips. "Lady Doritos" quickly became mocked en masse on social media. By mid-February 2018, when both phrases were still churning through the news cycle, constructor Brendan Emmett Quigley had created a crossword for his site that seeded TIDE PODS ("'Challenging' things to eat?") and LADY DORITOS ("Tone-deaf snack proposed by Pepsi last week"). Quigley wants the fruits of his seed patch to be consumed quickly—"last week" as a clue immediately begs to become obsolete—and then discarded, as readers move on to the next puzzle.[278]

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Architectural (abstract)

[278] Other clues for the fill reinforce the disposability of Quigley's puzzle: RIOTER is "Fan of the team that just won the Super Bowl, maybe," referring to the rowdy jubilance of Philadelphia Eagles fans.

Instead of the internal constraint of building their grids around a certain theme, themeless constructors often use the external challenge of creating grids with the most visual appeal possible: minimizing black squares, for example; minimizing the number of words per grid; creating stacks of fifteen-letter clues. These abstract designs are impressive and beautiful, yet give nothing away about any of the words in the puzzle; in other words, the design of the grid is divorced in subject from the clues and content.

*

Neck Riddle

A woman has been condemned to death (the reason why is unknown, and, for our purposes, unimportant), but the judge gives her one final chance to save herself. She can propose a riddle to her condemners, and if they cannot solve it, she will be spared. Her riddle: "Love I sit / Love I stand; / Love I hold / Fast in hand. / I see Love, / Love sees not me. / Riddle me that, / or hanged I'll be." The nefarious condemners are stumped, and our lady is acquitted. (The answer: "She had a dog, called 'Love'. She had killed it, and with its skin had made socks for her shoes—on these she stood; gloves for her hand—and these she held; a seat for her chair—on that she sat; she looked at her gloves and she saw Love; but Love saw her no more.") [279] This type of conundrum is a neck riddle: that is, a riddle where the stakes involve the riddler's neck. The riddler wants to propose something where you can only understand the answer in an extremely specific context.

Like neck riddles, crosswords sometimes feature phrases that aren't really phrases at all, in any recognizable sense. Campbell calls these the "anything goes" puzzles; Trip Payne,

[279] Michael Elias, "Neck-Riddles in Mimetic Theory," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* vol. 2, Spring 1995: 189-202.

a constructor who frequently uses this mode, calls them "Something Different."[280] In a neck-riddle-style themeless, clues feature phrases that aren't really phrases at all, or, rather, are strings that are made up solely for the purposes of the puzzle. They technically make sense syntactically in the language, but they're goo outside the puzzle. Think "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously," Noam Chomsky's famous sentence that illustrates syntactic sense without semantic content: the "anything-goes" clues are technically phrases, but not ones that would ever make any sense out of the context of each clue. "Flowery poem about one 1980s fad" yields ODE ON A RUBIKS CUBE;[281] "Put a Starbucks in each of Edward Hopper's paintings, say" (YUPPIFY FINE ARTS);[282] "Japanese assassin in a Tarantino movie" (PULP NINJA).[283]

The difference between neck riddle-style crosswords and pun-based crosswords is that the punsters riff on some common word or phrase, whereas these anything-goes clues don't yield a pun; rather, they're a literal definition of a weird clue. The neck-riddle crosswords are rather like dictionary definitions, except creating definitions for words and concepts that have never before been put together.

Neck riddle puzzles highlight the prescriptivism versus descriptivism debate in the realm of crosswords. While many constructors and solvers are happy to accept these types of crosswords as demonstrations of ingenuity, made-up phrases that can only exist in the context of their particular crossword, like mollusk shells that become uniquely tailored to the

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[280] A related phenomenon is the hapax legomenon: a word that appears only once in the context of an entire language, or author's work; the early 2000s fad of Googlewhacking, finding words or phrases that have one and only one hit in a Google search, is in the same family.

[281] Trip Payne, "Puzzle Explanations," *Triple Play Puzzles*, 2016, Web.

[282] T. Campbell, *On Crosswords* (New York: Koëler Books, 2013), 62.

[283] Brendan Emmett Quigley, "PUZZLE #78 & now for something completely different," *Brendan Emmett Quigley*, 25 Jun. 2009, Web.

soft body within, are anathema to Maleska's guidelines for construction. "Do not use colloquial phrases that are not found in any lexicon or book of quotations or as a title of a book, song, etc." Maleska admonishes his imagined audience of would-be constructors. Maleska, king of the reference books (*Magister maximus librorum*), held a conservative view of the puzzle; that is, the crossword should uphold a certain standard of usage in its referents and its wordplay. He was a cruciverbal prescriptivist: the crossword should be an authority, rather than a recording instrument or a place to let words arbitrarily loose.

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Smooth

Smooth crosswords are ones in which nothing is obtrusive: unlike the seed patch and neck riddles, which typically highlight marquee zingers, and unlike architecturally demonstrative grids, smooth crosswords do not call attention to any specific element or section. Campbell calls these well-honed themeless puzzles "puddings," because of their un-lumpy, easy-to-swallow designs: the answers contain a minimum of crosswordese, the grids don't have hiccups around awkward words, the black squares are in a regular but unobtrusive design, and, in general, the whole puzzle just works well. Smooth puzzles take an expert hand to design. Think Japanese zen garden, mid-century modern minimalism: their simple functionality belies the skill in their creation.

Theme

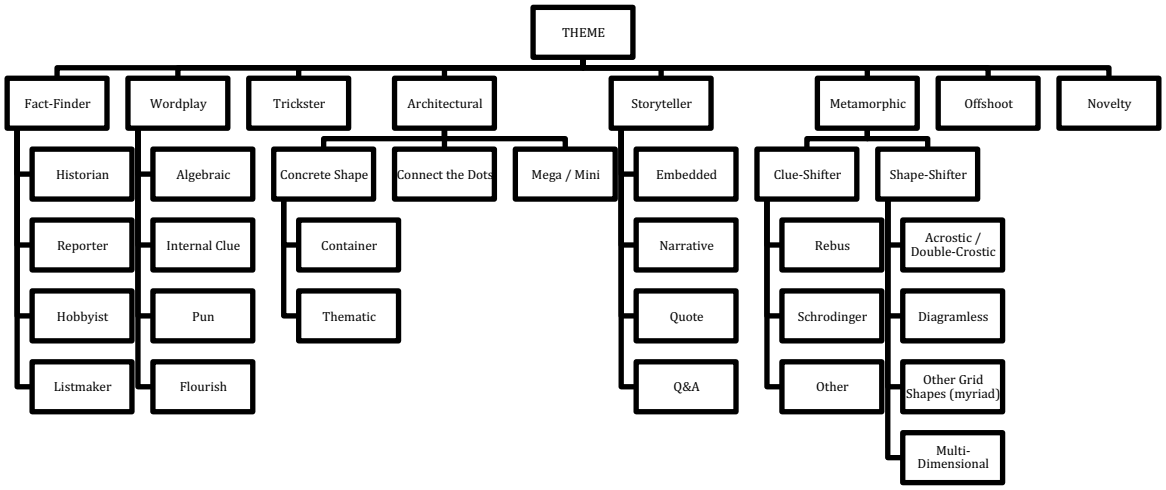

Figure 11. Theme Crosswords: Schematic Chart.

The crossword mechanism lends itself to the use of themes as an anchor, something to help provide form within the form—in other words, a theme helps give a reason to construct a puzzle at all. Themes echo the external, geometric constraint of a symmetrical grid by providing internal, algebraic rigor. Theme puzzles begin with a set of words, or a particular constraint, that provides the starting point for the grid. The rest of the puzzle fills in and around the answers related to the anchoring conceit.

There are nine main types of theme puzzles: fact-finder, wordplay, trickster, meta-puzzle, architectural, storyteller, metamorphic, offshoot, and novelty.

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Fact-Finder

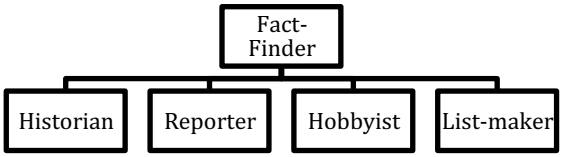

Figure 12: Fact-Finder Crosswords: Schematic Chart.

Campbell's term for any type of puzzle that relies on information rather than wordplay is a "fact-finder": a puzzle interested in presenting a certain chunk of thematically related information in a crossword grid. These are straightforwardly informational crosswords, ones that revolve around dictionary definitions, trivia, encyclopedia entries.

Historians, Reporters, and **Hobbyists** essentially use the same logical strategy. **Historians** are orchestrated around a specific occasion—an anniversary, a launch, a birthday—and build clues around that concept. **Reporters** respond to timely news or one-time events—the Oscars, the Olympics, obituaries. **Hobbyist** fact-finders are not timed to any particular occasion, but take their themes instead from a specific subject matter—golf, opera, French literature, early rap music—any category will suffice, provided it's for the right audience. Hobbyist crosswords tend to show up in publications and sites dedicated to particular audiences: *TV Guide*'s crossword features celebrities as both clues and answers; *Slate* ran a politically-themed crossword in the early 2000s. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* instructs constructors, "Because the *Chronicle*'s readership is centered in academe, themes that relate to topics such as literature, the arts, science, history, philosophy, and (of course) education are strongly encouraged."[284]

[284] Brad Wilbur, "The Chronicle Crossword: Style Sheet," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2018.

Listmakers presents a series of entries that might not seem related but are tied together by one umbrella theme revealer. "FULL HOUSE," "THREE KINGS," "ROYAL FLUSH," "FOUR ACES," "TWO PAIRS": the theme is revealed with the answer "POKER HAND."[285] The clues for the theme answers assiduously avoid poker ("Makeup of a double date" yields TWO PAIRS, for example). In a puzzle for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mark Feldman used the theme list NIGHTINGALE, GRECIAN URN, AUTUMN, INDOLENCE, and MELANCHOLY: each item is a KEATSIAN ODE.[286]

Listmaker variants that Campbell dubs "Marians," after Marian the Librarian in Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*, present lists with a twist. Like Marian, priggish on the outside but yielding to huckster Harold Hill's guiles, the Marian-style lists carry an extra element of cross-referenced wordplay to tie them together. (THE PERFECT STORM, SHADOWS AND FOG, RAIN MAN, DAYS OF THUNDER, GONE WITH THE WIND: not just movie titles, but weather-related ones.)[287]

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Wordplay

[285] Richard Chisholm, "Untitled," ed. Will Shortz, *New York Times*, 23 Nov. 2010. See also Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 68.

[286] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 68.

[287] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 70.

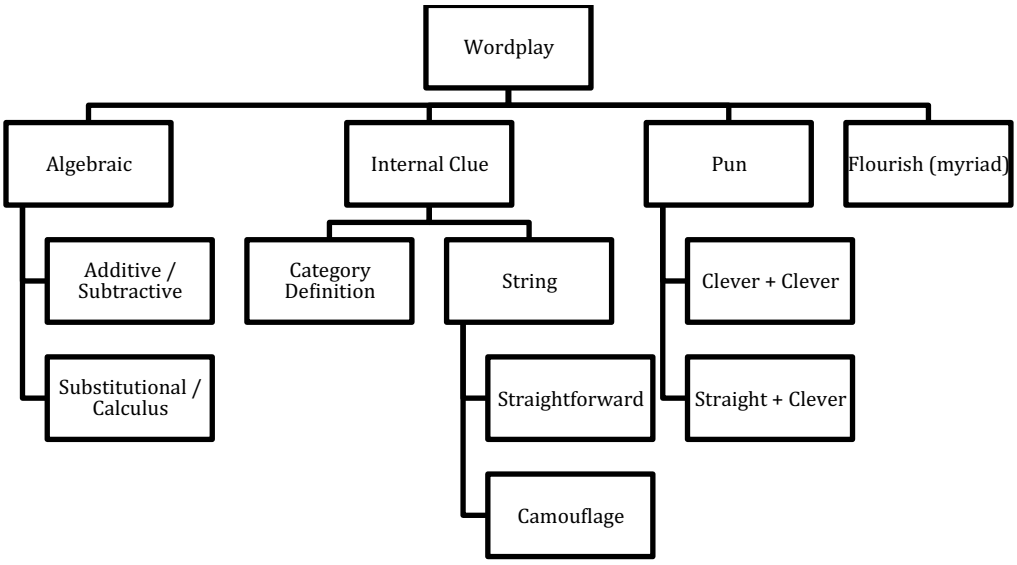

Figure 13. Wordplay Crosswords: Schematic Chart.

Within wordplay, the broadest and most popular type by far, there are four major sub-divisions: algebraic, internal clue, pun, and flourish.

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Algebraic

Algebraic crosswords involve inserting, removing, or re-combining strings of letters or words within answers. "Natural" words and phrases—that is, things that would typically occur in the language—get thematized through alteration.

Additive crosswords add a certain string to all the clues. Additive puzzles might add one or many strings in a fixed or a variable position in the answer. A *New York Times* puzzle by Patrick Berry titled "Prioresses" added a single S at the beginning of each word in common two-word phrases: **S**CREAMED **S**CORN, **S**TOOL **S**KITS, **S**PACE **S**CAR, **S**OLD **S**AGE, **S**WITCH **S**HUNTS, **S**MELTING **S**POT, **S**OIL **S**PAN, **S**HAM **S**HOCK,

SPIT **S**CREWS, **S**LAYING **S**LOW, **S**WISHING **S**WELL.[288] *Subtractive* crosswords operate in reverse, taking away a certain set of letters or a word. *Substitutional* puzzles combine addition and subtraction to remove strings and swap them out with other ones. And *calculus* algebraic puzzles use several operations at once. Merl Reagle's 2010 "Totally Q-Less" puzzle turns the "[kw]" sound in words with "Q," takes out the "k" sound, replaces it with a "w," and re-spells the answer. QUIET ON THE SET becomes **W**YATT ON THE SET, e.g.; **W**ICKER PICKER-UPPER, HERE A **W**HACK, THERE A **W**HACK, / EVERYWHERE A **W**HACK **W**HACK, SOME ASSEMBLY RE**W**IRED, FEELING A LITTLE **W**HEEZY and PORCUPINE **W**ILL.[289]

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Internal Clue

Category definitions, the most rudimentary type of internal clue, are one-dimensional ways to magnetize a crossword. You take a group of related things and build a grid around them. Such a crossword might tether around content-related clues: Nine muses. Seven wonders of the ancient world. Countries that have red, white, and blue in their flags. Another monochromatic way to create a theme is through the repetition of one key word: WHITE HOUSE / TOWNHOUSE / PLAYS HOUSE / DOLLHOUSE.[290]

String puzzles introduce a little mini-puzzle within the crossword. Margaret Farrar told the *New Yorker* in 1959 that Harold T. Bers, an ad writer, invented this "inner clue"

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[288] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 80.

[289] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 813.

[290] Matt Gaffney, *Gridlock: Crossword Puzzles and the Mad Geniuses Who Create Them* (New York: Thunder Mouth's Press, 2006), 186. Look closely, though, and this boring example begins to show a little subtlety: PLAYS HOUSE, while using same two-syllable structure as the other theme entries, is of a different semantic category. Unlike the other answers, which use an adjective to define a type of house, PLAYS HOUSE is a verbal phrase, and uses "HOUSE" differently. PLAYS HOUSE creates an action, while the other three paint a static picture. The fantasy "PLAYS HOUSE" suggests is gendered, and rendered more so by "DOLL HOUSE."

style: that is, a puzzle with a unifying theme that reveals itself gradually over the course of solving.[291] Bers's "CATALOGUE," an early example of the form, features not only entries such as THE CAT'S MEOW, CATACOMBS, CATERWAUL, and CATNAPPED, but also the more coyly catty PUSSYFOOT, KITTY HAWK, even PAWTUCKET, and AELUROPHOBE ("One afraid of felines"). One master rule overrides this puzzle: wherever a cat can be included, a cat should be clued. "They come 'on little cat feet'—Sandberg" (FOGS); "Cat: Fr." (CHAT); "A cat, for instance" (PET).[292] When a theme becomes gluey, it stick and oozes everywhere.

Strings are so widespread in crosswords that many words, phrases, and themes have become crossword cliché, stock type that's the equivalent of rhyming "moon" with "June": some combinations of letters and groups of objects work so well that they've become crossword commonplace. When the language produces crossword-sized coincidences, the grid will pick them up. Fifteen-letter words or phrases that all group together around a common element are perfect crossword bait. Consider the following three clues, which, at first glance, seem an impeccable theme: ERNEST HEMINGWAY / THE SUN ALSO RISES / A FAREWELL TO ARMS. All three are fifteen-letters long, thus perfectly spanning a 15x15 grid, the size of a *Times* daily. Maleska calls the Hemingway herring "fool's gold"[293]: it was probably terrific the first time, but constructors keep finding it over and over, turning it from a clever observation to a cliché.

Special wordplay clusters have also become hackneyed in the realm of string themes. Constructor Matt Gaffney points to what he calls the all-time most overused theme:

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[291] "Talk of the Town: Few Gnus," *New Yorker*, 13 Jun. 1959.

[292] Harold T. Bers, "Catalogue," ed. Margaret Farrar, *New York Times*, 19 Jan. 1958.

[293] Eugene Maleska, *A Pleasure In Words* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 397.

"ENGLISH MUFFIN, FRENCH TOAST, DANISH PASTRY, and SPANISH OMELET. (These puzzles are invariably titled "Continental Breakfast.")"[294] Indeed, when Will Weng took over from Farrar as crossword editor at the *New York Times*, he banished what he called the "Bermuda onion" school of crosswords, or the "early 1950s custom of featuring clues that combined countries and foods in what had originally seemed a clever manner."[295] Gone, too, were color/country themes—"Blue Danube, Red China, and Black Forest."[296] Hemingway was banished as well.

The string puzzle can take many forms, and infinite varieties of these forms, but the main way to distinguish them is whether the string is straightforward or is camouflage.

Straightforward strings can take on many varieties of forms. Consider the sequence, a series that unfolds over the course of the theme answers: **FIRST** AID STATION, **SECOND**HAND SMOKE, **THIRD** BASE UMPIRE, **FOURTH** CLASS MAIL.[297] Note, in this series, that the ordinal numbers are the only elements that tie these phrases together. If two had been from baseball, say—FIRST BASE, and THIRD BASE UMPIRE––the sequence wouldn't work as well, since the solver would not be sure whether to look for baseball or numerical clues. The theme can be obscured, but once solved, should be unambiguously correct. Straightforward strings might also be
pairs / triplets / ntuplets, or theme answers bring together two or more words or phrases in the category: SONY RCA MAGNAVOX (each one clued as "TV series"), MARS SATURN VENUS ("World series"), LITTLE TINY SHORT ("Mini series"). Straightforward strings

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[294] Matt Gaffney, "It Themes Somehow Familiar," *Slate*, 27 Nov. 2009.

[295] Michelle Arnot, *What's Gnu?: A History of the Crossword Puzzle* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 124.

[296] Arnot, *What's Gnu?*, 124.

[297] Kevin McCann, "Theme Types," cruciverb.com, 2011, Web.

take many shapes, and might intricately seem to defy their clues, but the theme jumps to the forefront of each answer, rather than remaining deliberately buried.

Camouflage strings involve an internal clue embedded in other clues. For example, the beginnings and ends of each theme answer form a specific word or phrase. **TIGER** IN THE **WOODS**, **SALLY** NEEDS A **RIDE**, **JOHNNY** OUT OF **CASH**.[298] Camouflage strings can be mono-string or multi-string, mono-position or multi-position. Variations are near-infinite. Some camouflage puzzles break up the string across clues. **PEANUT** GALLERIES / **BUTTER**BALL / **AND** SIGN / **JELLY** SHOES / **SANDWICH** ISLANDS.[299] And even the most unusual camouflages, like calculus, can be invented simultaneously and independently. Derek Bowman's "Going for a Run," published in the *New York Times* on Sunday, August 28, 2010, and Jo DiPietro's "Set in Order," published in the *Wall Street Journal* on Friday, September 3, 2010, both featured a camouflaged alphabet hidden in multi-word phrases.

Bowman's: **A**RMY **B**RAT, **C**ARBON **D**ATING, **E**XHAUST **F**ANS, **G**RAY **H**AIRS, **I**NSIDE **J**OB, **K**ITTY **L**ITTER, **M**IXED **N**UTS, **O**UTER **P**LANET, **Q**UICK **R**EAD, **S**PEED **T**RAP, **U**SED **V**EHICLE, **W**INTER **X**-GAMES, **Y**EAR **Z**ERO.

DiPietro's: **A**DMIRAL **B**YRD, **C**ANADA **D**AY, **E**NTRY **F**EE, **G**ETS **H**EMMED IN, **J**EDI **K**NIGHT, "**L**IKE **M**Y **N**EW **O**UTFIT?", **P**RINT **Q**UEUE, **R**AN **S**OME **T**ESTS, **U**RBAN **V**II, **W**INDOWS **X**P, **Y**ELLOW **Z**ONES.[300]

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Pun

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[298] McCann, "Theme Types."

[299] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 73.

[300] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 75.

In conversation, the punner typically brashly proclaims the pun while professing to brush off the wordplay: puns are pardoned ("pardon the pun") and faux-declaimed ("no pun intended") to make sure that the listener is aware of the speaker's cleverness. The punning crossword theme creates a definitive mood for the puzzle experience: a joke layers on top of the game. Certain constructors have made their careers from pun-filled puzzles. Maura Jacobson, *New York* magazine's crossword constructor for over three decades, made over fourteen-hundred pun-filled puzzles for that publication; her career became based on building clean, smooth, puzzles with ingenious but not abrasive wit. (Jacobson's final *New York Times* Sunday puzzle, "The Lady Changes Her Name," for example, featured theme clues and answers such as: Columnist reacted angrily: ANN SNARLED; Novelist-critic dances: SUSAN TANGOS; 1942 Oscar winner reacts to a bad pun: GREER GROANS.)[301] Merl Reagle, an extremely prolific and jovial constructor, created a reputation for milking a pun into as many theme answers as possible. Pun-happy constructors and editors ascribe to the belief that the crossword is meant to be entertaining, and that laying on the groaner-factor thick, as puns do, demonstrates that this is the FUN corner of the publication. Crosswords are meticulous and finicky to construct, but they're meant to take solvers out of themselves, not for deep introspection. Like a crossword or riddle, a pun has one neat, exact solution.

The pun crossword has two different types of relationships between clues and answers. *Clever* + *clever* pun puzzles, which Campbell calls "Grouchos," feature puns in both the clue and the answer: in other words, the clues signal a pun, and the answers themselves are altered by the theme. A 2010 *Times* puzzle that borrows from the website Four Word Film Reviews, for example, has such wordplay as *Taxi Driver* tagline?: A FARE TO

[301] Maura Jacobson, "The Lady Changes Her Name," ed. Will Shortz, *New York Times*, 24 Nov. 1996.

REMEMBER; *Titanic* tagline?: ICY DEAD PEOPLE, *Back to the Future* tagline?: A COMEDY OF ERAS; and *Return of the Jedi* tagline?: LUKE BACK IN ANGER.[302]

Straight + clever puns (Burns and Allens, as per Campbell) involve answers that are standard words or phrases, but the cluing turns them into puns. In a puzzle by Greg Kaiser and Steven Ginzberg titled "Capital Offences ("Pun-crimes committed by the answers to the six starred clues?")," the starred clues signal a national capital. As Campbell explains, "'Final resting place for old autos?' leads to KHARTOUM ['Car tomb'], 'Father of the Ziploc?' to BAGHDAD ['Bag dad'], 'Wide shoe specification?' to TRIPOLI ['triple-E'], 'Recently opened sandwich shop?' to NEW DELHI ['new deli'], 'Multiplyin' by 2?' to DUBLIN ['doublin'] and 'Base of a fragrant tree?' to BEIRUT ['Bay root']."[303]

*

Flourish

Flourish-based crosswords rely on a single, elaborate conceit. Campbell calls these the "freakshows": puzzles that arise from a highly specific form of wordplay not covered by more general categories.

Possibilities for the flourish are essentially endless. If you can think of a way to play with words, you can put it into a puzzle. For example: *Palindrome* puzzles use theme answers that are palindromes. *Pangram* theme answers use all the letters of the alphabet, while *lipogram* crosswords omit a particular letter. The *monoclue* uses a single clue for several answers: "Uh-oh" yields I WOULDN'T / IF I WERE YOU, BAD IDEA, BACK OFF, THINK AGAIN, and DON'T DO IT.[304] *Etymological* theme answers all draw on words from a single

[302] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 87.

[303] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 88.

[304] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 92.

root source: Matt Gaffney's "Island Time" has the two-word phrases OUTRE FREEBOOTER, GAUCHE SMUGGLER, RECHERCHE YACHT and FAUX KEELHAULING: all are French in the "north" and Dutch in the "south" to represent St. Martin, a Caribbean island divided into two separate countries, the north belonging to France and the south belonging to the Netherlands.[305]

The point, here, is that the flourish relies on some other extra bit of cunning wordplay to make the theme work, and once you've figured out what that other piece is, you've cracked the heart of what makes this puzzle tick.

*

Trickster

In some puzzles, the wordplay keeps going beyond the puzzle itself. Trickster puzzles use wordplay but add another layer: once the puzzle is over, there's another to be solved. One crossword hides another. These types of layered tricksters often appear in *contest puzzles*, or one in which solvers submit answers for prizes.

Tricksters are often *meta-crossword*, a puzzle beyond the puzzle. A trickster spanning multiple media used "Homer and Lisa Exchange Cross Words," the sixth episode of the twentieth season of the television show *The Simpsons*, which aired on Sunday, November 16, 2008. A *Simpsons* producer loved *Wordplay*, Patrick Creadon's 2006 documentary featuring Shortz and the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, and, in 2007, wrote an episode in which prodigal Lisa turns into a crossword addict. She makes crosswords on the hopscotch court and enters the "Citywide Crossword Tournament," run by the cartoon version of Shortz himself. Eminent crossword constructor Merl Reagle wrote the puzzles for the episode. He also wrote a coordinating Sunday *New York Times* crossword that contained

[305] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 93.

corresponding messages from the show: rather than simply creating a Simpsons-flavored puzzle, Reagle used the crossword as connective tissue between the experiences of watching the episode and solving the puzzle. There are two meta-puzzles in this crossword. Lisa finds one of them in the episode: a diagonal along the solved grid reads DUMB DAD SORRY FOR HIS BET. But Homer tells Lisa she's missed the extra puzzle. All the initial letters to the 144 clues form an acrostic, which is a message from Homer to Lisa: DEAR LISA, YOU MAKE ME SO HAPPY. REALLY, REALLY, REALLY HAPPY. SORRY, HE TOLD ME I NEEDED A HUNDRED FORTY-FOUR LETTERS. WHAT WAS MY POINT AGAIN? OH, RIGHT. BOUVIER OR SIMPSON, I CHERISH YOU.[306] Stalwart crossword critics Rex Parker and Amy Reynaldo missed the acrostic in the clues, and they grumbled about some apparently awkward entries in the hours before the show aired and they were directed to this second reveal.

*

Architectural

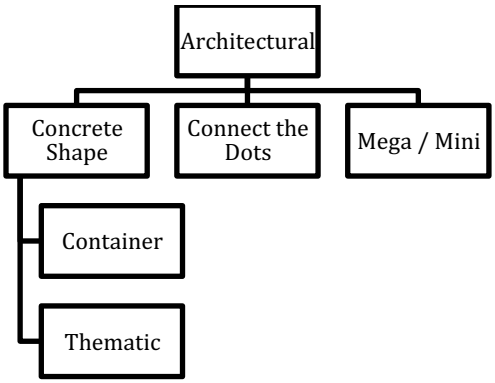

Figure 14. Architectural Crosswords: Schematic Chart.

Concrete Shape

[306] Campbell, *On Crosswords*, 130-1.

Grid art lies somewhere between Mondrian and latte design. In the early days of the crossword, when the grid hadn't yet become standardized as a square, novelty-shaped puzzles frequently studded the pages of *FUN*, each gridded shape resembling the thing it portrayed, like a parade-balloon approximation of an object. Wynne published a grid in the shape of an F one week, followed by a U, then an N, as though the crossword were dancing a very slow ür-Y-M-C-A. For the Christmas 1923 edition, *FUN*'s tenth anniversary crossword is "A Cross Word Christmas Tree," with a bit of doggerel hanging above the puzzle like mistletoe: "See our sprouting Christmas tree! / It should fill you all with glee. / If to solve it you know how / You'll find a gift on every bough."[307]

*

Container

Many early crosswords featured a shaped grid design, as though they had been cut out from a stencil, yet the clues themselves have nothing to do with their containers. Charles Layng's *Cross-Word Puzzle Book* from 1924 features a wide array of shape puzzles: to name a small sample, "The Basket," "The Skull and Crossbones," "The Maple Leaf," "The Table Lamp," "Puss In Boots," the Aces of Hearts / Spades / Clubs / Diamonds, two additional hearts (not including the ace), and "The Snow Man.[308] Layng does not extend his visual

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[307] Arnot, *What's Gnu?,* 46.

[308] I can't help but here Wallace Stevens:
One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

themes into the content of the puzzle, however. "The Puss In Boots" presents a grid adorably shaped like a cat (though in slightly disturbing two-eyed profile), yet the clues are all of the stiff dictionary-definition style, with no playful riffs on the visual fun. If anything, the theme is tropical: "A Hawaiian fish," "The squirrel fish of Hawaii," "A Maltest money of account," "A semi-tropical fruit," "The Hawaiian crawfish," etc. The clues oscillate from the persnickety ("A tree of the genus fraxinus") to the vague (50 and 51 Across are both clued as "A pronoun").[309] Crafting an object into a cute but arbitrary design is hardly a yen unique to crosswords. *Kyaraben*, or character bento, are elaborate Japanese boxed lunches in which the food is cut and arranged to look like characters: a rice ball panda, a sausage octopus. The content of the food itself typically has little or nothing to do with the shape. Like *kyaraben*, puzzles in shapes might have no relationship between the form and the content.

Or, the content could have everything to do with the crossword. From the 1920s through the 1950s, the Coca-Cola Company published the *Red Barrel Magazine*, an internal, monthly publication dedicated to all things Coca-Cola.[310] During the crossword craze, the magazine held a crossword contest: a $2.00 prize for the best original crossword puzzle containing words pertaining to Coca-Cola.[311] The winning crossword in the March 1925

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.
(Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man," *Poetry*, Oct. 1921.

[309] Charles Layng, *Layng's Cross-Word Puzzles: First Book* (Chicago: The Stanley Publishing Company, 1924), 32-3.

[310] Though the soda's now-ubiquitous nickname might have seemed natural for inclusion in the grid, "Coke" was not yet an accepted moniker for Coca-Cola; Frank O'Hara's poem "Having a Coke With You" was written four decades later.

[311] Jamal Booker, "Coca-Cola Crossword Puzzle," *Coca-Cola Journey: History*, 17 Nov. 2011.

issue is in the shape of a Coca-Cola bottle.[312] Though the answer words have little to do with Coca-Cola per se, the clues monomanaically push the product. 3-Across: "Too bad Noah didn't have a supply of Coca-Cola when he built this" (ARK). 12-Across: "The best time to drink Coca-Cola" (ANY). 6-Down: "On a trip through the desert, we would gladly pay this many dollars for the sparking, delicious and refreshing thirst quencher" (TEN).[313]

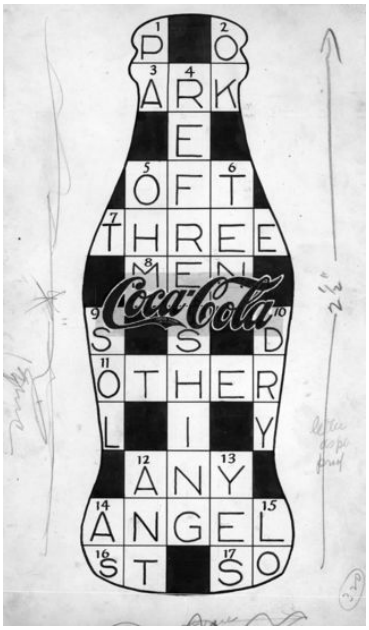

Figure 15. Coca-Cola Crossword, 1925.

Standardization of the square crossword did not prevent constructors from using grid design in their work, and contemporary crosswords that have shapes typically tie grid art thematically. One lipogrammatic puzzle without the letter "S" in any answer, for example,

[312] What's black and white and red all over?

[313] Booker, "Coke Crossword Puzzle Answers."

has a large "S" in black squares snaking through the center. Constructor Henry Hook branded one puzzle with an "H" of black squares emblazoned. Liz Gorski's October 18, 2009 *Times* crossword displays one of the most compelling uses of grid art. The black squares at the grid's center form a spiral, with THE SOLOMON R GUGGENHEIM / MUSEUM as answers spanning the top of the spiral, and—for the geometrically impaired—SPIRAL SHAPE across the bottom. Eight artworks hanging in the spiral-shaped Guggenheim museum appear as clues, with each artist hung as an answer in the puzzle.

*

Connect the Dots

Connect-the-dots crosswords create secret art in the grid: first, you solve the puzzle, and then, you trace a line through designated circles or letters in a certain order to reveal a shape. This induced pareidolia is sometimes revelatory. For the one hundredth anniversary of the Titanic's sinking, Kevin G. Der created a 17x31 grid, with four two-by-one blocks spanning rows three and four, shaded grey. Twelve of the squares contained, when solved, the rebus FE, that is, the chemical shorthand for iron. When you connect the iron—that is, when you "build" it—the ship appears under the four iconic smokestacks. The twelve squares corresponding to the reflection of the FE squares spelled "SHIP OF DREAMS," an alternate name for the TITANIC (56-Down).[314] Der also studs the puzzle with theme-appropriate answers: IM THE KING OF THE WORLD, an iconic quote from the 1997 film; DICAPRIO and WINSLET, the film's stars.[315] In the early 2000s, constructor Liz Gorski popularized the connect-the-dots style in the *Times*, usually via a year-end salute: a

[314] Kevin G. Der, "Grid Iron," ed. Will Shortz, *New York Times*, 15 Apr. 2012. See also the diagram's explanation on XWord Info.

[315] Kevin Der, "Guide to Crossword Puzzle Construction: Anatomy of a Crossword," *Quora*, 15 Apr. 2012.

martini glass tattooed across a James Bond-themed puzzle, a gingerbread man with a sinister grin, a cookie-cutter treetop snow angel.

Connect-the-dots puzzles might veer toward gimmicky, an overly complicated way to force a square peg into a round hole. But these puzzles can do a strange magic trick of turning a complex puzzle into a much, much simpler one by virtue of their visualization. Crosswords are naturally well adapted to give messages to the solver within the confines of the clues themselves. Every theme crossword carries a secret puzzle of varying complexity for the reader to crack. Unthemed crosswords can easily hide codes, too. Crosswords contain poems, quotes, proposals, instructions: the possibilities are myriad, since any word that fits can be included in the grid.

Crosswords, as a technology, aren't built to create secret messages scrawled across the top of the grid: this feat of engineering gives the two-dimensional medium a three-dimensional purpose. Pareidoliac crosswords, in which shapes pop out from the grid, force the eye to do a duck-rabbit with the grid. In other words, we first read the grid for one purpose—that is, containing the crossword's solution—but when we're asked to connect the dots, we see the grid as background for a new visual image that we hadn't realized was hiding in plain sight.

Part Wittgenstein, part kindergarten, connect-the-dots puzzles have a curious status perhaps best explained in a connect-the-dots puzzle by Kevin G. Der that appeared in the *Times* on Sunday, August 24, 2008. A dotted frame surrounds the puzzle. There are ten rebus clues: the numerals 1-5 each appear twice in the grid. Embedded in the grid, as five of the across answers, Der provided these instructions:

> 30-Across: CUT ALONG THE DOTTED LINE
> 48-Across: FOLD THROUGH EACH
> 67-Across PAIR OF NUMBERS
> 97-Across: IN THE GRID SEQUENTIALLY

138-Across: GO THROW THE PAPER AIRPLANE[316]

In a bravura yet suicidal architectural coup, the crossword provides its own instructions for its transformation and self-destruction. Once you figure out the puzzle and follow its own solution, you turn the puzzle into a disposable scrap. Connect the dots, and it's gone. The crossword is created explicitly to be destroyed, to return to its status as a piece of paper, and to fly away. Der's puzzle works beautifully, which means that it's completely disposable. The connect-the-dots reveals both the utter complexity and sheer consumer-happy quality of the crossword as a form: create it, and it's destroyed.

The crossword is consumable, and demands to be consumed. Once you've connected the dots, you've sealed the deal: the hunt for answers gets a different one-time purpose. Though constructing a pareidolia puzzle is a feat of architectural mastery and very rigorous cluing, solving this puzzle renders the relationship between clues and answers immediately secondary, because they have a new purpose of forming this other shape that's secretly inside the box as well, and once we get that shape, we've solved the puzzle's new, far easier purpose. We have to wring ourselves through the hard thing to turn the puzzle into the easy thing—but the hard thing has to be completely correct, if the simple one is going to work.

*

Mega / Mini

Crosswords can become giants or Thumbelinas. In 2009, a crossword over one hundred feet tall was projected on a building in Lvov, Ukraine, with clues scattered around the city for solvers to collect, more reminiscent of the madcap scavenger hunt in the film *My*

316 Kevin G. Der, "Come Fly With Me," ed. Will Shortz, *New York Times*, 24 Aug. 2008. See also the diagram's explanation on XWord Info.

Man Godfrey than of Inspector Morse solving the cryptic.[317] On the other end of the spectrum, miniature crossword books, on a 1:12 scale with traditional books, present functional crosswords for the doll-sized solver, at less than an inch tall and less than half an inch wide.

Mega and mini crosswords, on the other hand, typically refer to puzzles that use the standard square size but add or subtract rows and columns, rather than physically large or diminutive crosswords.

In 1949, after eleven years of work, Robert Stilgenbauer finished constructing an 111 x 111 crossword, with 2007 across clues and 2008 down. He distributed 125,000 copies to fans. Twenty-seven years later, no one had finished it.[318] Stilgenbauer's effort is not the world's largest crossword—computers have made creating grids of unusual size a slightly less onerous feat—but his achievement certainly stands as one spanning not only space but time in construction. Mega-crosswords often ignore certain solving conventions such as not repeating answers within a grid, or avoiding crosswordese, to maximize sheer girth. Stilgenbauer relied on obscure terms to complete his crossword. "The World's Largest Crossword Puzzle," introduced in 1997 by toy manufacturer Herbko and advertised on airplanes across America in the SkyMall catalog, features a 303x303 grid, but several of the answers are duplicates. Campbell created a 120x120 crossword adhering to *New York Times* rules, that is, without repetition (including repeated variants—no RHINOCEROS and RHINOCEROSES) and avoiding as many obscure crosswordy words as possible. The mega's real challenge is not only size but ease.

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[317] "The world's largest crossword puzzle built on 100ft tower block in Ukraine," *Daily Mail*, 16 Jan. 2009.

[318] By 1976, a Robert Videt of Bayside, NY, had come closest, reportedly having completed 93.5%. "Crosswords in History," *American Heritage*, Oct. 1976.

If the mega faces the danger of insolveability due to unwieldiness, the mini faces the opposite challenge: how can a 3x3 or a 4x4 provide any intrigue? Mini crosswords can provide an introduction to the form for new solvers, or a warmup lap for more experienced ones, but the form faces the challenge of simplicity and predictability. A 5x5 mini crossword, which sometimes has no black squares at all, or very few, began to appear as a regular feature in the digital *New York Times* crossword in 2014; three years later, the *Times* introduced a Mini into the print edition. The *Times*'s mini is a place for clues that might not make it into the standard daily or Sunday edition: since the mini is so quick to create and to solve, it can also respond much more rapidly to news trends.

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Storyteller

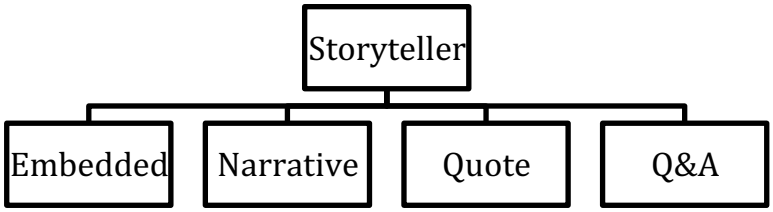

Figure 16. Storyteller Crosswords: Schematic Chart.

Crosswords usually aren't involved in a time-based narrative, so when they are, their logic has to contort itself in accordance. Most themes relate not to each other, but in isolation; it really doesn't matter in which order you solve them, because even though there might be some nominal progression throughout the puzzle, the element that links them is static, rather than evolving across time. A storyteller crossword uses the whole grid to move a certain narrative or sequence forward. Alternately, the storyteller might be subordinate to another

narrative entirely. This grid makes solving the crossword by hopping from clue to clue—standard practice, particularly among less skilled solvers—a less viable method.

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Embedded

The embedded crossword lives inside another narrative—for example, Dorothy Parker places a crossword inside her short story "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," which the reader is invited to solve; the plot's content hinges on the crossword, and the story's construction relies on the puzzle. George Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* employs an unfinished crossword puzzle as equal parts symbol and red herring: by placing an accurate but undone grid in a novel that centers on a never-solved jigsaw puzzle, the crossword becomes emblematic of the work as a whole. Rather than entering into a world of traditional narration, the reader of Perec's novel pieces together what's going on in the piecemeal, associative manner of solving a puzzle.

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Narrative, or, A Mangosteen Grows in Ohio

Jay Cotterman, a tropical fruit enthusiast from Columbus, Ohio, fell in love with rainforest flavors while traveling in Southeast Asia, but when he returned home, he wasn't satisfied with importing durian and jackfruit from halfway across the world. Rather than uproot his life and move to Thailand, he decided to move Thailand to Ohio.[319] Cotterman began ordering lychee plants and longan, rambutan and mangosteen; the flora soon outgrew his spare bedroom, so he decided to build a greenhouse in his backyard, one that could nurture the plants equally well through Ohio's negative-twenty-degree winters and its ninety-

[319] "Oslo, France, that is." John Ashbery, "Worsening Situation," *The New Yorker*, 20 Jan. 1975.

degree summers. The plants were reluctant at first, but Cotterman finally began to coax mangosteens, dragonfruit, and many other plants to bear fruit in his suburban jungle.[320]

A storyline forces the crossword into a logical habitat that it never naturally wants to inhabit. It can be done, but the form balks. Crossword clues typically juxtapose many different types of logical tissue, asking the solver to loosen narrative wires and think associatively rather than connectively. A narrative crossword, however, asks the solver to read both for plot and for clue, combing the story as a mystery while also keeping the ostensible thread in mind. The grid can help put some of these weirder clues into place, but the narrative crossword is a Rube Goldberg machine, neither an efficient use of the story nor an effective use of the crossword. Figuring out what's deliberately been left out doesn't leave the solver enough room to wander associatively; all the links are too ironbound. You can't get immersed in solving the grid, because you always have to go back and dip into the story in an established order. And you can't get immersed in the story, because the missing words kick you back into the grid. The narrative crossword is an intriguing gimmick, but ultimately, fruiting a mangosteen in Columbus is more a love of labor than a labor of love.

Narrative puzzles work like a game of Mad Libs, but backwards. Instead of providing a series of blank parts of speech that can be inserted into a story skeleton that is later revealed, the reader receives the partial story first, with the blank areas indicated, and must reverse-engineer the gaps from the story's context clues to fill in the grid. (Of course, the process works both ways: if you can't figure out a clue from the story, you can also use the grid to help you solve the narrative.)

Margaret Farrar's microfiction-cum-crossword, "The Green Umbrella Mystery," tells a simple short story with certain phrases left out, for the reader to fill in and slot into the

[320] See "How to Build a Tropical Greenhouse in Cold Climates," *Year of the Durian*, 5 Sept. 2014.

grid; the filled-in words will complete both puzzle and tale. She beings: "The night was (50A) than the underside of Niagara Falls. The little man with the green umbrella led them on a long chase. He was doing the rounds of the (5A). Inspector Cross and the federal (30A), who were shadowing him, were relieved when he finally (6D) in a flashy nightclub called The Golden (47A). They were a couple of frail (40D) and, disguised as they were in seersucker suits, they didn't enjoy getting wet."[321]

Another example of a narrative crossword is Ruth Lake Tepper's *Sherlock Holmes Crossword Puzzle Book*, which turns the reader into Sherlock. Tepper distills Doyle's stories into research briefs: characters, setting, and plot are carefully culled into a short synopsis that lays out the facts and the clues as Holmes receives them. Tepper then presents a crossword puzzle (American-style). A blank phrase at the bottom of the puzzle, cued to a few of the clues, indicates the solution: once you've solved the puzzle, you fill in the words in the spaces to arrive at the answer. An epilogue gives the solutions to the grids, as well as a narrative answer to the mystery. Although the crossword is the ostensible selling point of Tepper's book, it's a gratuitous mechanism. Tepper's rewritten Holmes stories display an admirable if somewhat puzzling exercise in abridgement. The solutions to each of her research briefs are given by solving the clues. We know, in advance, what clues are going to provide us the solution. Tipper's crosswords are more decorative than functional, an add-on for Sherlock-philiacs and puzzle enthusiasts, demonstrating the cultural grip of both—and their evergreen connection—rather than re-inventing either form.

Sherlock often provides fodder for crossword enthusiasts, as the readership of both has overlapped since the beginning of the crossword. Christopher Morley, one of the founders of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, organized his life around clubs ("The Three-

[321] Margaret Farrar, "The Green Umbrella Mystery," reprinted in "Puzzlemania," *New York Times*, Dec. 17, 2017.

Hour Lunch Club" was an unveiled excuse for Morley to have extravagant meals with friends). Morley was also a Sherlock Holmes junkie, and he'd begun to use the phrase "Baker Street Irregulars" to refer to informal gatherings of himself and dozens of his closest Holmes-admiring friends. But when strangers started writing into the magazine declaring themselves members of the BSI, Morley put his foot down. In May 1934, Morley ran a crossword puzzle in the *Review* to serve as a test for entry into the irregulars. Signed by "Mycroft Holmes" (the puzzle was actually created by Morley's brother, Frank), the crossword features fiendishly nitpicky Sherlockiana. The grid appears a little messy and asymmetrical until you look more closely and realize that the black squares form an "S H" stamped across the middle. Solvers who mailed Morley a correct solution—male solvers, that is; Morley's Irregulars were all-male until 1991—were accepted into the Irregulars.

*

Quote

Rather than creating theme answers that all anchor around some external point of commonality, crosswords might be built around a single quotation, broken across clues and spread through the grid. "To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance," an Oscar Wilde quip, breaks so neatly into three fifteen-by-fifteen chunks (TO LOVE ONSELF IS / THE BEGINNING OF A / LIFELONG ROMANCE) that it has rapidly become a hackneyed choice for would-be constructors of potent quotables.

Quotes might also form a meta-puzzle. Quotes may be buried in other words and then blossom out once the puzzle is solved in full. Jacob Stulberg's crossword of May 7, 2015, titled "Literary Circles," places an entire poem—"The Locust Tree in Flower," by William Carlos Williams—into the puzzle, in order. The poem's thirteen words were buried within longer words ("among," the first, nests inside CUCAMONGA, for example). "THE

LOCUST TREE IN FLOWER" and "WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS" are also answers: each of these phrases is, conveniently, twenty-one letters long, spanning a full Sunday grid. Stulberg, at the time a graduate student in English literature at Harvard, came up with the idea for the William Carlos Williams puzzle while teaching the poem to his students and realizing that the entire poem could fit inside a crossword; when he opened up the puzzle from a daily to a Sunday grid, he was able to get the poem's author and title into the grid, an added bonus.

Eugene Maleska invented the stepquote, which contains a quotation that runs in a stair-step down the grid; the quotation is broken into answers that look like gobbledygook on their own, and only create a meaningful phrase when connected through the whole. Each clue in the stepquote has no hint beyond "Stepquote: Part III," etc. (For example, the answers that comprise the theme quote in a stepquote from June 7, 1981 read: THEFA / ASHIO / ONWEAR / RSOUTMOREAPPA / ARELETH / HANTH / HEMAN; when you extract the quotation itself, you get, "The fashion wears out more apparel than the man.")[322]

Quotes can be borrowed from other sources or constructed *de novo* for the puzzle at hand. Constructor Frances Hansen had a habit of putting her own poetry in grids. Other constructors, such as Brendan Emmett Quigley, frequently make up their own pithy theme phrases.

*

Q&A

Like a quote, the question—often in the form of a riddle—poses a particular phrase over the course of the puzzle; unlike the quote, the question requires an answer, which may

[322] E.T.M., "Stepquote," ed. Eugene T. Maleska, *New York Times*, 7 Jun. 1981. "E.T.M." is a thin pseudonym for Maleska himself.

or may not also be given. Question puzzles include marriage proposals in crossword form from the constructor to an actual person, a cross between proposal by jumbotron and a scavenger hunt.

*

Metamorphic

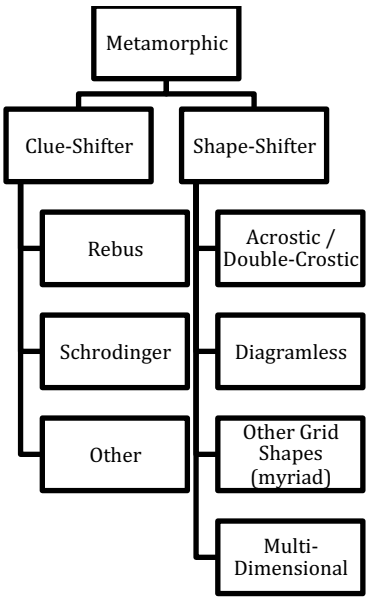

Figure 17. Metamorphic Crosswords: Schematic Chart.

Clue-Shifter

Most crosswords operate under the assumption that each clue produces one answer, with one single correct letter corresponding to each square. However, certain puzzles ask solvers to re-write this one-to-one relationship between the clue and the space provided for it in the grid.

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Rebus

Sometimes, a crossword invites a solver to break the relationship between single letter and single square through a rebus. A rebus, broadly defined, is any letter, number, or symbol that stands in for a whole word. In crosswords, a rebus refers to any clue that requires multiple letters to be written in the same box in the grid. Rebuses, like any crossword theme, can vary from the relatively simple letter substitution—whenever the letter combination "ZZ" appears, it's clued into one box—to more complex arrangements. Milo Beckman constructed a puzzle with two seven-letter clues composed entirely of rebus squares. Each rebus square contains letters of a musical note on the solfege scale: DO DO SOL SOL LA LA SOL / FA FA MI MI RE RE DO. This tune, when sung or played, is the beginning of "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," signaled in the puzzle by the clue: "Words sung to the beginning of 41-/39-Across: TWINKLE TWINKLE."[323]

*

Schrodinger

On the morning of Election Day, 1996, a crossword ran in the *New York Times* that contained the clue, "Lead story in tomorrow's newspaper (!)." The answer was CLINTON / ELECTED. Or, the answer was BOB DOLE / ELECTED. The letters in CLINTON and BOB DOLE work for all of the crossing clues:

> Black Halloween animal: BAT/CAT
> French 101 word: OUI/LUI
> Provider of support, for short: BRA/IRA
> Sewing shop purchase: YARD/YARN
> Short writings: BIOS/BITS
> Trumpet: BLAST/BOAST
> Much-debated political inits.: ERA/NRA[324]

[323] Milo Beckman, "Untitled," ed. Will Shortz, *New York Times*, 29 Mar. 2012.

[324] Jeremiah Farrell, "Untitled," ed. Will Shortz, *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 1996.

This type of puzzle, a Schrodinger, contains letters that can be clued in two different, equally correct ways, yielding different but equally correct grids. Schrodinger puzzles often tackle larger conundrums, creating a small-scale model of a major choice. Ben Tausig constructed a puzzle in 2016 with the theme answer GENDER FLUID to cue solvers to its particular Schrodinger nature: some of the answers could equally be solved using the letter M or the letter F (MAKE / FAKE; MESS UP / FESS UP; etc.).[325]

*

Other

In these clue-shifter and answer-shifting crosswords, the blank grid looks the same as a garden-variety puzzle, but the solver is asked to understand that the relationship between numbers of letters in each square is not automatically assumed to be one-to-one. *Squeezebox* puzzles are ones in which every square is a rebus; *vowelless* puzzles ask solvers to remove the vowels from the answer words and only clue in the consonants. Crosswords can be filled with all symbols, or comprised of syllables. Crosswords might include some numbers; macaronic puzzles, in which different languages criss-cross, are also possible. Variations on these themes abound.

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Grid-Shifter

Acrostic (Double-Crostic)

When Elizabeth Seelman Kingsley, a former schoolteacher, was widowed in 1926, a niece sent her a book of crossword puzzles to provide comfort and companionship.[326]

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[325] Ben Tausig, "Untitled," *New York Times*, ed. Will Shortz, 1 Sep. 2016.

[326] Crosswords have long been associated as solace for isolation under many circumstances—bereavement, illness, unemployment, retirement, imprisonment, military enlistment, moving to a new location, divorce, etc.

Kingsley, a word whiz, found the crosswords amusing enough, but something seemed to be missing: why was there no ultimate goal to the game? At a college reunion several years later, she discovered that students were immersed in modernist authors—Joyce, Stein, Woolf—but were rapidly losing touch with the classics she loved. Kingsley realized she could put her two discomforts together in the form of an adaptation of the crossword: the acrostic, or "double-crostic," as she dubbed the new puzzle. Using anagram tiles, she spelled out a quotation and put it into a crossword-ish grid. She then assigned each letter in the quote a corresponding number, re-scrambled the tiles, and created a series of unrelated words, which became the answers to the set of clues she provided. Solvers had to figure out these unrelated words from the clues, then fill in in the blanks based on the letters in those answers. The first letter of every answer word created an acrostic of the title and author of the quote's source work. Words were often broken across the grid, so, unlike a "Wheel of Fortune" fill-in-the-blank, the number of letters in each set of blank squares did not necessarily correlate with word divisions.[327] Kingsley's first double-crostic, perhaps a jab against Joyce, contained a quote from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses": AND THO WE ARE NOT NOW THAT STRENGTH WHICH IN OLD DAYS MOVED EARTH AND HEAVEN, THAT WHICH WE ARE, WE ARE; ONE EQUAL TEMPER OF HEROIC HEARTS, MADE WEAK BY TIME AND FATE, BUT STRONG IN WILL TO STRIVE, TO SEEK, TO FIND, AND NOT TO YIELD.

In 1934, Kingsley sold the Tennyson double-crostic to the *Saturday Review*, which hired her to produce a puzzle each week, which she did single-handedly until 1952. Creating double-crostics was a full-time job for Kingsley, who spent her summers researching

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Poet Alice Notley began to do crosswords when her father died. The secretary in Mary Gaitskill's "Secretary" does crosswords when she leaves her job due to harassment and finds herself unemployed at her familial home.

[327] Arnot, *What's Gnu?*, 142-4.

archives at libraries and colleges for original material. Kingsley eventually retired, and the *Saturday Review* folded, but the double-crostic lived on as a feature at the *New York Times* and in special collections dedicated to the form. The double-crostic uses the same mechanism of placing letters into a grid, but unlike the crossword, the ultimate purpose is not only matching answers to clues, but setting the clues to a second, overarching purpose. As the form evolved, the quotes began to be more and more obscure, but rather than frowning upon the use of sources, Kingsley encouraged readers to turn to reference books. "Contrary to crosswords, the use of words is just a means to an end—the quotation," she instructed solvers.[328]

*

Diagramless

In 1925, crossword editors Margaret Farrar, Prosper Buranelli, and F. Gregory Hartswick, the three editors of Simon and Shuster's hit 1924 crossword book, gathered over lunch to proofread a sheaf of puzzles. They realized that they'd left one of the diagrams behind in the office, but rather than going back to fetch it, Hartswick roughed out a grid on the back of a menu and reproduced the puzzle easily, filling in the number of each entry and the black squares as he went along. Hartswick realized that the jigsaw-cum-word-square he'd created was fun, and he and his fellow editors decided to publish the new game as a "diagramless" puzzle.[329] Solvers don't get the number of letters in an answer, and they may or may not get any clues about the puzzle's shape and symmetry or lack thereof.

*

Other Grid Shapes

[328] Arnot, *What's Gnu?*, 153.
[329] Arnot, *What's Gnu?*, 164.

The varieties available for irregular crossword grids are nearly infinite. The point here is that the crossword doesn't have to be square, nor do irregular crossword-like offshoots have to involve traditional down and across. The root of all of these puzzles is still the same: a blank grid, with clues that tell the solver how to fill in the answers. Though the rules of these non-square grid games are different, the solver still enters with the same underlying logical assumption of clues that provide answers.

To create crossings—that is, to remain cross-word puzzles—grid shapes often rely on some sort of overlapping device—answers with letters that overlap, or, when read backward, create a different set of words.

Rows gardens provide a grid made of hexagons. Some of the answers, the "rows," read across the grid, and it's up to the solver to figure out the divisions between answers. Other answers are six-letter words that get filled clockwise or counter-clockwise within the shaded hexagons (the "blooms" or "gardens") that comprise the grid. *Beehives* and other hexagonal grid puzzles similarly play with interlocking hexagons of letters, but feature only six-letter answers in their design, like a set of identically shaped gears.

Snake charmers feature answers placed end-to-end in a chain that goes in an S-shape. The chain overlaps its own path. *Marching bands* feature a square grid with alternating bands of light squares and shaded squares, creating a design that resembles a target, but in square silhouette. Some of the answers go across, and some go in spirals around the bands. *Spirals* build a grid that works forward and backwards. Answers are entered on inward and outward paths, with no clear delineation between them. *Circular* crosswords can feature answers in any direction. *Stacked* grids add a z-axis to the x-axis and y-axis of typical two-dimensional crosswords, creating cubes that align the answers correctly.

Clueless crosswords present crossword-like grids, but no clues; instead, solvers have to rely solely on patterns and spatial reasoning. *Fill-in crosswords* give the words and the grid, but ask solvers to slot them into the correct spots. *Split decisions* create a grid in which each answer has bubble of at least two letters: AD[VE/SO]RB, for example. *Multi-Dimensional* multi-media crosswords use other media to create clues and answers. Clues might contain audio or video; answers, presumably, might include audio or video components as well, with a crossing that works for both.

*

Offshoot

In 1938, architect Alfred Mosher Butts created a game called "Criss-Crosswords," a word game in which players built words on a 15x15 blank grid. He sold a few homemade sets to friends, but "Criss-Crosswords" didn't take off. A decade later, James Brunot bought the rights to manufacture the game in exchange for agreeing to give Butts a royalty for every unit sold. Brunot altered the board slightly and changed the game's name; still, the game lagged until 1952, when Jack Straus, the president of Macy's, played the game over Thanksgiving, was immediately hooked, and placed a huge order. Within a year, the game—Scrabble—was an enormous hit.

Crosswords, themselves a mash-up of several ancestors, have inspired many spinoff word games—Scrabble, Banagrams, "Scrabble Crossword Cubes," Rubik's-esque letter cubes, etc. Arthur Wynne, the inventor of the crossword, never patented the crossword but did patent a word-ladder version of the puzzle.

Digital varieties of the crossword abound, such as "Crickler," a puzzle that retains clues but eliminates the grid; instead, it's an interactive list that you solve one at a time.[330]

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Novelty

Novelty puzzles are crosswords with a purpose: puzzles that are created with very specific functions or occasions in mind.

Educational puzzles use the grid as pedagogical tool, creating puzzles that are typically more practical than entertaining or beautiful. Crossword-style grids frequently appear in study guides and quizzes, as tools to make studying "fun." In exchange for a word bank you provide, free online generators will plunk out a scatter-shot, asymmetrical criss-cross patchwork, more mini-golf than checkerboard. The spoonful-of-sugar principle is at work here: since crosswords are culturally coded as fun, solving a crossword to learn vocabulary might be more palatable to students than straight-up rote memorization.

Custom crosswords might be commissioned for any number of occasions: a birthday party, a brochure, an advertising campaign, etc. In 1996, three former editors of *Games* magazine founded Puzzability, a company that produces boutique and high-quality puzzles on demand, from puzzles for a Tamiflu brochure, to the games in the *Martha Stewart Kids* magazine, to the op-ed pages of the *New York Times*, to rebuses inside Snapple bottle caps.[331]

Show puzzles might look like a puzzle and act like a puzzle, but not function with crossword-logic at all. During the crossword craze of the twenties, fashion designers were quick to cotton to the puzzle for aesthetic purposes, if not functional. Simon and Schuster's early crossword puzzle books featured advertisements for crossword-themed jewelry; prices

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[330] Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, Bobby Schweizer, *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 92.

[331] "Clients," *Puzzability,* puzzability.com, 2016, Web.

ranged from fifty cents for a simple enameled collar pin to thirty-five dollars for a 14K solid gold bracelet. [332]

*

I am no Nostradamus, nor does this taxonomy claim anything about the relative dominance of any one subfield. A variety of crossword not listed here might yet overtake the field. The goal, here, is to understand how the crossword thinks: given that we're linking answers within a grid, what are the logical systems at work?

The relative popularity of any one category depends on a wide combination of variables. Editor Eugene Maleska preferred theme puzzles with wordplay, puns, and quotes, but had little tolerance for puzzles that involved many mutations or answers not found in the lexicon of a person educated in the Western canon. Will Shortz's reign has seen puzzles in the *New York Times* that display a much wider range of types of vocabulary and logical behavior than any of his predecessors published. On the other hand, the *New York World*'s initial puzzles showed a far greater scope of grid shapes than Shortz's puzzles. Editors such as Brendan Emmett Quigley favor extremely topical puzzles, while editors like Matt Gaffney have a penchant for the meta-puzzle. Puns and specialty puzzles go in and out of fashion. The rise of constructing software made themeless puzzles, once an unpopular subset, a thriving economy of their own, cultivating wars of attrition based on wordlists. The crossword will continue to develop, but it is likely that its patterns of behavior will be traced back to these evolutionary roots.

A Guide to Cryptic Crosswords

[332]Arnot, *What's Gnu?*, 54.

Ximenes's Guide to Cryptic Clues: Seven Types of Ambiguity

In 1925, Edward Powys Mathers began setting crossword puzzles using exclusively cryptic clues, that is, clues that rely on wordplay rather than pure definition. Mathers used the pen name Torquemada, after the famous medieval Spanish torturer, thus inaugurating both the tradition of cryptic setters adopting pen names as well as the expectation that cryptic puzzles should be masochistically difficult for solvers. Upon Mathers's death in 1939, constructor D.S. Macnutt took over the *Observer*'s puzzle, writing under the pen name Ximenes, one of the original Torquemada's successors in the Inquisition. In 1966, Macnutt published *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword*, a style guide and rulebook for the elements that should be present in all good cryptic crosswords. Macnutt based his rules on the guidelines that Torquemada had laid down and passed on to him. For a clue to pass the Ximenean bar, it must be absolutely clean and precise in its ambiguity: the clue must provide some sort of deception that the reader must enter and actively decode, but the clue should also not provide the reader with inaccurate information. Macnutt is not afraid of wordplay thickets, but he prizes elegance and efficiency in cluing. The labyrinths he creates for the reader to arrive inevitably at a particular word might require twenty steps where two would do; but those extra eighteen hoops are what make the puzzle worth entering. Macnutt loathes cluing clichés or tics of compilers, and find himself bored with conventions: if a way of cluing a certain word does not feel fresh, it will not titillate the solver. There is not one logic that drives a Ximenean clue; on the contrary, Macnutt provides an astonishing array of ways of getting from A to B.

Macnutt classifies cryptic clues into seven main types.

1. Two or more meanings: Clues with two or more meanings demand words that allow for ambiguities. The simplest kind of ambiguity suggests one word but requires another.

"Fleeces, things often ordered by men of rank [6]" suggests noblemen buying woolly garments, but the verb "to fleece" is intended. As Macnutt explains, "'men of rank' are soldiers, not noblemen, who 'order' the things referred to on parade. RIFLES is the answer: to fleece and to rifle are to plunder, and soldiers order arms."[333]

2. Reversals: A reversal is a word that forms another when read backwards. An element of the clue itself typically nods to the reader that a reversal is wanted. For example, consider "Heater with electric valve reflex – one just out [9 – an across word]": "'Reflex' is clearly appropriate to the reversal of an across word," writes Macnutt. "An etna is a heater, and tube can mean an electric valve; hence we get etna-tubed reversed into DEBUTANTE, one who is 'just out,' a nice chance from the picture of the modern gadget."[334]

3. Charades: Charades are clues in which the words fall into complete parts, and the reader must take them apart to put them together again. "Voting against, told to go and vote for [7]" can, Macnutt explains, be solved Humpty-Dumpty style by breaking the word apart and putting it together again: "'Voting against'? Think of pro and *con*: to tell someone to go is to send: therefore, CONSENT." A more complex charade requires the reader to doctor one or more of the parts. Consider "What was Gertrude over Hamlet's upbringing? She must have been crazy [6 – a down word]": Mc Nutt explains that " 'upbringing' points to reversal: Hamlet will probably be the Dane, reversed. ..enad, and G. was his mother: hence MAENAD, a crazed female worshipper of Bacchus."[335]

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[333] D.S. Macnutt, *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword* (London: Methuen & Co., 1966), 56.

[334] Macnutt, *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword*, 57.

[335] Macnutt, *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword*, 57.

Container and contents resemble charades in that they have wholes and parts, but the parts re outside and inside the word itself instead of existing side by side. A relatively simple example: "I'll be kept in by the beak for talking too much [5]" solves as NOISE (no-I-se), that is, the 'I' kept inside the 'nose' for too much 'noise.' "Notice 'I'll be': 'I am' would be criminally inaccurate, as we have already seen, because the letter I is third person,"[336] writes Macnutt.

4. Container and contents: The complex form of the container / contents type uses hyphens and abbreviations, but expects solvers to understand which words they are meant to truncate. "Bridges, for example, long overdue: a top-class lot of engineers to be called in [8]" demands a very particular type of reader to understand its solution:

Abbreviations again. 'Top-class' must be AI (i.e., A1) or U (cf. non-U): 'lot of engineers' can only be R.E.[337] As the general picture suggests engineering, get right away from it and remember that Bridges was poet LAUREATE (l-a-U-R.E.-ate). There are rather a lot of parts this time, and it is a somewhat clumsy clue as a result; but it illustrates possibilities.

5. Puns: Clues using puns typically depend on homonyms; a simple example is "German sounds in need of a regular brushing up [4]," with the answer HERR (that is, a near-homonym of "hair"): the "sounds" in the clue cues the solver to use a homonym.

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[336] Macnutt, *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword*, 60.

[337] "R.E." is the abbreviation for the Royal Engineers, a corps of the British army.

6. Anagrams: Macnutt is particular about anagrams, specifying that there should be an appropriate connection between the anagram and the definition, and that clues should not give an indirect anagram, i.e., a synonym of the anagram[338] rather than the actual anagram itself. "Port's apt to make you steer it erratically [7]" yields TRIESTE; "*Le Spice* is very naughty: cut out heavenly body [7]" gives ECLIPSE.

7. Hidden: The hidden type embeds the answer word in the clue, but uses camouflage of word spaces or punctuation. "Where they wear saris in thin diamanté [5]" gives INDIA; "Give power to some of the policemen – a blessing [6]" yields ENABLE.

Macnutt cites several other ways of employing wordplay in cryptic clues:

--Heads and Tails: Clues that indicate that a word must lose its first or last letter. "Wail – South African beheaded not long ago [7]" is ULULATE (Z-ulu, late).

--Peculiarities of speech: Clues that depend on local accents, or on some effect of speech –e.g, lisping, stuttering, a stuffy nose—to work. "I'm a hypocrite to denigrate a Liverpool rocker? Sounds like it [8]" is TARTUFFE: people from Liverpool typically pronounce "tough" as "toof"; the full title of Moliere's play is *Tartuffe, or, The Hypocrite*. "A chap like Macbeth's quite rethponthible [5]" yields THANE (i.e., a lisped "sane").

[338] A "synogram," perhaps?

--*Words treated as parts of other words:* For example, "After an outing, terrier wants a drink [5]" solves as AIRED: if we read "wants" as "lacks," and we drop "ale" from Airedale, we get "aired," which is what a dog is after an outing.

--*Initial or final letters*: "Name of the last of the Legends Barham wrote [4]" yields ESME, the final four letters of the final four words of the clue.

--*Foreign languages*: "English writer, but understood by all Frenchman [4]" is MAIS, the writer SPB Mais, a prolific travel author and journalist of the mid-twentieth century.

--*Literary references*: Clues that refer to, but does not necessarily rely on, a familiar literary phrase. "Poet whose 'sculptor is paid' in advance [5]" is particularly felicitous; though the poem[339] to which the clue refers is, as Macnutt puts it, "not a chestnut," the reader does not have to know it to make sense of the clue: "PRIOR means 'in advance' and it also the name of a poet; so that *must* be right."

--*Outsides:* The converse of a "hidden" clue. To solve "Calvalrymen disheartened in Normandy [4]," the solver takes out the heart of "calvalrymen" to achieve CAEN, a part of Normandy where heavy fighting took place in 1944 during the Battle of Normandy. "Put me in the bloomin' ward – you'll see what I am [4]" yields GAWK—both a clumsy person and

[339] Matthew Prior, "For My Own Monument." The phrase quoted comes from the second stanza: "Then take Mat's word for it, the sculptor is paid / That the figure is fine, pray believe your own eye; / Yet credit but lightly what more may be said, / For we flatter ourselves, and teach marble to lie." George Gilfillan, *The Poetical Works of Matthew Prior: With Memoir and Critical Dissertation* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1858), 377.

the act of staring—which one adds to the middle of "bloomin' ward" to get "blooming awkward."

--*&lit.:* The final type that Macnutt describes is his favorite, a type he calls the "&lit." clue: the clue that can be solved both on the level of wordplay and on the literal level. With such a clue, Macnutt explains, "the solver can read the whole clue in two quite different ways, first as an indication of the letters or pars, and secondly as an indication of the whole word. Every word in the clue does double duty."[340] As an example of how an "&lit." clue works, Macnutt provides his exegesis of "I don't exactly get more dim – I last, if I'm this [12]":

> "I don't exactly get" suggests an anagram – I get these letters, but I don't get them exactly, i.e. correctly, arranged; and the next four words contain twelve letters, the required number. So you can read the whole clue first as meaning "If I am what I am, I get the letters of 'more dim I last' arranged in a different order." You can also read the whole clue as a very full definition of the required word: "If I (and in this case I may be anyone) am this, my memory does not become dimmer, but lasts." IMMORTALISED precisely answers both ways of reading the clue. (I don't often use that vague 'I,' but here I think the merits of the clue compensate for this irregularity.)[341]

Macnutt points out that "the clue-writer must never forget that his object is legitimately to deceive; so, if he is writing a clue to a word that lends itself readily to one of these seven kinds of treatment, he must do his utmost not to announce too obviously, by the form of the clue, the type to which that clue belongs."[342] The strongest clues are the ones in which form and content create some friction.

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[340] Macnutt, *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword*, 73.

[341] Macnutt, *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword*, 73-4.

[342] Macnutt, *Ximenes on the Art of the Crossword*, 55.

Chapter 4

CROSSWORD PRAXIS, PART 1:

TOURNAMENT OF CHAMPIONS

Prologue: Stamford, Connecticut

Stamford, CT, is the seventh-largest city[343] in New England. A bedroom community swallowed by high-rises, Stamford has buildings and streets the width of Manhattan, but without the population to fill it. In 1950, the Census reported Stamford's population as 94.6% white and 5.2% black.[344] Stamford is tied with Iowa City, IA, for the US metropolitan area with the highest percentage of adults who have a bachelor's degree or higher (44%). Iowa City is a UNESCO City of Literature. Stamford has an excellent public library with an attached full-service Starbucks.

In 1692, Katherine Branch, a seventeen-year-old French servant who lived in the house of Daniel Wescot, went out to pick herbs and suffered a fit, convulsing on the ground in seizures, her tongue lolling from her mouth. After the girl displayed several more of these episodes over the next few weeks, the local midwife determined that she must be bewitched. Branch started claiming that a cat that turned into a woman and back again had spoken to her. Among the six women Branch accused was one Elizabeth Clawson, a member of a family that had been feuding with the Wescots for generations. Clawson was formally brought to trial and subjected to a water test, in which she was dropped into a pond with her

[343] "City" is defined in *Merriam-Webster*'s as "a large town." The word "town" originally referred to a space that fences enclosed. Historically, in England, towns were communities too poor to afford walls, and so built stockades instead. There are cities in England that are smaller than large towns; there are villages in India larger than towns. "Towns, suburbs, and even little cities are totally different organisms from great cities": Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 16.

[344] By 2017, Stamford had become 53% white.

hands and feet bound: a normal woman would drown, but if a witch, accusers insisted, would float, because the pure, Christian element would reject someone in allegiance with the devil. Clawson bobbed like a cork.

The trials in Stamford were the second-most famous witchcraft proceedings in New England that year. At the height of witchcraft hysteria, from 1692 to 1693, at least twenty-five "witches" were executed in Salem, Massachusetts: nineteen were hung, one tortured, and five or more died in jail. Stamford's denizens were more methodical in their approach to judgment, and ultimately, more merciful. (Stamford has a proud history of being egalitarian and a little boring.) Despite the damning evidence against Clawson, and despite the fact that defending someone accused of witchcraft was itself a condemnable activity, seventy-six Stamford residents signed an affidavit testifying, "We have not known [Elizabeth Clawson] to be of a contentious frame nor given to use threatening words or to act maliciously towards her neighbors but hath been civil and orderly towards others in her conversation and not to be a busybody in other mens' concerns." Clawson was acquitted.

Word puzzles are as old as witchcraft, and here in Stamford, settlers have been puzzled by mysteries for centuries. In 1647, Samuel Danforth, a Puritan minister and one of the founding Fellows of Harvard, published his *Almanack for the Year of Our Lord 1647*, the second-earliest American almanac. In addition to the standard miscellany—celestial tables, calendars, tides, court dates—Danforth used the *Almanack* to publish his own creative output, including the first word puzzles printed in the colonies. Danforth created twelve enigmatic verses, one for each month, and printed them next to the astronomical and astrological data. Each puzzle—closer to metaphor than mathematics, but a puzzle nonetheless—adopts one common seasonal feature and describes it in a coded style. In his undergraduate thesis at Indiana University, Will Shortz wrote a history of early American

puzzles, from 1647 to 1860. Shortz gives examples of Danforth's calendrical riddles, such as this one, printed next to the data for January:

> Great bridges shall be made alone
> Without ax, timber, earth or stone,
> Of chrystall metall, like to glass;
> Such wondrous works soon come to passe,
> If you may then have such a way,
> The Ferry-man you need not pay."
> [The answer :"ice."][345]

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The American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is both flagship and platypus of the American crossword world, its crown jewel and one of its more curious manifestations. Held at the Marriott in Stamford, Connecticut, the ACPT draws somewhere between 600 and 700 competitors each year. That's a lot of crossworders, but compared to the 350,000 subscribed in 2018 to the *New York Times* crossword app alone, let alone the legions of print solvers and those who don't play in the *New York Times*, this crowd is a miniscule sliver of the cruciverbal kingdom. The ACPT is crossword attar, the headiest concentrate of grid upon grid. Competitors will officially complete seven puzzles over the course of the tournament weekend; most will do far more. The hotel turns into a Matryoshka puzzle hive. When you finish a tournament puzzle, you pull out your phone to do another crossword during the break. There are puzzles inside your folder when you arrive, and fresh piles of new puzzles in the lobby bloom each day. Is this heaven? The Stamford Marriott is either the garden of the lotus eaters or Sisyphus's mountain.

The ACPT is the closest thing crosswords have to a professional conference. The cruciverbalists in attendance range in dedication from the mildly enthusiastic to the devoted acolyte; all come to the ACPT to network with friends in the crossword world. Many would

[345] William P. Shortz, "The History of American Word Puzzles to 1860" (Thesis, Indiana University, 1974), 55.

never have the chance to meet in real life, or, if they passed each other on the street, they'd never recognize each other as sharing this passion. About a third are here as serious contenders, a third as competitive but out of the running, and the rest to enjoy the thrill of the puzzle. The little pile of kid-friendly puzzles on a shelf in the lobby suggest, like packets of crayons on restaurant tables, that families are welcome; however, most ACPT registrants fly solo. They come to be with their ACPT people.

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ACPT people sift into three broad, overlapping subcategories: constructors, solvers, and officials.

The Constructors

There are two types of constructors: gridders and cluers.

Gridders care about what the letters in the squares look like. Shotput gridders: How can I get as few blank spaces as possible, and show off the size of my word stacks? Javelin throw-gridders go for elegance and try to stick a smooth landing: how can I make every answer read as naturally possible, without having to rely on crosswordese, that is, letter combinations like STP and SSW, with definitions that have basically become "It's useful in a crossword"? There are the pole vaulters, the ones who build grids around wild answers: how can you get VOXPOPULIVOXDEI to work smoothly into a grid (as Brendan Emmett Quigley did in 2002), for example; or how can you make a pangram grid with all the letters of the alphabet; or how can you make a grid that works with rebus squares? Triple-jumpers create artwork in the grid. Mary Lou Guizzo's Valentine's Day puzzles in the shape of hearts, for example, or Joe Krozel's grid in the shape of a clock face with hands pointing to 1:30, or

Jacob Stulberg's Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2, with the title of Marcel Duchamp's painting spelled out in a silhouette rendition of the artwork:

Figure 18. "Untitled [Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2," Jacob Stulberg, 2015.

Cluers are more interested in the relationship between how they get people to think about the words that are in the grid than in the actual shape of the grid itself. Maura B. Jacobson's weekly *New York* magazine puzzles were heavily pun-based, relying on clever cluing to make the answers make sense. Donna Hoke, a playwright who constructs crosswords for *Soap Opera Digest*, readily admits to using "cheater squares"—an extra blank square here and there that made the grid asymmetrical—so that she could achieve maximum density of soap-y clues and answers. (She estimates about 60-75% of each puzzle to be soap opera themed.) In a 2018 *Times* puzzle, Peter Gordon ends every clue with the letter T, for little more rationale, apparently, than to prove that he can.

There are those that fall in the middle: Ben Tausig's "gender-fluid" Schrodinger puzzle, in which certain words can either take an M or an F (MAKE / FAKE), have to be clued in such a way so that the clues point to the right answer with both letters, but the grid

also has to be executed carefully so that switching these letters will still create a fit with every flip.

The Solvers

At the turn of the twentieth century, mechanical engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor was unimpressed. Workers in America and Britain, he'd noticed, were deliberately "soldiering," dialing production to a crawl to protect their own interests; moving too fast, so they argued, would make them finish tasks too quickly and thus throw everyone out of jobs. In his 1911 *Principles of Scientific Management*, the grandfather of how-to guides ranging from IKEA manuals to Charles Duhigg's *Smarter Faster Better: The Transformative Power of* Real *Productivity*, Taylor argues that efficiency, not underworking, is the key to success. Taylor boiled management into a formula: turn complex jobs into a series of simple ones, measure everything, and make what workers earn directly connected to how well they perform. Taylorism has its drawbacks in the workplace. Charlie Chaplin perhaps satirized the system best as a factory worker in the 1936 film *Modern Times*: Charlie-Cog has to screw nuts onto a machine, but the machine keeps speeding up, faster and faster, until he's working at such a breakneck pace that he finally snaps and throws the system into chaos.

But Taylorism thrives among speed-solvers: efficiency and accuracy are everything. The 100-meter sprint speed solvers careen through the puzzle, as much a physical burst of energy as a mental one. Erik Agard, winner of the 2018 tournament, wore a basketball jersey and sweats to the finale stage. There are various tricks: read only the down clues; start in one corner (doesn't matter which) and work your way toward the middle; use a lowercase "e," because it's much easier to inscribe than the capital letter. Speed solving operates by rote, like putting a Rubik's cube together. Howard Barkin, the 2016 ACPT winner, told me that

he can solve the easiest *Times* puzzles of the week in a couple of minutes while carrying on a conversation: he just looks down and the puzzle has basically solved itself. Dan Feyer, the Federer of the ACPT—champion from 2010 to 2015, and then again in 2017—posted a YouTube video of himself solving a *Newsday* crossword puzzle in one minute and eight seconds. He begins with a long across clue in each key quadrant, then flips and solves all the downs rapid-fire.

The team-marathoners solve with flamboyance. A man wearing a T-shirt with the back emblazoned TOTALLY CLUELESS sits next to a woman whose T-shirt reads CLUED IN.[346] A woman in the front row wears two pairs of spectacles and has a crossword-patterned teddy bear perched next to her puzzles, and a crossword-emblazoned tote rests at her feet. Another woman's hand-knitted cardigan features grids on the sleeves and a pencil on the back, sewn next to the word DOWN where a designer's label might be. A man wears orange silk pants and carries two vuvuzelas. Many solvers sport crossword-patterned baseball caps, scarves, and/or vests.

There are also the Walk-for-the-Cure solvers like Miriam Raphael and Josephine Quinones, the nonagenarians who have been solving puzzles for decades. Dan Feyer's grid for Puzzle 5, the notorious beast, is smooth and perfect, with hardly an eraser mark; he's completed the thing in under eight minutes. Josephine Quinones's grid looks like a Tetris board captured mid-game: the blocks have begun to accumulate from the bottom up, in mostly solid aggregate with a few gaps here and there, and there are a few vertical pieces falling into the grid, but the top is mostly blank.

The Officials

[346] THE FUTURE IS FEMALE.

Deb Amlen, who writes the *Times*'s "Wordplay" blog, describes the ACPT's officials as the "glitterati of the crossword world."[347] Officials get tapped each January in a mysteriously bcc'ed email from coordinator Michael Smith, who tells them only to arrive on puzzle day, in the scoring room; further instructions are given from there.

Judging crosswords at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is the true apotheosis of the anal-retentive mind. The glitterati gather at 9 am on Saturday morning, two hours before the main event begins, to review the scoring procedures and organize their game plan. "You will collectively examine over a million boxes this weekend," Matt Ginsberg tells them.

Veteran constructors make up the bulk of the judging room: Brendan Emmett Quigley, who runs his own puzzle website, stalks the back of the room in leather jacket and novelty T-shirt. Affable Mike Shenk is another: he's the editor of the *Wall Street Journal*'s crossword and part of the team behind Puzzability, a custom puzzle creation company that generates puzzles on commission for clients ranging from to *The New Yorker* to Martha Stewart Living to Snapple. Official Stan Newman shows up in a loudly patterned shirt that, from afar, looks like a crossword pattern but, on closer inspection, proves to be a black-and-white Hawaiian shirt. Newman, a longtime crossword editor, ran a crossword-themed cruise for many years, exploring the Caribbean with especially devoted solvers. Brad, a librarian, keeps track of everybody: how was Florida, how old is Henry now, how's your knee feeling.

When officials are in the ballroom, they're "ballroom referees." Each ballroom referee carries a blue highlighter. They play zone defense, scanning the lowered sea of heads to spot when hands pop up like Whack-a-Moles. A referee scuttles to the finished contestant, collects the paper, marks down the number of minutes remaining on the clock in

[347] Deb Amlen, "Puzzle Lovers Find Their Tribe at a Crossword Tournament," *New York Times*, 26 Mar. 2018.

official blue highlighter—seconds are discarded—then hands the puzzle to one of the kids running around the room, the "runners," kids at the cusp of bar mitzvah age. Like the ballboys and ballgirls at tennis tournaments, they stand at the edges of the room, hands clasped, then sprint around when they see fresh puzzles to be collected.

In the scoring room, the officials become "judges." Every crossword at the ACPT gets judged by hand. Until 2012, the scores were also tabulated by hand, which meant that most years, the judges were counting squares until about 2 am. Finally, Matt Ginsberg, creator of the computers solving software Dr.Fill, built a computerized program for grading crosswords, which has chopped grading time in half. The software is "incredibly brittle," as Ginsberg puts it.

Everything relies on highlighters. (Or "hilighters," as they're spelled roughly half the time in the instruction sheet, without any discernable rhyme or reason as to when and why the spelling will switch.) When a judge fills in a square, she has to fill in the whole square. The computer reads only highlighter.

Yellow is also used to mark the time taken to solve the puzzle. Each contestant puts a label on the back of the puzzle, with that contestant's number above a series of boxes labeled 1 to 30, and then 30+. The time remaining on the clock, in minutes, has been noted by the ballroom referee in blue.

To score a puzzle, the judge takes a yellow highlighter and fills the number noted on the back in blue highlighter into the grid on the contestant's label. If the solver has taken all the time allotted, the grid remains blank. Then, the judge flips over the puzzle, writes her initials in the corner using a regular pen, so that the computer doesn't get confused—the initials are for the human record, so that if a judge has poor highlighting techniques (not filling in the squares fully, etc.), she can be chastised by a scorer in the tech room.

The judge has a choice: she can either mark any wrong squares in the grid in yellow, or she can mark any correct squares in blue. Puzzles that look like rotting jack-o-lanterns will get treated in blue—though it's more tedious to check for right answers, after training the brain all day to scan for errors, the blue highlighter is a godsend for the Walk-for-the-Cure solvers in the massive heap of botched Puzzle Five solutions. The only thing a judge definitely cannot do is alternate between marking in yellow and marking in blue on the same puzzle. That would break the machine's brittle little eyes.

Judges have the answer key, and they read each puzzle left to right, like reading a book, ignoring the downs. This creates unintentionally striking images, as though building a memory palace. SIAMESE ASCENTS, in puzzle one: "I can't get the image of Siamese cats climbing mountains out of my head," says a judge.

If a judge messes up while highlighting—coloring a correct square yellow, or a wrong square blue—she can correct herself by going over that square with a pink highlighter. Pink deliberately confuses the computer, who will then ignore the square, which is exactly what the judge wants it to do.

The computer handles the scoring. Puzzlers get bonus points for every minute still left on the clock. Solvers also get a bonus for a perfect puzzle, and a certain number of points for each answer correctly gridded; points are docked for wrong answers. Since the computer tabulates by the highlighted squares, the humans translates the letters into a simplified language of colors that the computer can read, and lets the computer do the job it can do best. Humans are still better at recognizing handwriting, and making judgment calls between, say, a loose O or a tight U or a sloppy V. The tournament's MVP in the judges' room is the one who's deemed to have best handwriting of the weekend.

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Pre-Tournament

March, 2017. It's warm for this time of year, and gray, a somehow dry dampness. The weekend hadn't seemed real. *I'm going to Connecticut for a crossword tournament*, I'd kept telling myself, not quite believing.

On the train, I casually glance at the fellow passengers, sizing them up to see if any of them are my competition. The crossword is a commuter's sport. Solvers can clock themselves by how many stops it takes to complete the grid. But the Amtrak from Boston to Stamford isn't a useful clock; there's too much time between stations to measure progress or prowess, and no one around me is doing the puzzle.

The American Crossword Puzzle Tournament (ACPT) is the oldest and largest annual crossword tournament in America. Inaugurated in Stamford in 1978, the tournament draws around seven hundred participants annually. Competitors complete eight original crosswords over the course of the weekend. Solvers are awarded points based on time and accuracy. There are five skill-based divisions, A through E. The top three finalists in each category solve their puzzles on huge whiteboards onstage, and radio hosts provide color commentary. The winner of the A division is that year's ACPT champion

Wordplay, Patrick Creadon's 2006 documentary about the crossword world, takes place at the 2005 ACPT. Creadon enters the Marriott and follows champion solvers as they compete throughout the weekend, weaving the internal private suspense of each puzzle with the tournament's much more public and character-driven drama. The film grossed over three million dollars at the box office and prompted swellings in the ranks that compelled the tournament to move to a larger venue in Brooklyn. But a decade later, casual attendees drifted away, and the numbers evened out. In 2015, the crossword returned home to Stamford.

Every March, the ACPT is held at the Stamford Marriott Hotel and Spa, part of the Starwood Alliance. (Nights here can be used to collect rewards for nights in other hotels, or free nights collected in better locations can be used to stay here.) Thick hedges that rise above hip height and concrete lattice walls mask much of the Marriott's entrance from the sidewalk. The courtyard garden area, dark green and brown, is perpetually gray and slightly dripping, its own microclimate. Finding the entrance cut into the wall is difficult, and the courtyard is surprisingly terraced, with walkways at several different levels, like an impossible cube: you think you're following one up, but you turn the corner to find yourself at the bottom again. Around the corner, where cars enter, the Marriott's driveway swoops in the semi-circle beloved of all high-rise hotel entrances: your car carries you to the top of the parabola, where an electronic door slides apart to welcome you in, and your car is whooshed down the rest of the arc by a valet.

The lobby is virtually window-free, with colorless carpet and polished mahogany paneled walls, wood-grained. The ground level has multiple mini-levels; in a slightly sunken pit, a large structural column organized to resemble a chimney points through the ceiling to somewhere, with an electric fire perpetually burning in its grate, like a television channel tuned to the image of "fire." This weekend, the Marriott also welcomes the Lady Oregon basketball team, in town for a NCAA tournament. They're in matching sweats and Under Armour duffels and they're all named Maryanne.

The ACPT's mastermind and master of ceremonies is the emperor of crosswords, Will Shortz, current puzzle editor of the *New York Times* and *National Public Radio*'s puzzle expert. Shortz belongs to a rarified breed of host-types, *Homo prudens*—Alex Trebek of *Jeopardy!*, Tim Gunn of *Project Runway*, Regis Philbin of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* and various talk shows, Marc Summers of *Double Dare* and other family-friendly shows—who

make it their business to perfect the natty uncle figure. They're nonthreatening, semi-pedantic; like different shades of gummy vitamins, they're not quite the same flavor. Trebek is a bit of a smart-aleck, a wiseacre who might get a little randy at a dinner party. Tim Gunn is a crisply empathetic mentor, the only one with tear ducts. Regis is conservative, with a proclivity towards crotchety-ness; Marc Summers wears his OCD most openly. Shortz is earnest if a little bossy, eager to make everyone correct, but he's also tolerant and patient, willing to explain the same instructions over and over without a hint of resentment.

Crossword tournaments became popular when the crossword was a craze in the nineteen-twenties. A 1924 exhibition match among several colleges featured predictable sexism; college newspapers reported with eyebrows-raised bemusement that the Wellesley team had managed to hold their own well against the strapping Ivy Leaguers, beaten in a narrow photo finish by Yale. Ruth von Phul, crosswords' first ingénue, starred in the *New York Herald Tribune*'s yearly tournaments, and regularly set the bogie time—that is, the bar to beat—for local newspapers in the nineteen-twenties. In the thirties and forties, crosswords mellowed from craze to lifestyle, and the appetite for tournament diminished—people found themselves sated by a puzzle a day, rather than craving a high-stakes frenzy.

Puzzles puttered along without a tournament culture until 1978, when the twenty-five-year-old puzzle editor at *Games* magazine, Will Shortz, realized that there were millions of people doing the crossword in their own corners of the country and the world, and they were all communicating by virtue of doing the same puzzles, but there was no physical gathering place for enthusiasts. Shortz knew that there had been crossword tournaments in the past, and he reasoned that the fan base was more than large enough to support a tournament again. This was before chat boards or blogs, and though you could write a letter to the editor or talk to local friends about the puzzle, if you wanted a puzzle community, you

had to create your own. Shortz created the ACPT, in part, as a resurrection of the glory days of tournament play, the manic-mano-a-mano machismo of the twenties' battles. But it was also, more importantly, a way for the new generation of professionally-minded cruciverbalists to gather while still remaining in the solving isolation they craved: in a tournament, everyone is alone together.

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Crosswords are, for many, a family affair. When I ask people how they first encountered crosswords, the common refrain is, "My grandfather loved crosswords," or, "I did them with my aunt." Younger generations associate doing puzzles with older folks. Deb Amlen, editor of the *New York Times*'s crossword blog, *Wordplay*, told me that she regularly gets tweets from college-age converts: "I now do the crossword—I've officially turned into my grandma." Alice Notley, the poet, told me that she used to pass the crossword back and forth with her mother: "She wrote in pencil, in lowercase, and I wrote in ink, in uppercase." Notley's mother did word puzzles until the day she died. Her last words, Notley said, were about words, thinking about the Pentecost, and speaking in tongues. Crosswords were a way for her to pass the time at end of her life. "But anything you do to pass the time can be fascinating."

Games run in my blood. Both sides of the family are from Atlantic City, New Jersey, a town that has always made its legal and less than legal living through games. Back in the radio days, my great-grandmother Sara was once on a quiz show; the host asked her, "Is Mickey Mouse a dog or a cat?" "Cat," she snapped.[348] My grandmother and her sister grew up in Atlantic City, where, as girls, they ran the numbers from their father's boarding-house lobby to the bookies' back room in the corner candy store. My great-great-uncle Benny,

[348] In the 1806 edition of Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, "cat" is defined as "a common domestic animal," and "dog" is defined as "a common domestic animal."

according to family lore, took the rap for Nucky Johnson, the mobster who ruled Atlantic City in the twenties. In their mellower years, my grandparents would gather a few times a week to have dinner and watch *Jeopardy!*, announcing the answers at the screen.

Monday nights during high school, my parents, brother, and I would have a crossword race. My father would Xerox copies of the Monday puzzle, hand them out to each of us, and, at a designated moment, we'd all flip them over and begin, scribbling in separate corners of the house. I'd hear Ben crow triumphantly, *Done!*, which would make me frantically push to finish the last corner; or I would scrawl the final rapid-fire capital letters and cry out, racing the puzzle into my parents' room, to discover my mother, coolly reading the rest of the day's arts section, had breezed through the grid several minutes earlier, and that my father had almost finished, but was now pretending not to care anymore, a few scattered blank squares belying his victory.

A few weeks before the ACPT, I was visiting my parents, who live in northern Vermont, when I said, "I'm going to Connecticut for a crossword puzzle tournament."

"Ooh!" says my mother. "We'll come too." My mother is the family's inveterate crossworder, a nightly solver, who can regularly do the Friday and Saturday.

"I like bridge," says my dad. "I'd rather go to a bridge tournament."

"You don't have to come," I say. "Neither one of you has to come."

"You two go," says my father. "I'd come in last place." But he knew he would go, too. My father and mother work together, and their office is in the top floor of our house. They run a consulting and publishing company that my father inherited from his parents. They share a cell phone. My father is a rabid competitor who turns daily life into a series of little contests: the game of what to have for breakfast, the game of going to the drugstore to pick up the newspaper and cutting in line to put down the exact amount of money for the

paper. Things that come naturally to him: racquet sports, running, bridge, and doing the jumble in his head. He hates yoga, skiing, and ice fishing.

My brother, Ben, is the trivia maestro in our nuclear family, and the one who would most readily identify himself as a games person. Ben is a health care analyst in Boston who hosts a popular weekly trivia night at a pub through an organization called Geeks Who Drink. He memorized sports almanacs as a kid and could spit out facts about bowl dates and RBIs like a jukebox. When he was seven years old, Ben burst into tears on the Little League field when his team, the Silver T-shirts,[349] lost. My mother tried to console him by telling him that if he was so upset, he didn't have to compete. Ben turned his wet face to her and said, "But Mommy, I love competition!" In fifth grade, Ben competed in the state geography bee; in high school, he captained our Scholars Bowl team. He's been a religious fantasy footballer for decades, and he's part of an online invite-only contest called Learned League, in which members not only answer questions every day but also rank how hard they think the question will be for the competitor to answer. At age thirty, Ben became a *Jeopardy!* champion.

"Will Mom and Dad be mad if I don't come," he frets. "I think they're expecting me to come. But I have Geek Brunch on Sunday, and—"

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[349] The Shrine of the Silver Monkey was one of the rooms in Olmec's Temple, the obstacle course that formed the climax of each episode of "Legends of the Hidden Temple," the children's television show that aired on Nickelodeon from 1993-5. "Legends" featured six teams of two children each— Red Jaguars, Blue Barracudas, Green Monkeys, Orange Iguanas, Purple Parrots, and Silver Snakes—and the goal was to defeat the other teams through a combination of physical and mental obstacle courses. The winning team got to race through Olmec's Temple, a sort of cross between an archaeological dig, Tough Mudder course, and McDonald's ball pit. The Shrine of the Silver Monkey appears to be a fairly simple puzzle: there are three pieces of a silver monkey, and you have to screw them together in order. Although the puzzle looks simple on TV, nearly all the children struggle with it; in a New York Comic Con panel in 2016, host Kirk Fogg and the voice actor who played Olmec (the temple's stony-faced stone guardian), said that the puzzle was quite tricky: not only was it at the very end of the maze, and thus always approached in a state of exhaustion and distress, the monkey was like a Japanese puzzle box, with a deceptively minimalistic structure that was quite finicky. The middle piece looks very similar upside-down to its correct orientation, and the frazzled team member would often try to jam the head into the upside-down torso, attempting to solve the problem through persistence on a wrong tack without opening up the potential for other ways of thinking.

"I don't know why they're coming," I reassure him. "Why would they assume you're going? There's no reason why anyone has to come."

"Because it's games," Ben says.

After much redistribution of familial guilt, Ben decides he's not going.

My family finds it difficult to enter willingly into a competition when we don't know that we'll be above average: we're good at taking risks when we think we'll come out on top.

The ACPT is low stakes, with no expectations, but it's hard to enter a contest psychologically without the spark of hope that somehow, improbably, you will be that Cinderella story, that you'll magically be imbued with a prodigal talent and whiz past the others, or that the other competitors will find themselves all simultaneously struck, Lotos-Eaters style, and loll about as you sail past them. We know we've got no chance, yet deep down, we want to win.

This deep-down kernel of magical thinking is rooted in the fact that there is a word game at which I happen to be something of a prodigy. My skill is Boggle, a rapid-fire word search game, in which players shake a four-by-four or five-by-five cube, scribble the words they see over the course of three minutes, and then compare lists. You get points for words no one else has, and you get more points for longer words. There are two basic Boggle strategies. Either you blitz and write down everything, or you hunt for the Bantu wildebeests, the long words that will garner you many points, and assume that everyone else will cancel each other out on the little words and no one else will find your rare game. When I played against Larry Summers, ex-president of Harvard and former Secretary of the Treasury under Clinton, I used blitz, he used wildebeest. Three games: we tied, I won, he won. When I played Will Shortz, we tied. We only had time for one game, though—he was running late to table tennis.

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The Tournament. Friday Night

The way the ACPT works is this. When you arrive on Friday night, you're given an official tournament puzzle, which contains a print-out of the instructions, the explanation of the delightfully Byzantine ranking system your name badge, a few color-printed ads (a crossword puzzle retreat, a *New York Times*-sponsored crossword-themed ocean crossing, a crossword magazine with calls for submissions), and some free crosswords, not in tournament play, but just for on the side. Even though I've known for months that I'd be attending the tournament, I waited too long before signing up to receive an officially printed badge. I am registered, with a ranking number, but my name is "walkon," so I must write in my nametag, if I want one.

In the hotel lobby, there are several stacks of free puzzles to add to the yellow folders. Friday's *Times* puzzle, crosswords from the *Post*; mostly, though, these are the special variety puzzles that various attendees have created for the weekend itself, for a spare moment in between tournament play, when you're itching for a hit. Nearly every crossword constructor has built a new puzzle for the weekend, since it's irresistible advertising: your puzzle, automatically in the hands of the country's most dedicated solvers. It's unclear, though, whether the token kid-friendly crosswords were created by actual tournament junkies or put out in a well-intentioned but unnecessary attempt by some Loretta at the front desk, desperately chipper in all her attempts to sit with the cool kids in the lunchroom, but who will never really grasp that the way to ingratiate yourself is not to be an eager beaver but the opposite, to disengage, to make *them* need *you*.

Friday is the Warm-Up. There are two rounds of "variety" puzzles. In both rounds, we get three different puzzles, and we can solve any one of them; the winner of each

combination of puzzles, judged by accuracy and speed, gets entered into a raffle, with prizes revealed later that evening.

Saturday is the Main Event. Every puzzler solves six identical puzzles, with a break between Puzzles Three and Four for lunch. Sunday, Sabbath Day, is the Grand Finale. Everyone does Puzzle Seven as a valedictory lap. Then, there's a break, during which final scores are tabulated, and the ballroom where we've all been solving is converted into an auditorium. The top finishers in a panoply of categories are recognized and applauded—best rookie, best solver from New Jersey, top "Senior" (over eighty)—but only division winners receive an award beyond a handshake from Shortz. The top three finishers in the C division take the stage to solve the puzzle live on three whiteboards, wearing noise-cancelling headphones, and commentators give a spirited dialogue about their answers as the audience follows along. For each round, the grid is exactly the same, but the clues are different; the competitors are sequestered throughout the finale. After the three top C's compete, fresh blank grids replace their completed puzzles. Then, the three best B's take the stage; finally, the A's. The winner of each division is the one who solves it first and with no mistakes, and the "A" winner is crowned overall Champion.

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2017 is an unusual year for the ACPT, the tournament's equivalent of a leap year. The crossword competition has an opening act, before Friday's Warm-Up Puzzles: the Second World Palindrome Championship. In 2012, Shortz organized the first-ever World Palindrome Championship, which was held at the ACPT five years ago; as of this year, it's now a quinquennial tradition. This year, eight of the best English-language palindromists ("pa-LIN-drom-ists") in the world have been convened to vie for a $1001 prize and, of course, the glory. This palindrome contest lives inside the crossword tournament like a

Matryoshka doll, and is its weird bizarro mirror. Over the course of the weekend, hundreds of crossworders gather at the long tables in the ballroom to fill in the same blanks, while few select palindromists scatter through the Marriott to figure out words that will conform to a certain type of pattern, but the size and shape of which is not preordained.

Will, in his best imitation of a pageant announcer, calls out the names and occupations of each palindromist. There are seven men and one woman. Will refers to Douglas Fink an actuary, and Doug immediately lopes forward to correct him—"Actually, I'm not an actuary"—but no one seems to be listening.[350] (DO GEESE SEE GOD?)

A film crew has mushroomed out of the wood paneling when the palindromists took the stage. "A Man, A Plan, A Palindrome" began as a short profile of 2012 World Palindrome winner Mark Saltveit, a stand-up comedian and editor of *The Palindromist* magazine. That film had its premiere at the 2015 ACPT, to anecdotal acclaim. The directors, who previous collaboration was a documentary about Tetris fanatics[351], decided to expand this short into a feature-length film. The filmmakers are profiling Saltveit and two of the other top palindromists in the world as they prepare to compete in the 2017 championships. Along the way, the filmmakers will do a deep dive into the surprising and incredible history of palindromes. As the film's Kickstarter funding pitch describes the project, "Legend says that the first words spoken by a human were a palindrome. Adam introduced himself to Eve saying: 'Madam, I'm Adam.' Ancient palindromes were the words of Gods and the curses of demons, a vessel for witchcraft and monkish devotion, inscribed on holy baptismal fonts and amulets of malefaction. We even find palindromes beguiling the genius code-breakers of

[350] There was a poster in my high-school function analysis classroom featuring two blandly smiling people posing next to nineties-era plastic beige machinery. BE AN ACTUARY, it said. YRAUT CAN AEB.

[351] *Ecstasies of Order: The Tetris Masters.*

WWII. Our dream is to tell this story by interviewing the experts and imagining these episodes with hand-drawn animation."

For Friday's competition, the palindromists have one hour to create one or more palindromes using at least one of four possible constraints:

1) Use a q not followed by a u

2) Rhyme the first and last words

3) Start or end with a French or Spanish word(s)

4) Use the name of two magazines in your palindrome

When they scatter, the camera crew scurrying after a few of them to film their labor, the cruciverbalists' Warm-Up Round can begin. We play our variety puzzles, take a break, play again. While someone is tabulating our scores, a clock rings somewhere, and the OOZY RATS IN A SANITARY ZOO scuttle back to the ballroom to put their efforts on display. We crossworders are the judges: we have a ballot sheet, and we vote for our favorite individual palindrome, not for our favorite palindromist. This means that even though the contestants were told that they could make any number of palindromes, the ones who make several have a much better shot at winning, whereas the ones who gamble on extremely long or technically complex or intricately legible palindromes have to rely on the collective whim of the audience to all vote for that one.

Martin Clear, an Australian programmer, takes the first round, following the rhyming constraint:

Ono, miked, unaware, damned, ruby burden made raw: a nude kimono.

My favorite is the runner-up, from Jon Agee, author of such palindrome cartoon books as *Go Hang a Salami, I'm a Lasagna Hog*:

007 saw Q's DNA. Lands! Q was 700.

Even though nobody technically needs to be here on the Friday of the tournament, everybody is. Friday is the social hour, and after the warm-ups, we all gather in introverted clusters. Though this is the Super Bowl of crosswords—during March Madness season, too––the aesthetic is more business than sportif. But the discussion is all sport in its rigorous, wonk-ish particularities. *Remember that comeback on Puzzle 5 in 2002. 2007, Puzzle 3 – Puzzle 3! — the one that sent Tyler down to number 18. That southwest corner on Puzzle 4 in 2013: that was rough. That got a bunch of us knocked out of the running.* In the best of these conversations, the participants are reminiscing about themselves, in the third person; they're their own legends.

Friday is also fashion night. New York-based designer Lisa Perry's Pre-Fall 2015 collection featured several items in a crossword-motif tech-satin, including a swing dress ($895), a swingy jacket ($845), and a pillow ($150). That's not what constitutes fashion here. A woman named Sue wears a cow uniform, which, upon second glance, is not a cow at all: it's a onesie in crossword fleece, a full-body Snuggie with a crotch and arms and slippers. "My daughter-in-law made it for me!" she says. "I wear it to sporting events, sometimes, when it's outdoors and cold, because it's so warm and cozy." How do people react? "They think I'm the mascot or something, sometimes. Or I get mistaken for that Chick-Fil-A cow!"

Sue is a prominent lawyer by day, a partner in her firm. For years, she didn't tell anyone about her crossword puzzle habit, much less the fact that she would even consider going to a crossword puzzle tournament. But the first year she got up the gumption to go to the big tournament was the year the documentary was being made, and she won – she won the C division, the rookie division – and she couldn't hide the thing she hadn't been hiding, exactly, just not really explaining the whole truth. The office was curious, and celebratory; it's now the thing she's most famous for: it's in her biography on the company website, just as a "fun fact" at the end, she hastens to explain, but she's seen a little boost in clients, and she's

pretty sure that's why: it's this human thing they can latch onto. Ah, you do crosswords! I do crosswords – or, my grandma does crosswords – too. I can trust you. So she began to go regularly, and openly, to the tournament; one month, the company newsletter did a little feature on the crossword lawyer, crossing words in cross-evidence, counter-arguments, legal eagle cracks the case and the crossword. Thank god she won the C division that first year, says Sue, because if she's been sort of the middle of the pack, even the upper-middle of the pack, but with no win and no shade of an outcome to this, the lawyers would never have embraced it: it would have been a harmless if somewhat embarrassingly overeager quirk, rather than a sanctioned skill. A hobby is a much better hobby when you win.

Sue now comes openly to the ACPT. Rather than hiding her hobby, she can take a regularly scheduled weekend each year to devote to that last sentence in her bio, the one that the other partners are happy about because it's bringing them more business, to have a partner with mild fame in another skill set that does not reflect embarrassingly on the firm, but rather adds to a certain intellectual patina without seeming threatening.

By the end of Friday evening, I feel as though I've been served a full course of after-dinner mints, but now have to work backwards to the meal itself: the crossword.

*

The calendar has become important to the crossword as a hierarchy. Ever since the Shortz era, the crossword follows a thoroughly reliable progression of difficulty over the course of the year. Shortz also popularized the use of words and phrases in the grid that, while they might pass the Sunday breakfast test of immediate appropriateness (the *Times* is above such jokes as "The [_____] is mightier than the sword"), will not necessarily withstand the test of time. The puzzle has been adapting itself to a digital environment, and the app is booming; the *Times* Games floor, devoted almost entirely to the crossword, is over

a dozen full-time employees deep, including Will Shortz's former intern and now co-worker, Joel Fagliano. Fagliano writes the mini-puzzle for the *Times*, which is a supplemental, four-by-four or five-by-five or sometimes seven-by-seven, bite-sized hors d'oeuvres that have nothing to do with the main event but exist in parallel orbit, a satellite of Planet Shortz only in that their difficulty loosely maps to the corresponding day of the week, but whose content and tone operate on their own schedule. Unlike Shortz, who edits but does not author each day's puzzle, Joel has to create these snippets from scratch daily. (Not totally from scratch—he can get a computer to spit out an appropriate blank grid—but the content comes from him, not from contributors mailing puzzles to Pleasantville.)

Every day, a stack of new puzzles for the *Times* arrives in Pleasantville, NY. (The postal service won't say how many puzzles are posted to Shortz's address per day.) All the manila envelopes begin in the dining room, but most get cut there. Shortz's shortlist makes it to the living room, where Shortz and his intern debate the puzzle on the basis of several characteristics. First, there is the puzzle's "puzzlability," meaning, how well does it work: are there too many obscure or made-up words, is the grid symmetrical, are there words that don't cross each other, are there duplicates. Then, there is the question of the puzzle's originality, meaning, does it do a theme that no one has attempted, such as constructor Jacob Stulberg's puzzle that visually mimics Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2." Some puzzles don't want hugely innovative themes, especially if they're going to be in an easier day, but recycled themes over and over very soon seems sloppy, in the same way that relying on excessive crosswordese (AERIE, UMA) doesn't cut it. The combination of grid-building software, independent crossword puzzles with steady followers, and highly-regarded crossword critics that have mushroomed in recent years means that there is much more scrutiny on the *Times* than there had been in the midcentury.

*

The Tournament. Saturday Morning

Saturday morning. Nearly everyone is on time, which is to say, twenty minutes early. Some hover like hummingbirds around sugar water, precisely three minutes early to the main event, though they've been here for hours, to claim their seats and arrange erasers. The ballroom tables have been covered with a flock of yellow dividers, marking off each competitor's tiny island.

The room buzzes with a combination of collegiality and jitters. A woman swills a Muscle Milk. Breakfast and coffee are not served: the only food is a half-empty container of Oreos, on the back table, next to the free pencils that nobody needs, since everyone has their lucky pack. The only people who take the free pencils do so as a ritual, five at a time, laying them next to each other, end on end, then stacking the Oreos next to them in Oreo Lego blocks, squaring the circle.

As in a spinning class, the front row solvers claim their spots. A woman with two pairs of reading glasses draped on her nose and a crossword teddy bear perched on a metal pencil box is already vigorously puzzling away, forty minutes before the first round. Josephine Quinones, age ninety-plus, has taken down her yellow divider already to create her setup: pencils, magnifying reading glasses, water. Sue is in regular clothes today, as she needs to focus incognito, but there's no shortage of plaid, custom T-shirts and other crossword-friendly attire. Other crafty attendees have found Sue's crossword-patterned fleece. Jen, an official, wears a crossword-fleece vest; Emmy, her service dog, has a crossword bandanna with JUDGE drawn into some of the blank squares.

There are people who have one pencil and people who have eight. A few solvers opt for ostentatiously large headphones; more pack earplugs into their ears. One T-shirt reads

GULP FICTION and features two parrots sipping from straws out of a birdbath-sized margarita. A Rat Pack in the back corner have nicknames after professional wrestlers, which they've displayed in placards propped inside their yellow dividers: ACE IN THE HOLE, THE LEGEND SLAYER, THE PEOPLE'S CHAMPION, SUPER SOCK, THE CEREBRAL ASSASSIN.

There's far more swag for sale in a fitness studio than at the ACPT. Our folders only brand us for the weekend, a flock of taxicab yellow, but outside the tournament, no one could tell the difference externally between my ACPT-official folder and one I'd picked up at Staples. The extra pencils by the pencil sharpening station are standard-issue pencils, un-monogrammed. The Oreos (a "black-and-white treat" provided by a puzzler) aren't ACPT-stamped. "They're seriously not taking advantage of their marketing opportunities," my mother laments.

As my father scopes seats in the ballroom, my mother and I check out the "crossword expo," where people are selling crossword-related merchandise. I'm used to an "expo" being huge. My parents used to do consulting and marketing for several grocery stores, so they'd attend the Food Marketing Institute's yearly flagship conference. The expo at FMI was a wonderland. In one of those endless hotel airplane hangar rooms, each company set up a glossy cabana. At the Ben & Jerry's booth, you could play shuffleboard with ice cream pint tops. There were spinning wheels and mini-paddleball. Freebies abounded: bottle openers, keychains, rubber ducks, magnets, carabiners, candy, business cards piled thick as confetti. My brother and I would roam around the convention floor, happy as free-range chickens.

The ACPT expo is a small adjunct room of entrepreneurs selling crossword-related wares: mostly books, with a couple of booths of magazines and homemade jewelry. The

sellers are in a peculiar catch-22 of boredom: they can't compete, because someone needs to be manning the table, but no one is buying wares during the competition itself, so they have to wait out each round anyway. The vibe is more bake sale than convention. There's one man who's come from Florida with a box of hand-stapled crossword newsletters. Once he runs out, he says he'll go home. A pair of crossword jewelers have re-tooled Scrabble tiles into earrings, and they have little black-and-white business-card holders and "I Survived Puzzle Five"-stamped keychains. "This is our first year selling," one of the jewelers, a woman in a strapless dress and a hand-knitted pink pussy hat, tells my mother. "We noticed last year that there was no swag to buy, and we thought, why not?" Mom nods vigorously.

The Village Bookstore from Pleasantville, NY, Will's hometown, is doing the briskest trade, selling crossword books, all on the Shortz brand. They've also got broadsides of an original crossword-themed poem: "The white and black squares / promise order," the poem begins, and lays out in loving detail, semi-erotic in its particularity, the ritual of doing a crossword each morning over a steaming cup of tea.

My mother and I go back to the ballroom, where my dad has made friends with the woman next to him, Bianca, somewhere between forty and fifty. I nod at the man to the right of me, taciturn, with a cylinder of pencils fastened by rubber band where a coffee ought to be. His name is Ron, says his nametag. I fan out my pencil, which is hard to do since I only have one pencil, but not impossible. Will enters, all business in long-sleeved polo and glasses, he schmoozes with a few of the front-row solvers, but the best solvers are scattered throughout the room, keeping a low profile.

The officials hand out the first puzzle, face down. There's a standard amount of clumsy flurry.

"When you're done," says Shortz, "wave your paper in the air." Shortz reminds us that the time is noted by the minute, not the second. So if you've solved the puzzle with 7 minutes and 32 seconds on the clock, use those 28 remaining seconds in the minute to check your answers. This means that the time right before each minute is crucial, and volunteers have to practice being ready for each rush.

The clocks are set, two billboard-sized digital clocks on either side of the room, and when Shortz gives the cue, they set off in perfect sync. The room rustles as solvers turn over the puzzle, then goes pindrop silent. Most figure out the theme right away, microseconds apart; I can feel the energy, like kernels bursting into popcorn. There are parallel sensations. My frustration builds: why haven't I found it yet? I also go into a strange, vaguely headachy calm: the other people don't exist, I am here with this piece of paper and a slight headache and all I can do is move through these squares, darting from clue to row to column, slowly building my way through the grid. I am Theseus, following the string through the labyrinth; I am Holmes; I'm also Mary Bennet, the plain but silly fourth sister in *Pride and Prejudice*, insisting on her little pillbox of talents but revealing herself to be rather a dolt.

The way your hand moves across the page separates even the middle-tier ACPT attendees from the amateurs. My mother, our family's best realistic hope to crack the middle tier, is still a hunt-and-peck solver. The experts don't create jack-o-lantern gaps by filling in squares at random throughout the grid; rather, they build structures of letters, corners and bridges flowing up architecturally. Even the winners of the E division look like they're writing a letter when they're solving the crossword, moving smoothly from one corner down to the other; or they write in their own private boustrophedon, criss-crossing the grid right to left to right; or they write from the bottom up; or they start from the center and radiating outward. True speed-solvers try to only use the Down clues and rain their answers through

the puzzle, because it's inefficient on the eyes to keep twitching between vertical and horizontal.

The tournament puzzles don't follow the *Times*'s Monday through Saturday calender of difficulty, exactly. Puzzles One and Four are the easiest; Puzzle Six is the cruise to the finish. Puzzle Number Five, Saturday's penultimate, is always the hardest puzzle; hence the keychain. When it's announced, the crowd hisses.

Between the puzzles, there's a little time for camaraderie, like the snack breaks during sections of the SAT. If you finish early, you can either sit quietly or leave the room to debrief with whomever is at your same speed stratum. Most puzzlers who leave the room re-hash the most recent solve, and several obsessively load and re-load the stats on their phones, but others can't bear to parse what they've just done, as they'll worry and beat themselves up for every mistake, so they flutter around the lobby and adjacent bathrooms, immersed in not talking.

Other quick solvers get up as soon as they're done and hobnob in the hall. Frank Longo leaves the room quickly each round, with several minutes to spare. Longo, a veteran puzzler, creates a variety every week for the *New York Times* called "Spelling Bee": there are seven letters, one in the center, with six arranged around it in a circle, and at least one word that uses all seven letters. You have to find words of five letters or more, using the center letter at least once in every word, and letters can be re-used in a word. My father loves this puzzle: he tries to find the seven-letter word at a glance, in his head. If he can't find it immediately, he loses interest entirely. "I'm running out of words!" Longo tells me, cheerfully. "I mean," he clarifies, "I'm running out of words that you can't find over thirty words inside."

Some solvers stay in the ballroom when they're done. Ron, next to me, finishes each puzzle long before the time is up, hands it to a volunteer, and placidly sets in on one of other crosswords in his folder After several years of ACPT-ing, Ron has worked his way up to the C division. I'm impressed, but he shrugs modestly: he'll never really crack into the B's, he says, but as long as he stays above the halfway line, he'll be okay. He's thinking about starting a blog, he says. The View from C-Level.

*

The Tournament. Saturday Afternoon

The judges see where everyone makes mistakes. Some errors are creative guesses that sort of fit the constraints, such as THE FRAT FLOOR for THE FLAB FLOOR ("Beer belly's foundation?") The solver hadn't grasped the theme of the puzzle—add L's to a common phrase (so "fab four" becomes "fLab fLoor")—but she had recognized that the answer was supposed to be clever, because of the question mark. Other puzzles stump solver wholesale.

Puzzle 5, notoriously the tournament's hardest puzzle, always has a trick to it: one year, several of the clues required solvers to flip the numbers of the clue and write the answer in the flipped number's space in the grid. The answer for 17 Across, for example, had to be written in the space for 71 Across, and vice versa. The same errors would crop up across some puzzles for solvers who didn't figure out the trick. OPIATES was in the bottom of a southwest corner, but the clue for that line should have been transposed to its inverse spot in the puzzle. If a solver filled in OPIATES, she was likely to get CREDO going down, where the correct choice was TRACT. One solver abandoned the puzzle entirely and scrawled in the grid, "THANK YOU JOEL YOU RUINED MY LIFE," speaking directly to Joel Fagliano, that yeaar's Puzzle 5 puzzle's constructor. The E in LIFE was correct.

At the beginning of Puzzle 5, Will knows he can take a break for a few minutes, since even the top solvers will require longer than ninety seconds to solve. He gets a square of the birthday cake and eats it standing up, walking back into the ballroom, digging into it with a plastic fork as the sticky white custard in the center of the white layers sticks into his napkin and the whole things becomes a sodden, crumbly mess, white frosting on white cake with white center custard oozing into the white napkin. Will doesn't stop walking as he chews, automatically ingesting, and when he reaches the front, he crumples the napkin, somehow wiping his hands neatly in the process, and continues to scan the room for raised hands, as the top solvers crack the code.

*

At the tournament, Will Shortz is neither villain nor compelling protagonist. His portrayal in the film matches his presentation in real life: a genial uncle figure, asexual, a benevolent organizer who is single-minded without being rabidly obsessive, focused without the attendant paranoia and drama, neither manic nor depressive. He's smart and engaged with the world, but there is no outward sense that crosswords are anything but comfortable and fun. He's extremely competitive, but there's no sense that life is on the line. Shortz is a genius at the crossword, but there's none of the terrifying drama that comes with being on the verge: he's too stable, almost uncomfortably lacking in wild-eyed desperation.

The same goes for the competitors. As humans, we're drawn to human drama, and the crossword is slightly inhuman. The stakes are lower. This is a pastime, not a passion. Obsession and addiction could be the bedrock of this drama, but we don't get the sense that the crossword is something that drives these people's lives, or something they couldn't live without.

*

"Why isn't this a bridge tournament," my father says, and, "These people are just like bridge people!" and, then, "Why aren't you writing about bridge?" Crosswords are not something for which my father has a particular natural aptitude, nor has he been training to get good at them.

But he's also got a rabid lizard brain that activates when competition strikes. Even when my father isn't the best at the game itself, he's deep into the strategy around the game. He sizes up the room. The psychological capacity of the crossword tournament—how to psych people out, how to suss the competition—is limited, since inside your cubit of space, it's solver against self. But there are still some psychosocial tactics available to the obsessive. Once you finish, do you get up right away and flaunt your speed by walking out? Or do you sit in your spot and flirt with your pencils, even work on another crossword, playing possum with your prowess? My dad analyzes everyone in the room. He gets bored easily with the crossword itself; I can see him tugging at his lip. But he loves the scoreboard, tracking his progress as closely as though he were among the leaders. He cheers up when he realizes he's not rock-bottom. He's also tracking the top, of course; he calculates, almost without thinking about it, how many words the fourth-place person can miss to stay in the top ten, how fast the thirtieth-place person has to be to have a chance of cracking into the top twenty. My dad understands the alphabetical divisions and the tournament organization like a native speaker; he, too, is a law school graduate who never had a penchant for the law.

My mother goes along steadily, concentrating on her own game. She's content with following her own puzzle. She looks at her number on the scoreboard, notes that she's comfortably enough above last place that she'll never fall there but comfortably below the top that she'll never join it. She's ready and contented with the solve itself. She hasn't trained, but she hasn't not been training. My mother is competitive in the sense that she will

happily do each puzzle, again and again, rote behavior, and do each one as well as possible, and to try and perfect her own skill, but there is no burning lizard brain compelling her to be better than everyone else.

*

I'm itchy, like wearing a wool turtleneck; something makes me fidget. I'm unable to stop doing the crosswords, but also unable to tune out the world enough to turn completely to them. I'm caught in this place between past and future: the crossword mimics the way I construct and solve problems so I don't have to deal with my life, but since it's not an escape hatch of my own design, it doesn't fit. The world becomes crosswords, but crosswords are not the world. There's something missing, but it isn't missing from the crosswords, and it isn't missing from me. The crosswords translate the world into grid and solution, but the solution only solves an answer to a problem that may or may not have ever been there.

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After the six puzzles, everything is in diagrams. I go to the mall after the tournament play is over, to have something to do between the crosswords and the night's crossword entertainment. The mall map is divided into several floors, each floor a sequence of squares. I match the department to the storefront. Clues. 3B. Sephora. 4A. GameStop. If the J. Crew is in the northeast quadrant in relation to the Saks, the Apple store will fit in between, but not Claire's, even though you think it should go there. We walk into one of those big designer-basements, the Saks Off Fifth, and it's a weirdly warehouse space of shoeboxes and rows of dresses, sometimes correctly sorted into their geographies. There's too much space and too many nondescript semi-off-bran sneakers, like the white keys on a piano with no black notes. Why is the same shoe left in nearly all the sizes?

*

The Tournament. Saturday Evening

Saturday evening, when we return from wherever we've been, we go to the ballroom for Dr.Fill's update. Every year since 2011, when he first brought his software to the tournament, Matt Ginsberg has given a presentation updating competitors on Dr.Fill's experience of that year's ACPT.

Computers have bested humans in the majority of mental games: backgammon (BK 9.8, in 1979), checkers (Chinook, 1994), chess (Deep Blue, 1997), Scrabble (Quackle, 2006), Go (AlphaGo, 2016), even Texas Hold 'Em (Libratus, 2017). According to Ginsberg, Watson, the artificial intelligence that won at *Jeopardy!*, has an asterisk next to its victory because it was allowed to vet the categories beforehand, and Dr.Fill can do no such thing with the puzzles. Humans, Ginsberg tells the rapt audience, are still better at three things: bowling (the machine was too perfect, and wore the oil off the alley), contract bridge, and crosswords.

Ginsberg has pitted Dr.Fill as the crossword world's nemesis, more smoothly villainous Hal than blandly omniscient Siri, a nefarious force whose goal is to topple the crossword world. Ginsberg enters the ballroom with Dr.Fill in a briefcase. When Ginsberg Jeckyll is being Dr.Fill, he wears a special sweatshirt; the front reads, "THIS IS YOUR BRAIN"; the back, "THIS IS MY VOLLEYBALL ON YOUR BRAIN."

Ginsberg speaks about Dr.Fill with a healthy paranoia. I'm just interested in whether a computer can consistently do better than an average human at an average crossword, Ginsberg claims, but that's not the game the crossword world wants to play: apparently, constructors and champion solvers will only be satisfied if Dr.Fill can best the nastiest curveballs. "The constructors throw howitzers at me every year," Ginsberg claims, and try as he might to tweak the software endlessly to make Dr.Fill ready for any kind of trick, the

constructors' continued use of Dr.Fill as their personal target practice makes his software slip in the rankings. It's a vendetta, according to Ginsberg, but I don't take it personally, he says. If that's the way I have to answer the question of whether a machine can defeat a human at a crossword, then so be it.

I asked Joel Fagliano if he was deliberately trying to trip Dr.Fill up when he constructed his tournament puzzle. "I'm trying to trip everyone up," he said.

*

After Dr.Fill has his say, there's some sort of trivia night hosted in the ballroom, but the who's who of the puzzle world drift out to the lobby.

The lobby is the place to see and be seen. Tribes form, clear as high school cliques, but unlike in the cafeteria, the cabals aren't exclusive; anyone can join anywhere. Men of a certain age in fisher hats hog the good couches around the fake fireplace, each doing crosswords alone, grim and silent in their labor. A determined octet has already set up a quiz game involving colored buttons and iPads. The speed solvers grip mixed blue drinks, pacing, or chatting in tight knots. Brendan Emmett Quigley, veteran constructor and cool kid in slight stubble and natty glasses, wears all black, black T-shirt and black pants somewhere between jeans and khakis. The T-shirt has a forgettable slogan on it, words for the sake of being words, not to be read. He stations himself closest to the bar, gradually drawing others to him as a spider lures flies.

A forty-something with a twitchy face and steady eyes, paces irregularly around the sunken area by the Marriott faux-fireplace, with a little skip-step as he walks. He's got sharp, light, piercing eyes, no glasses, his hair cut into some sort of dark unassuming bowl cut that also has a cowlick. He's maybe wearing khakis. He tracks his own slightly elliptical yet

purposeful orbit, as though a bee diligently gathering honey for the hive, but with no honey, and no hive. There's no conversation he's in, but he's not on the outside.

The twitchy man wanders close, and the conversation doesn't hush, but a gap opens up; when he enters, I realize that he hasn't been hovering, but that we have been waiting to see if he'll give us the privilege of having him enter the conversation. Every conversation pauses in that brief instantaneous pause of a room recalibrating to the conversation you wish you were part of: the physics of the room shift ever so slightly, micro-adjustment of a solar system to a new center of gravity. Some voiceover whispers to me, This is Howard Barkin, last year's winner.

I don't even really read the Monday and Tuesday puzzles, says Howard. I'm talking to my wife, we're doing the laundry, and by the time I look down, the puzzle is finished.

*

Ben and Ross are anthropologists, observing the scene. Ben an ethnomusicologist at the New School in Manhattan, is the editor of the A.V. Club Crossword, a highly regarded independent puzzle. Contributors, typically a stream of steady freelancers, get paid at one of the highest rates in the business. Crossword enthusiasts might think of the puzzle as a hiatus from society, but once you have this many personalities in play, Ben tells me, even this tiny and self-selected subset is large enough to be its own ecosystem, with its own attendant problems. Gender disparity plagues the crossword world. The pay gap between Will Shortz and everyone else is also terrible: there's one emperor and a large fiefdom. Shortz didn't make the system, and he's a lot fairer to his serfs than past overlords, but the system has no whiff of democracy.

Ross, an occasional constructor and middle-pack solver, says that the first year he came to the tournament his first thought was, how many people are getting laid? I walked in,

and I realized: zero percent. Then, he adds, "I realized: there were the was the old stalwarts, but there was this group of people—*the pod*, I call them—these twenty-somethings, thirty-somethings, mostly male, sort of skewed gay – people who wouldn't have ever been brought together, were it not for this thing, the crossword puzzle."

The pod boys look like they're solving a one of those party box murder mystery, or plotting their way through an imagined Escape the Room, or something that never existed. Some of them drink diet sodas, some drink Gatorades, they've probably spiked them but that isn't even the point; whether or not they're over twenty-one is not something any of them have noticed.

Most of the pod boys got their start in the world of competitive crosswords by watching *Wordplay*. They might have learned how to do the crossword by watching their grandmother, but the film propelled them into the subculture. The pod also turns up at Lollapuzzoola, a crossword tournament every August that's held in a church basement on the Upper East Side. When there's a pause in the action, the pod boys pull out their phones to play a game called Code Names, except they're playing "Kode Names," the knockoff site that hasn't been pulled down yet because nobody high enough up cares enough to Kare.

Watching the pod, I wonder: why would they do crosswords at all? Part of it is the old-school new-school aesthetic; not quite as retro as typewriters and letterpress, because you can play it on your phone. The crossword is a technology that works. It's something you can get good, really good, at, and relatively quickly. It's a skill set within a limited frame that taps into both math and words, but it's also something that people recognize. You're a nerd who can be a respected, if slightly fuddy-duddy, nerd when you get into crosswords.

When I ask, they corroborate my suspicion. The technology of the crossword itself is good. It's addictive. It's adaptable, too; you can take something that people understand how

to do and push and pull with it. It's a game with low stakes in the real world that allows for a high capacity of rabbit-hole wonkiness, but can also be done casually with one eye shut, and can also be done by rote, a skill that requires focus and concentration but where the consequences are controlled. Though it might seem like any number of activities could fulfill these sets of requirements, very few tick all the boxes as well as the crossword tick.

And the crossword, the pod boys tell me, is something that you can be good at without much social approbation. Let your freak flag fly. If not fame, you do get a certain respect when you toss off, casually, oh yes, I wrote a *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

The crossword is both a marker of entering into the adult world and a way of staving off responsibility. First, it's something you do with your parents or grandparents, or you watch them do every morning, the way you watch them drink coffee. Then, you realize that you can also drink coffee, and you can also do the crossword puzzle. Then, you realize that you can make the crossword puzzle your own.

*

Why do people start crosswording?

Most of the older crossworders came to the crossword individually, in their twenty-somethings, in adulthood, as adults. The old narrative is one in which the crosswords come in to stave off looking down the barrel of the routine of the next fifty years of your life. Rather than facing your boredom, you do the crossword, a rote ritual within a rote ritual. But the crossword is something you can solve – it provides a triumphant moment each day, trapping yourself in the maze but also triumphantly escaping. If you're in a trap of your whole life, and you don't know how to get out, rather than getting out of your life, you can have the vicarious superhero sensation of getting in and out of the crossword.

The old guard has steady jobs (the Wallace Stevenses of the crossword world, selling insurance by day, crosswording in the morning and at night), and the crossword is not their career but a refuge from it.

The middle narrative is during college. These people didn't grow up with a crossword community; the tournament collects the extroverted introverts. It's easy to magnetize a few crossword enthusiasts in your daily life over the course of decades, perhaps, but getting them all into a room and admitting the kind of passion that would not only allow you to know about a *tournament* of crosswords (a collective noun, like a parliament of fowls) but also to *go* to this tournament, to organize the rest of your life around it – that's more of a risk, an actuality, than simply doing the crossword each day, that's taking the thing that's an escape but not an intrusion and putting it at the forefront of your decision making, giving it an importance in a particular way; like being very good at watching Jeopardy to auditioning to auditioning in person. Bianca, a middle-narrative crossworder, started doing puzzles in her room in college; she was a loner, a self-styled loner, and it was a way to do something less lonely that didn't feel like a deliberate pastime walling herself off from the world. The crossword creates a shape around which your day can form itself actively. The crossword isn't something that just fills in passive gaps – it takes a jelly day and makes it into a day with purpose because there is a created space to create a crossword. The Container Store is popular because it sells the promise of a busy and organized life.

My grandfather's Dalmatian had a sore on her leg that she used to lick obsessively. She'd lick it and lick it, and instead of helping it to heal, the sore got angrier, red and inflamed. Maybe she saw the inflamed sore and then instinctively tried to lick it to make it get better; maybe she licked it to make it worse so there would be more problem to solve.

*

In the Richard Linklaeter film *Waking Life*, Ross tells me, there's a scene where a man and a woman are in bed together, and the man says, Imagine a population that's been given a crossword puzzle one week, and then another one that's been given the same puzzle a week later, and they're a lot better at it, because they've had the words seeded in conversation around them.

I laugh. Ross says, "No, no, I've had this exact same phenomenon happen to me – where I'll get a word in a puzzle, and I've never used that word before, and don't remember having read it, but I get in in the puzzle. And then I can usually trace it back. like, oh, something my granddad said 15 years ago. It usually has nothing to do with the clue that prompted that word in the first place."

"There's that frustrated feeling you have of being stuck – and then the satisfaction you have when you sleep on it and you wake up and you can finish the whole thing," says Ross. "Literally sleeping on it: there's your erotics for you."

*

The Tournament. Midnight

Is the ACPT a murder mystery?

The *Times* has a motive: killing off the others so that it can be not just the perpetual front-runner that everyone secretly and not-secretly derides and despises, but also going back to the glory days in which the *Times* was not just one among many—and not even just the crown jewel among many—but was definitional, *the* crossword, the form synonymous with the paper. In the way that Kleenex equals tissue and Band-Aid equals adhesive bandage and Xerox equals Xerox, the *Times* wants to return to a time when the *New York Times* crossword puzzle equals crossword.

Suspects:

Sue in the crossword onesie.

Sam, Shortz's the new intern.

Joel, the old guard of the newbies.

Doug, the palindromist who is not actually an actuary.

Quigley and the gang of constructors, the Stadtler & Waldorf-esque bystanders.

Shortz.

My parents.

Me.

*

The Tournament. A Murder Mystery

Capsule review: CROSSWORDS IN CONNECTICUT.

A sloping white dream house in Connecticut, cocoa and conviviality, oversized gingham sofas. Snow is just starting to fall in pinprick flakes, but the sky is that hard, clear gray that means that we're in for the long haul, and by the next morning, the entire landscape will be indistinguishable from itself, heaping drifts of white on white. What begins as a light-hearted gathering of crossword enthusiasts in the countryside slowly becomes sinister as a snowstorm shuts off access to the outside world. Suspicion mounts as a former champion mysteriously goes missing. Our hero, A., is not a crossword expert; she's here as an observer and casual participant, not in the running for the win. But even with her limited knowledge of crosswords, she grows increasingly suspicious at the other puzzlers' apparent nonchalance.

Puzzle Five, the climax: should we solve or should we start a manhunt? (MANHUNT: "Femme Fatale's fatal attraction?") Puzzle Five's title, H_NG_M_N: A., h_nged. You're supposed to drop every A from the theme clues, and the double twist is that the extra A's you've dropped find themselves "hanging" from various other answers. (SCARRED LETTER?)

The air around A. quickens, as though we've changed altitude suddenly. I am not getting the double clue, though I know there is a double clue there, and the frustration builds like pressure in my inner ear. She needs to solve this.

Slowly, she starts to suspect that something is happening, and the way to solve the puzzle is in the crosswords: has the champion been murdered, and is it up to A. to figure out the answer lurking somewhere in the clues? Or is the whole weekend a meta-puzzle to frame A. herself?

The 1941 film "Christmas in Connecticut" features Barbara Stanwyck as a magazine columnist who writes wildly popular articles about the household and domestic life; Martha Stewart, brunette. But Stanwyck has never set foot in a kitchen, as far as we can tell; the opening shots of the movie pan over her glamorous Manhattan bachelorette pad, all impractical satin sheets and room service; far from spending the weekend wrapping homemade preserves for friends and acquaintances, some sort of elaborate fur coat has just arrived as a present to herself, still floating in its cloud of tissue paper, the ribbons and box flung across the floor. Stanwyck's boss has no idea that Stanwyck is a slinky socialite, not a successful housewife, since she turns her pieces in under a pen name without pictures. Through a complicated series of events, the boss decides he wants a Christmas centerpiece from Stanwyck, complete with photo spread, turkey dinner and happy husband and, best of all, bubble-blowing baby. So Stanwyck has to scramble to stage herself in the Connecticut country house she's conjured so convincingly in her columns. Luckily, she's got friends, and in a jiff she's whizzing up to a farmhouse even better than the one she'd painted: huge and sloping, white clapboard outside and cozy wide floorboards and gingham on the kitchen table, but grand and stony, too, with a sunken great room and human-sized fireplace. The house is both invitational and aspirational, at once fantasy of family life and familiar home sweet home.

*

The Tournament. Sunday Morning

Sunday morning, and the mood is tense. The final puzzle for everyone—a Sunday morning puzzle—is at nine o'clock sharp. It's a soft sharp. The crossworders who are out of the running for the prize scuttle in late in their Christmas sweaters. Some glance guiltily at their watches and twitchily try to find a seat in the ballroom; others amble with a feigned timelessness, like guests at a British country house sauntering downstairs for kippers and eggs under those little cloches, pretending that they've just happened to arise and emerge in full attire at the very instant the bacon is fresh from the fire.

The last solve is a red herring. What we're really waiting for is the final solution, the championship playoff. Everyone has to get through this ceremonial hoop, check the ceremonial box, but six out of seven puzzles into the tournament and we know who is going to the championship and who is not.

There's also the crossword puzzle talent show. This is what none of us have been waiting for: the ones who juggle, or do crossword-themed improv, or sing "We Didn't Solve the Puzzle" to the tune of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire."

After the talent show, the stage is cleared for the talent. The championship solves are done on whiteboards, with the puzzlers wearing military-grade noise-cancelling headphones. The audience watches each solve, and commentators from a National Public Radio word game show make running commentary throughout, trying to be sports announcers ("Tyler's filled in ZEBRAFISH where it really should be BETTAFISH, when will he figure that one out, oh good he's gotten into that tricky southwest corner, Dan has started from the bottom and worked his way up").

The nine final solvers are given the same grid with three sets of clues: the C clues, the B clues, and the A clues. The C group, the best of the rest of us, goes first. There are three sets of clues for the same grid. All of the clues will allow the solver to fill in the grid accurately. Only one of the sets of clues reveals the murderer.

As the B group is solving the puzzle, the audience's murmuring suddenly becomes electric. The B group, we learn midway through their solve, has been given the A clues.

But then the A group is given the A clues as well. Is this part of the mystery, or just a fluke? Do puzzlers ever make mistakes that aren't puzzles?

*

A million little boxes later, it's over. At the ACPT, there's no murder, no mystery, no meta-murder, no Norman Rockwell, no velvet smoking jacket, no blizzard, no red herrings. There's no way to make the ACPT more dramatic than it is. Like a palindrome, like an ouroboros, the crossword is fully recyclable. Once done, it's done.

*

Epilogue: Crosswords ex-Connecticut

Crossword people who don't come to the ACPT are more numerous than those who do. Like a trick bookcase that is a door, or a secret floorboard that hides a safe, or the rock in the flowerpot that opens in the back to hold the spare key, crossworders look like the rest of us until they're not: they're exactly the same as they've been the entire time.

Smart characters who get bored in literature do crossword puzzles, or think about them. When eccentric Henry translates *Paradise Lost* from English into Latin in *The Secret History*, Donna Tartt's murder set on an idyllic Vermont college campus, Richard realizes that the project is "nothing more than a method of whiling away the early morning hours, much as other insomniacs do crossword puzzles." When the secretary in Mary Gaitskill's

short story "Bad Behavior" quits her job after her boss abuses her, she lives at home and spends the productive part of her day doing crossword puzzles. Her mother also does crosswords – she is in the car doing crossword puzzles when the secretary interviews for her job – so it's a genetic thing, the secretary turning into the mother when she is both bored and frustrated, idle but not out of her own volition. Crosswords signal busy people idling, or idle people busying themselves.

"I love crosswords," says Peter. He's a wealth portfolio manager, who majored in physics and started a graduate degree in physics before realizing that physics was not for him, and that he could make a lot of money if he left graduate school and joined the corporate sector. He started doing crosswords in college, he said, and picked them up during his job. Many of the finance guys, or some of them, do crosswords, as a way of escaping the trap by entering another trap.

No, he laughed. I've never thought about going to a crossword puzzle tournament. But I am quite good at them. His eyebrows point upward and downward, accent ague and accent grave. I don't let him buy me a second drink, but I regret it; the Scotch in his glass looked expensive. The first thing he told me was how much money he made and the second thing he told me was how much his salary went up in quantum leaps each year, and how this was a trap, he knew, but this is how they trap you, just for another year or two, you tell yourself, he told me.

"I'm very good at crosswords," says Jeff, a media studies graduate student. His project is real estate porn: fantasy catalogues of luxury homes, sprawling HGTV, mansions that go beyond mansions. He readily admits his addiction, but doesn't bother to be addicted to anything before Thursday, like the smoker who only smokes imported Gauloises. Jeff is

also a poet who takes practice LSATs for fun. He got higher than perfect on the verbal section of the GRE.

Even Jeff admits that French crosswords are difficult for him. Georges Perec, of Oulipo fame, constructed crosswords that ask you to take apart words, like Calder mobiles, solve for each piece of the word, then twist around the parts and put them back together in its new form. It's as though French were constructed not of letters and syllables but as ideograms, jointed and twistable, turning the monkey-bar horizontal reading from letter to letter into a vertical experience. Jeff is immensely versed at being extremely glib, but the motion of mind from conversing in French to thinking in French to punning in French to knowing where the invisible breaks were in the word and punning on silent assumptions—in French—was something that wasn't even a matter of linguistic and cultural competency, but an innate functional knowledge. You have to lay down the neural pathways, and crop rotations, letting the fields grow and then lie fallow, the way it takes London cabbies twenty years to know London in their minds, to have that deep connection. You can be a perfect map reader quickly, but fluency only forms with time.

My parents decide that once is enough for them. They quickly revert back to the pattern they known, doing the crossword every night, on competing iPads.

Going home on the train, I am recycled into a loop. I am exhausted but not tired, invigorated but not excited, trepidatious without feeling tingly. I can't wait to write about it but I don't know how to think. Yet there's a certain calm that comes from doing a test over and over without consequences; the adrenaline and release is not unlike hot yoga: you sweat and you sweat without being able to differentiate whether the sweat is from your physical effort, your mental effort, or the temperature of the room. The crossword creates stress to release it, to get you back to baseline frustration. It's a link to the past and future without

needing to trouble the present. Even the opened wound, as much as you lick it, will not fester into a sore. At the end of the day, an abandoned puzzle is the same as a completed puzzle. We tell ourselves games in order to live.

Chapter 5

CROSSWORD PRAXIS, PART 2:

A CELEBRATION OF THE *TIMES* CROSSWORD, DAILY PROGRAMME

December 08 – December 15, 2017

From the New York Times Journeys catalog: *In 1942, The New York Times printed its first crossword puzzle; it became a daily occurrence in 1950 and one of the paper's most popular features. To celebrate the Crossword's 75th anniversary, join Times puzzle editors on a seven-night transatlantic sailing aboard the luxurious Queen Mary 2®. With daily game sessions, private lectures and exclusive access to the Times experts, solve your way across the Atlantic.*

Day One, Port Day.

0600. Wake up in Midtown. The Westin Fitness Center is down the high-speed elevator to the lobby, and then up a second bank of elevators to the eighth floor; it's a standard gym, view to nowhere.

Hotel hierarchy: once you're above about floor ten, and above the majority of your surroundings, the rates per floor vary based on your horizontal, rather than your vertical, orientation. If you pay more, you'll see the city or the sky or the water. Pay less, a wall.

0800. The *New York Times* is sponsoring a crossword-themed crossing aboard the Queen Mary 2. It's part of the *Times* Journeys, a series of travel experiences curated by the *Times* with experts, cultural activities, and programs exclusively for the group. There are about 65

of us on the crossword crossing, a special enclave within the Queen Mary 2 as she makes her transatlantic journey.

This is the first crossword crossing, but not the first crossword cruise. For eleven years, Stanley Newman, crossword editor at *Newsday* since 1992 and the author of such puzzle-themed books as *Cruciverbalism: A Crossword Fanatic's Guide to Life in the Grid*, organized an annual "Crossword University Cruise" through the Holland America line. Newman's cruises ("Sail Away With Stan!") included group sessions on puzzles such as "Puzzling 101" and "Tackling the Toughies," one-on-one personalized solving instruction, and group crossword construction sessions. Every year before sailing, Newman would visit the ship and plot a scavenger hunt for the passengers. Crossword activities only occurred on sea days, and between meals; the rest of the time, passengers were free to explore the boat and the stops at their leisure. Photo albums from past cruises display Newman's impressive collection of black-and-white Hawaiian shirts. Demographic of attendees: half male, half female, over sixty, all white.

Maurine, Florida: *My favorite memory was the way our reputation spread at the ship's daily Trivia Contests. (I believe that each and every time we entered a team, we won!)*

Lois Ann and Gary, Oregon: *We had a great time, thanks muchly to your time and effort (muchly is my own word).*

Linda, Illinois: *The crossword aspect makes a cruise especially fun for singles. Between interesting shore activities and educational tours, you can work more of Stan's puzzles on your own or with a group of*

colleagues; take advantage of varied ship programs - including both mental and physical games; hit the shops, the spa, the gym or the pool; enjoy the never-ending banquet, or simply curl up in a lounge chair with a good book . . . although I never found time to read on the last two crossword cruises. During the formal puzzle sessions, one can enjoy the bonhomie of fellow word enthusiasts and the info Stan imparts on words, puzzle solving and puzzle making. Some of the most enjoyable things in life all wrapped up into one week. It's a great vacation!

0830. We assemble on Floor 3 of the Westin, our first muster en masse. We're each given really excellent metal magnetic nametags, with our names and where we live engraved.

The *New York Times* Building is across the street from the Port Authority Bus Terminal, one block down and one across from the Westin, so we are cut into four arbitrary groups and walked over to the building, which is on 42nd Street, across from Port Authority. The security guards start to scan us obediently, handing us generic little nametags to grant us entrance, and we in turn obey, fumbling for pieces of ID and one-handedly peeling the stick-ums, until Rebecca 'n' Rachel realize what's going on and usher us to the side, swooping our group around the electronic eye.

This building is the "new" *New York Times* building, designed by Renzo Piano and completed in 2007, is 1046 feet tall, with fifty-two stories, and contains 23,500 tons of steel, almost as much as the U.S.S. *Intrepid*. Tall buildings move in high winds. In the 1930s, when skyscrapers began to become increasingly popular, engineers discovered that they could build buildings that would sustain weather just fine, but that human confidence was not

nearly as strong as their buildings: people would get motion sickness and become shaken both physically and mentally, leading to panic and hysteria.

We're sped up to the 38th floor, a corporate floor, where the crossword lives, and swept into a corner room with impressive floor-to-ceiling views of midtown. We're told to sit at any table. The tables are numbered, and once we sit, that's our designated group for the morning. People fumble towards seats, hovering and hesitating. Were we supposed to know our groups? Were there groups pre-assigned? Or are the groups truly an ex-post-facto designation?

0900. Each seat is outfitted with a glass of champagne and a *New York Times Journeys* tote with promotional knickknacks: a 2018 crossword desk calendar; a fat pencil advertising the KenKen, a number puzzle; and a metallic USB charging stick, the size of the metal nametag and satisfyingly heavy. The day's *Times* lies neatly at each placesetting. The woman next to me unfurls the Weekend Arts section and flips into the crossword; the man cater-corner from me is already well on his way into the upper left.

0915. We're introduced to the cruise experts: Joel Fagliano, Will Shortz's assistant; Natan Last, a crossword constructor who leads crossword classes for senior citizens; Deb Amlen, who writes Wordplay, the *Times's* crossword blog; and Ben Zimmer, a lexicographer who writes a word column for the *Wall Street Journal*. Joel, Natan, and Natan's girlfriend, Hannah, are all in their twenties, and the other passengers quickly lump me in with them. I dub the four of us the The Young Quartet. Though Will Shortz will be at the brunch later, we're told, he will not be sailing with us.

0930. Before I can decide whether or not to drink the champagne, we're whisked around the *Times* building in our groups. The elevators in the new *New York Times* building can only go to one floor at a time. You tell the elevator bank which floor you want to go to, and somewhere in the machinery, the elevator gets programmed to go to that floor. I picture a flotilla of midcentury switchboard operators somewhere deep in the building's core, connecting the wires. Elevator 4 to floor 16. Elevator 8 to floor 36.

Group 4 gets put on Elevator 3 to floor 14, but floor 14 is the cafeteria, and the tour is supposed to take us to floor 18, the executive suite. Somebody figures out the error, and we're finally ushered into the Churchill Room, filled with portraits, both painted and photographed, of the man and his family; one photograph winks, Churchill's left eye sinking cheekily into his jowls as his right side remains impressively impassive.

David "Bowtie" Dunlap, who has been working at the *Times* since linotype, passes around a slug from the last newspaper set in hot type, July 2, 1978. A slug, Bowtie explains, is the type of metal used to cast a line of printing from a linotype machine. (*Line o'type*, that's where the name comes from.) He gazes at the slug reverentially, as though he were one of Chaucer's friars showing relics to an adoring congregation. The slug is also the size and shape of our metal nametags, but much heavier than it looks, and still warm from Bowtie's hand. "That was such an informative presentation!" gushes Julie? Sylvia? Edith?

1030. At the white elevator bank, whatever floor we're on, Rebecca 'n' Rachel confirm on their phones that all lifts are programmed to go to the same place, back to Floor 38, where

the brunch is waiting. We file around the buffet, Will Shortz slips in; he's wearing his seafaring gear, windbreaker and khakis.

1100. Will leads the crowd in a lecture about the history of the *New York Times* crossword, and fields some questions, but not too many, because we have to play a game. He divides us into teams, and each team needs a captain, and a woman in the front already has her hand raised straight up, as though dislocating her shoulder: Captain Rebecca, from Seattle. Captain Carol, in a vest joins her. The word game keeps the group captivated and focused on the large white easel, rather than looking at the back of the room, where various officials, either security detail for the *Times* building or executives with Journeys, are muttering things into Bluetooth and tapping at their phones.

1200. Is it noon because the game is over, or is the game over because it's noon? As we rise and mill into our things, Will slips out by the bag check.

1300. Embarking the Queen Mary 2 is like going to IKEA. We take a special bus out Red Hook, a white elephant gliding down West Avenue. We unload from the bus into a hangar. We take out our passports, go through a bag check and a body scan, and present a credit card that is immediately linked to our stateroom. The only currency aboard the Queen Mary 2 is the credit that lives in your stateroom key: Monopoly money that, Cinderella-fashion, becomes real money the midnight before disembarkation.

1400. I find my stateroom somewhere in the maze of Deck 7. Inside, a half-bottle of sparkling wine, compliments of the captain, perches in a bucket of fresh ice. A litre of still

water sits atop the refrigerator with a card on it; £3.95 for the bottle, or you can fill out the card and subscribe to a fresh bottle of still or sparkling water each day, at a discount.

1430. On this crossing, the Queen Mary 2 will set sail at midnight instead of the customary 1700. Tonight, there is a movie premiering on board the Queen Mary 2: *The Greatest Showman*, starring Hugh Jackman, among lesser stars. The movie premiere has nothing to do with the crossing itself—the boat makes a cameo in the film, and so they're using the ship's serendipitously timed docking as an occasion to host the event. The premiere is strictly off-limits to the Queen Mary's passengers, though later that night, we'll find a complimentary glossy promotional photograph of the film tucked next to each of our stateroom doors, in the little slot designed to hold notes and invitations.

1530. I slip into a gaggle of movie crew on their walkthrough of the liner. We are toured down the Red Carpet and past the Golden Lion pub, which is going to be the holding pen is for the media, not the actual reception for the premiere's guests. "No alcohol is going to be served here," says the tour leader, underscoring the fact that the Golden Lion is a decoy spot. We go into the service stairs, white and windowless, like the inside of an old-fashioned icebox. I don't want to give up my insider access into whatever tricks the crew is learning, but after they all keep waiting for a service elevator to come, and no one seems to be dropping any pieces of actual insider glamour gossip, I decide my fifteen minutes of movie production are done.

1600. I slip down the service stairs, retrieve my lifejacket and coat from my stateroom, and rejoin fellow passengers for the mandatory muster, where we carry our lifejackets, gather

into various designated public spaces, and pay as much attention to the directions as passengers on a plane do to the flight attendants guiding their eyes toward the nearest exit.

1700. POSH: Port out, starboard home. There are berths on both sides of the ship, but being posh means knowing on which side of the ship you should book your berth so that you'll be on the left side leaving, right side returning. Since the Queen Mary 2 is making a one-way crossing, the posh ones must be all port. I have no idea which side is port.

The Queen Mary 2 divides its guests into four main castes, based on stateroom: Queens Grill Suites, Princess Grill Suites, Britannia Club, and Britannia. Your stateroom tier determines which dining room you'll attend each night. The rubric divides sharply into royalty and non-royalty, and within each, upper and lower tiers: there are the Upper Uppers, the Queens, and the Lower Uppers, the Princesses; and then there are the Upper Lowers, the Britannia Club, and the Lower Lowers, the Britannia.

Queens guests receive butler and concierge service, champagne and chocolates upon embarkation, soft velour robes and slippers, an illy coffee machine, a pillow concierge menu, daily pre-dinner canapés and fresh fruit, personalized stationery, books, an atlas, and an iPad. Princess guests do not receive a butler, pre-dinner canapés, a complimentary bar, or an iPad. Britannia Club members are provided ordinary bathrobe and slippers, an electric teakettle but no illy coffee machine, no personalized stationery, no books or atlas, no concierge, and only sparkling wine upon embarkation. Britannia staterooms lack a pillow concierge. Queens and Princesses have the option to relax in the Grills Lounge, a private seating area with royal

purple plush upholstery; they also have exclusive access to an outdoor whirlpool on Deck Eleven, not to be confused with the outdoor hot tubs for the hoi polloi on Deck Eight.

1750. I set mini-Journeys for myself within the crossword crossing. Journey #1: Complimentary alcohol. The *Times* Journeys participants are invited to an "informal" cocktail hour before dinner, which means, we discover, that drinks are on us. "Formal" denotes when the *Times* picks up the tab. (I should have had the champagne with breakfast.) All Britannia-level crossworders are seated in the early seating of the Britannia Restaurant, the main restaurant of the ship, which spans two decks; unlike the posher dining establishments, the Britannia assigns its diners to the early seating or the late seating, and switching is not an option.

1800. As we file into dinner, the maître-d starts to point us one by one to our table, until the tireless coordinators Rebecca 'n' Rachel sweep in to shepherd us to our bank of four crossword-designated tables, where we scatter carefully at random.

Norm from Atlanta, in thick, natty glasses and a vest, introduces himself to me by saying, I've been looking out here for a husband for you, but I don't think you have many prospects among this crowd – how old do you want to go? Norm's a retired radiation oncologist, skeptical of humanities. Leslie Lacy and Christi Todd's nametags introduce them both as being from Michigan, though neither is. "We're the Disaster Twins," chirps Leslie, though they're not twins, but sisters who have only managed to see each other during manmade or natural disasters this year: Fort Lauderdale during shootings; Houston in August during Hurricane Harvey; the Queen Mary 2.

Norm says, there's a saying, every cruise has a set of newlyweds, only one comes out alive. I remember, on the way to dinner, seeing the scalloped "Mr. and Mrs." sign hanging on a stateroom door in my hallway on Deck 7. At the time, I'd grinned.

The head waiter tells us, with our coffee and tea orders, that this table is the table we'll be seated at all week, but that isn't exactly true; all the crossworders in the Britannia level are interchangeable for each other in the crossing's dinner seating.

2000. The Young Quartet – Natan, Joel, Hannah, myself – wander the ship from snout to tail. On the twelfth-floor deck, across from the Sports Centre – a driving range, is that tennis or badminton? – there are the kennels, where they have an American-style squat red fire hydrant and British-style tall black fire hydrant or lamppost, whatever British dogs stereotypically relieve themselves on. Everything is glamorous, or not. Everything is permissible and forbidden. We're still docked in Red Hook.

2100. FACTS ABOUT THE QUEEN MARY 2.

The RMS Queen Mary 2 is the only ocean liner—that is, a passenger ship primarily used for transportation across seas or oceans—currently in service. In 1807, Robert Fulton first successfully applied the steam engine to ships. Engineers soon discovered that very large ships are more fuel-efficient than smaller ones; this innovation, combined with the legal ease of traversing international waters, spurred the rise of passenger ship lines offering international crossings. In 1839, Samuel Cunard founded the Cunard Line, the first shipping

company dedicated to transporting mail across the Atlantic, which ensured regular passenger service between Britain and the United States. Cunard and its rival, the White Star Line, started building more and more lavish liners, jockeying for maritime dominance as travel across the Atlantic became both more accessible and more desirable. In 1902, J.P. Morgan founded the International Mercantile Marine Co., a trust that initially only owned American companies but soon absorbed Cunard's biggest British rivals as well, including the White Star Line. To help maintain British competition on the high seas, the British government subsidized Cunard to build two superliners, the Mauritania and the Lusitania. On May 7, 1915, Nazis U-boats torpedoed the Lusitania, killing nearly 1200 people, including 128 Americans, which partially inspired the United States' entry into World War I.

The Queen Mary was dreamed up long before she became a reality. Throughout the 1920s, several international companies launched new liners into the seas, but the Great Depression dried up the superliner business. Construction on this ambitious new Cunard ship, which had begun in 1928, was put on pause. By 1934, Cunard and White Star were both in such dire straits that the two rivals swallowed their animosity and merged, allowing Cunard to finally complete the Queen Mary. The Queen Mary's rival, the French ship SS *Normandie*, had just been enlarged by a new touring lounge, so the Queen wasn't the largest ship on the seas. But on her maiden voyage, the Queen did edge out *Normandie* as the fastest: the *Normandie* did 30 knots, but Queen Mary did 30.14.

During World War II, the Queen went into service: painted grey and dubbed the "Grey Ghost," the ship underwent a transformation from luxury resort to streamlined troopship. Six miles of carpets and 220 cases of glistening table service went into storage, and once

triple-decker bunks replaced the spacious staterooms, the Grey Ghost could carry over fifteen thousand soldiers; because she was so swift and ran a zigzag course, she was nearly impossible for U-boats to catch. After the Allies' victory, the Grey Ghost delivered a load of war brides to Canada and returned to Southampton, where she was re-fitted in her royal state and ran as a passenger ship again. But the first transatlantic commercial jet flight in 1958 and the subsequent boom in air travel put ocean liners out of business. In 1967, the Queen Mary retired from service. When most ships get put out to pasture, they become scrap metal, but the city of Long Beach, CA outbid Japanese metal merchants at auction. The original Queen Mary—the Queen Mum, as no one calls her—is permanently moored off the coast of Long Beach, CA, operating as a floating museum, event space, and hotel. Only three other ocean liners made before World War II are still preserved today.

In 2003, the Queen Mary 2 was built in a swamp at the mouth of the Loire River. The swamp is the home of the Chantiers de l'Atlantique, one of the world's great shipyards, birthplace of the SS Normandie. One month before her completion, a gangway collapsed, killing sixteen people. On Boxing Day, the day after Christmas Day, Queen Elizabeth christened the Queen Mary 2, and in January 2004, she took her maiden voyage, sailing from Southampton, England, to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In 2004, the Queen Mary 2 replaced the Queen Elizabeth 2 as the flagship ship of the Cunard line. When the QE2 retired in 2008, the QM2 became the only transatlantic ocean liner making crossings between New York and Southampton, England.

When she sails at capacity, which she is doing this crossing, the Queen Mary 2 carries 2620 guests and 1253 crew members. The QM2's gross tonnage is 151,400, and she contains over

300,000 pieces of steel. She is 1,132 feet long, over twice as long as the Washington Monument is tall, 147 feet longer than the Eifel Tower is high, 86 feet longer than the *New York Times* building at the top of its tower, and 123 feet shorter than the Empire State Building laid on its side. She has seventeen decks and rises 200 feet above the waterline, the equivalent of a 23-story building. Her final cost to build was about $300,000 per berth. She has 2,000 bathrooms, 3,000 telephones, 5,000 stairs, 8,300 automatic fire extinguishers, 8,800 loudspeakers, 88,000 points of lighting, 144,000 square yards of insulating material, and 280,000 square yards of fitted carpets. The chefs use 7,000 boxes of strawberries and approximately 90 metric tons of pineapples per year. The QM2's amenities include five swimming pools, a two-story spa, a casino, a two-story Grand Lobby, a planetarium, and kennels.

2200. Getting used to a leather-bound menu at each meal and a turndown service twice a day takes less adjustment than you'd imagine. *Sunset Boulevard*, Billy Wilder's 1950 film, features William Holden, playing an out-of-work screenwriter, who is evading debt collectors in Hollywood when he stashes his car in the garage of what he thinks is an abandoned old mansion. As it turns out, the mansion isn't abandoned at all, but frozen in time. It belongs to Norma Desmond, an aging star of the silent screen who has now become a recluse, refusing to acknowledge that her youth and fame have faded. The mansion rambles on and on, with a swimming pool, a parquet dance floor, an organ, an extravagantly expensive car, a butler with a face like petrified wood, and a dead monkey. William Holden is uncomfortable with the display of wealth at first, but soon becomes accustomed to it, sporting a sharp tuxedo and snapping open a solid gold cigarette case: extravagance becomes ease.

2300. A transatlantic crossing differs from a pure pleasure cruise in that it is a voyage, not a loop: we are sailing from New York to Southampton, one-way, so while you're having fun, you're also getting somewhere different than when you began. "Getting there is half the fun," proclaimed a mid-century advertisement for the Cunard line. The shipboard programme is the focal point, but the journey is still a means to an end; we are on a purposeful journey, not a hedonistic purgatory.

Crosswords are a leisure activity, but not a purposeless indulgence: they are good for prevention of Alzheimer's; they stave off memory loss; they sharpen the brain's facilities; they provide structure and require discipline; they provide knowledge and logical reasoning skills without being pedantic; they help solvers cope with the rest of the world by giving a regular escape from the daily news.

2330. Tomorrow's Daily Programme has been laid on my bed, along with a square of chocolate and the breakfast-in-bed menu. In the write-up of "yesterday," which, of course, is still tonight, our evening's launch from the harbor has already been summarized as a success, slightly vertiginously, as we're still docked in Brooklyn. A glossy card on the desk informs me that my sparkling wine has been put in the refrigerator, and should I wish to enjoy it chilled at any time, I can ring for a fresh bucket of ice.

0000. Cinderella Titanic: At the stroke of midnight, I look out my stateroom's porthole. If we are moving, I can't see it.

Day 2. Sea Day.

0800. I hear it—a low, steady humming, that will never cease the whole time we're at sea—then I feel it, a steady shifting rocking, not unpleasant, like walking on a thick trampoline rather than thin earth.

On the treadmill, though it's programmed with no incline, I feel like I am running up and down hills; the ship is moving vertically, as well as side to side. The screen has a monitor, which feels like I've discovered a secret portal to the outside world, one that I'm not supposed to have found. But when I discover that my static, soundless choice is between a dim Fox and Friends, dimmer MSNBC, and an inscrutably chipper German home improvement show, I switch the machine's monitor to the channel charting where in the world the Queen Mary 2 is right now.

Norman is on one of the weight machines, but I don't catch his eye. When I leave to go back to my room, incognito in sweat and still with bags under my eyes, I pass Richard, the head waiter, as he jokes with a couple in matching pastel polos about last night's premiere: "You're my movie stars!" he tells them. I assume the couple are QM2 regulars, the way they're so familiar with each other, but then Richard turns to me and says brightly and immediately, "Good morning, Miss Raphael [sic]!"

1000. The Royal Court Theatre, where various entertainers perform; and Illuminations, the auditorium with the Planetarium where lecturers speak. Deb Amlen, the Wordplay columnist for the *New York Times*, gives a public lecture, open to the crossworders as well as the rest of the ship, and Illuminations is packed. She talks us through her own career. She's everyone's

best friend: if Deb can do this, says Deb, you can, too. When she took over the blog in 2011, she felt raw and bold when she came out as a mediocre solver. She was advised not to, she says, and she was afraid she'd be shunned by solvers as a huckster. The opposite was true, says Deb: there was a "huge sigh of relief" that swept across the crossword community. Someone like them—the amateur coffee klatsch solvers—had a voice in what had been purely a wonk's world. Deb, says Deb, is the voice of the average solver, in her words, that person who enjoys the daily puzzle but still needs those Top Ten Text Terms You Need To Know.

The audience is rapt. "How do you get the rap terms," marvels someone in the audience? (I scan: white, white, white; old, old, old). "Do you have a panel of experts?" Deb says that she often turns to a "constructor of color" for the rap answers; even she cringes a little to hear herself say it.

I'm reminded of Issa Rae, in the HBO series *Insecure*, called upon by her white co-workers to represent all people of color. Issa Rae plays Issa Rae, a woman with a name made for crosswords (double S, common letters, lots of vowels, short). Issa works for an L.A. after-school enrichment program, We Got Y'all, where she is the only black person among white colleagues. Rae code-switches her vocabulary, accent, and diction fluently and immediately; when she is at work, she speaks in the valley-girl uptick and full sentences of a socioeconomically upper-tier graduate of an elite college. When she speaks with her friend Molly, herself a prominent lawyer and expert code-switcher, the two immediately flip the switch into quicker, accented speech filled with slang and studded with expletives; their voices both drop and rise half-octaves, oscillating between gravel and squeal. Their

professional, neutral, "white" voices are reminiscent of BBC English: ostensibly unaccented, yet of course, unaccented is in itself an accent.

Deb advises us that if at first you don't think you can succeed, keep pushing yourself, and you will succeed. Be brave. Try that Thursday crossword.

1200. Time runs strictly on the Queen Mary 2. Every day at high noon, except on Sunday, we set our clocks forward by one hour. We are gradually shifting into Greenwich Mean Time, and instead of transferring all at once at the beginning or the end of the journey, we tilt more swiftly every day toward dinner.

1330. Things are bustling. The gym is bustling; the King's Court is bustling; the library is bustling. There are enough people so that everything is pleasantly crowded and nothing is packed; the only queue is at the stroke of noon-plus-one, when a few people have already started lining up in the hallway for the sit-down lunch.

1400. Journey #2: find a USB key. I've turned my luggage inside out but I can't find my flash drive, and without steady Internet, I can't email my work to myself.

I decide to become mildly paranoid. What if the ship flooded and my computer got waterlogged, and my notebook became a sodden mess, rendering this whole week gone? What if one of the Queens-level passengers had seen me peering into their Clubroom, decided I must be a spy, and, during one of the turndown services, garnered a crew

member's uniform, slipped into my stateroom, and wiped my hard drive? Was I a double agent?

The shopping arcade circles the upper balcony of the Grand Lobby on Deck 3, bridging the Champagne Lounge and the Godiva Tea Room. The shopping arcade begins with simultaneously cheesy and expensive baubles, Michael Kors bags, Robert Coin hoops, and winds its way to overpriced champagne flutes and models of this ship.

I add a level to Journey #2: How to scrimp on the Queen Mary 2. I'm not going to buy the first option I see: instead, I'm going to see The One Best Way. There's a flash drive for sale in the sundries section, near the earplugs and the Cunard teddy bears. It's a "Splash Drive," 8 neon yellow GB in hyperactive font for $32.00 I keep going.

On Deck 2, the photography guy is very eager to make a deal with me to get me a 2 GB Cunard-stamped USB key for $9.95 instead of the Splash Drive. Here is the deal he will make me, he says. I will buy one of the stock photos, because they're the cheapest; he shows me thee bank of watermarked images. He forgets that I don't want them and assures me how special the archival photos are, "not even on Google," these archival images from the Queen Mary's past, or rather, from Cunard's past, but unearthed recently on the Queen Mary. Why can't he give me the USB for free? I almost do it, but the process will take twenty-four hours, and 9.95 plus 24 is 33.95, so I splurge: Splash.

1730. Tonight is the Black-and-White Ball. The ship is changing over from activewear to formal attire. Guests returning to their room are in pleated khakis, jogging attire for non-

joggers, quilted vests. Guests emerging from their rooms are in formal regalia, faces primed and primped, hair teased, tails and floor-length gowns. In the hallway from the Grand Lobby to the Britannia Restaurant on Deck 3, they array themselves in front of the photographer on the "red carpet" that is an actual red carpet, with a Cunard-branded backdrop.

The *Times* is hosting a Formal cocktail hour for the crossword crew that is exactly 60 minutes long; "Formal" means formal and free. I ask for a champagne cocktail, not knowing what I'm asking for, but Deborah Kerr ordered it on the cruise in *An Affair to Remember*, and, as Norm knows, if it could conjure Cary Grant, I would not say no.

Who takes a crossword cruise?

Girlfriends:

* Captain Rebecca—a different Rebecca than the Rebecca of Rebecca 'n' Rachel—and her friend Evelyn, her Smee, from Seattle, are the only crossovers between the crossword cruise and the competitive Scrabble world. (Smee has cross-checked.) ("We're nerds, says Smee.) Crossworders tend to look down on Scrabblers, Captain Rebecca says. They think Scrabble is too mathy, letter combinations, you don't have to know words' meanings. But Captain Rebecca and Smee aren't snobby about it, they tell me. They're different skills, Scrabble and crosswords; you wouldn't expect your chemistry teacher to teach you French. Captain Rebecca and Smee are zaftig and spectacled. Smee has rosy cheeks and a perma-half-grin. On formal nights, she's in a jacquard skirt-suit and little kitten heels. Captain Rebecca wears orthopedic sandals with socks with her skirt. "They're comfortable," she says.

* Edith and Pat, both retired from publishing. Edith has birdlike bead-eyes and a sharply shaggy pixie cut. She is allergic to spinach, so she gets her menu in advance. ("I'm not sure why they make me do my menu in advance," she says. "I know how to not order anything with spinach.") Pat, perfect white bob with no stray hairs, teal skirt suit. Edith: "Steve, my husband, knows how much I like crosswords. He's the one who saw the advertisement for this, in the print paper, and he's the one who said that I have to do it, but he wasn't going to come with me. So I asked my girlfriend, Pat, if she wanted to come. Pat's not as crazy about word games as I am. I like any word game. Perquackety, Boggle."

Couples:

* Julie and David, Queens-tier passengers. Whenever they see Joel, Will Shortz's assistant, they wave like a proud aunt and uncle. They're the parents of college friends of Joel's, which creates an uncanny intrusion of the outside world, like happening upon your second-grade teacher at the grocery store.

* Bill and Nora, a look-alike couple with twinkly squints, have done cruises before, but this one, Nora says, particularly caught their eye because Bill's been competing in the ACPT for twenty years, and his mother competed in the very first ACPT, in 1978, and Nora gets a hotel weekend in Stamford and a week on a cruise. Bill, Bill tells me, was on *Jeopardy!* 20 years ago. He won one night, $18,000, which was still before the prices on the show doubled, he reminds me. He was winning going into Final Jeopardy on night 2, too, but no one got it right, and he'd bet to win, and he lost. But back in those days, he said, the losers

didn't win money the way they do now, they won prizes, and now they have a sculpture of dolphins from Jeopardy sitting on their wine rack. Jeopardy has more of crossover with crosswords than Scrabble does. Ken Jennings, the legendary Jeopardy champion with a 74-day winning streak, comes to the ACPT sometimes, just a solver like anyone else.

* Michael and Ellen. Michael, the retired nuclear radiologist, and Norm, the retired pediatric oncologist, hit it off the first night with glowing radiology stories, then never speak again. Ellen, with the beautiful helmet of silver hair, hates crosswords. She is a novelist, and she's writing a novel that will take place on a cruise. The heroine is going to be an expert hired to give lectures on the cruise, she says. She prefers writing romance to other genres, she says, but she doesn't like writing the sex scenes. Nora shakes her head. I wouldn't like reading your novels, she says. I go in for violence, for the thrillers.

* Andre and Alex, on a four-years'-belated honeymoon; Alex's family is in England, so they're traveling for a month afterwards, London, Lisbon, London. They're both journalists: Andre, Bloomberg, is the cruciverbalist. The crossword is the only app he pays for on his phone, and he does it every day. Alex, Cosmopolitan, is the cruiser. He's here, he says, for the spa.

* Brad and Sylvia, not their first marriages. Sylvia's hair is dyed jet-black; she wears a marvelous Mondrian-esque mod A-line raincoat. Brad is tall, thin, taciturn, with the tiny midsection polo-shirt paunch of a thin man.

Sisters:

* Gail and Sandy, bemused and earnest, with little spectacles and sharp features. Gail is crisper, with a primly streaked pixie cut and a tiny jeweled glasses chain; Sandy is the boho sister, un-blow-dried hair. "All these people already doing crosswords! I'm out of my league," said Sandy, at the first brunch. The awe is genuine, not jealous; they're here to unwind, not to win.

* Leslie and Christi, the disaster twins, tall and very sweet and very opinionated, with overly expressive faces. Leslie and Christi are a hoot. Christi is addicted to Outlander, the thinly-veiled time-travel porno, because why would you want to go back in time if you weren't going to have steamy sex? The men in kilts are the good guys, the men in pants are the baddies, but they're still hot. If you see other ladies in the doctor's office or the dentist's office reading Outlanders, titillated, their eyes wide, licking their thumbs as they turn the pages.

Mothers and daughters:

* Desi, blonde, Texas, is here with her mother, LeAnn, who lives in rural Colorado, with Desi's children. Desi has a red beaded gown, a black sequined gown. "You have to read 50 Shades of Grey before you get married," she instructs me. I read it on my Kindle, she says. No one knows I'm reading it. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to read it. Why "before" I get married: as a guidebook to marital sex, or as a last vicarious fling before my libido goes into lockdown? In high school, our American History teacher had an end-of-class party at her

house, where someone accidentally-on-purpose found a book in the bedroom: *101 Nights of Grrrrrreat Sex*.

* Wyna, from New York City, and Yvonne, from New York City. They are on this particular crossing because of crosswords, but cruising is a thing they do, Wyna and her mother. They stay in the same stateroom. Wyna is the puzzler. Yvonne speaks little to no English. Wyna is an artist, a jewellry-maker, who wears her own jewellry, minimalist and beautiful, silver; her ring has tiny, invisible magnets that attract a delicate chain between two bars.

Solo travellers:

* Bunny from Palm Beach. "I'm Bunny. I hop around a lot!" Bunny is on her third marriage. Bunny wears matched teal velour track suits for daytime and festive sweaters for evening: tonight's has a knitted Chanel handbag with a handle picked out in seed pearls. Bunny has vigorously tanned skin, zealous teeth, sawtooth cheekbones.

* Carol, a retired State Department librarian, with a soft face that looks impassive until her eyes start to twinkle. She knows things like which color passports go with which decade; which states changed when from having drivers' licenses be only printed cards to requiring photos on IDs.

*Norm, the retired pediatric oncologist, all-black getup at the gym and pinstripes at night.

Others:

* There are several people on the crossing who wanted to book their travel on the official *Times* Journey, but booked through Cunard, rather than through the *Times*, so while they're here with us, we're passengers in parallax. There are also just the crossers, mostly British, who like crosswords, without having any idea that there was a specific Journey aboard this cruise: these are the people doing the daily Queen Mary 2 cryptic offered in the library on Deck 8, or the quilted vest crowd in the Champagne Bar doing crosswords out of "Codewords," a cryptic compendium, during Christmas Carols.

Who among the crossworders is having sex?

2245. The Black and White Ball is white, white, white. Who are we celebrating? Are we the celebrities? The dance floor clears off after every song, as though every song is the last. Self-contained units, little puzzles that you enter and complete and leave.

The singer, Kelli Broadway, introduces each song. That was "I'm So Excited," she says. This next one is a slow song, Billy Joel, "Just The Way You Are." Now we go to the eighties, Elton John, "Crocodile Rock." This next song is a waltz. Aretha Franklin. "A Natural Woman."

When the band takes a break, Your Social Director Tommi, in a white tux jacket, bounds to the stage to introduce Your Ballroom Dance Demonstration with EUGENE AND DARYA. "EUGENE AND DARYA are on board until May," he says. "The same as me," he adds in an afterthought that isn't funny, like a clown with a tear tattooed on his face.

When they're off the boat, says Tommi, EUGENE AND DARYA are competing like mad; this year, they were crowned the best dancers in Ukraine. You can take lessons with EUGENE AND DARYA every sea day. They swan on, shellacked and toned, in black and white, sleeves and flutter at the hem. Oohs and aahs.

Anyone can walk in, but once you do, you had better be in black and white, because everyone else will be.

2300. Journey #3: Turndown Tetris. I'm inventing games to play with the crew, inventing games I didn't know I didn't know existed. Where will they place my pyjamas tomorrow? (Under the pillow in the morning, laid out across the blanket at night). What will they do with the sweaty gym clothes I hung on the clothes line in the shower? (Leave them there, with the shower curtain partially closed.) What will they do with the clothes I leave on the bed that are not pyjamas? (Leave them neatly draped on the back of the desk chair.) What will they do with the uneaten chocolates? (Leave them on the side table.) What will they do with the unopened sparkling wine? (Leave a card on the desk saying that they have put the sparkling wine in the refrigerator, but that I can request another bucket of ice should I want to put it on ice again.) (But they didn't do this – they left the bucket in the refrigerator and the card on the desk, but the wine carefully placed on the table between the two wine glasses. I put it in the fridge.)

"AT YOUR SERVICE Luwell": The card had been on my desk after the first turndown; on the second night, it's tucked into the side of the mirror above the desk. If I leave it, will the card be elsewhere tomorrow? If I move it, will it stay in place? What games are we playing

out of courtesy, when will we catch each other at them, who's watching? Is the other person playing the same game? Is it the same other person?

2345. Nothing is required and everything is in order. There's an arbitrary aimlessness and a deeply unironic rigidity: nobody has to enter this world, not even for an instant, and you can comfortably coexist outside of it. But once you step in, once you accept and confront the fact that you are on a crossing, you are doing a crossword, once you are there, you are present for every iteration of the rabbit hole you're entering. You have to trust the pre-programmed mind of the constructor, the cruise designer, for your experience. You can wander anywhere you like – 1-across, Deck 13, the southwest corner of the grid, the Atlantic Room – but you will remain in the same place.

Day 3. Sea Day.

0800. This morning is category 11 on the Beaufort scale, a "violent storm" according to the map on the gym machines charting the QM2's progress. The Beeaufort scale goes up to thirteen, and "violent" is the second highest, just shy of hurricane. Everyone is physically disturbed, pitching back and forth dramatically, but no one seems psychologically perturbed. Category 11 is expected for Winter North Atlantic waters. On the treadmill, I pitch backward and forward, like doing hill repetitions, except instead of me running the hills, the hills are running me.

0900. Every morning, Deb runs a coffee klatsch to work on solving the puzzle together. We get the next day's puzzle in our staterooms with the evening turndown service, so we've had

all night to work it out for ourselves before the chat group. Deb holds court while a dozen solvers huddle in the lounge outside the all-hours buffet, chatting over clues; others sit at tables out of earshot, working it out by themselves.

1000. Journey #4: Find *Wordplay*. The Times couldn't get the rights to play *Wordplay* for all of Cunard, so it's billed in the Times Journeys program as a "Times Journeys Exclusive," a "private screening" for travelers, followed by a Q&A with the experts. But our coordinators Rebecca 'n' Rachel have discovered that no one has thought to actually bring along a copy of *Wordplay*. Rebecca spends the weekend downloading *Wordplay* onto her phone, using precious drips of the ship's shitty, spotty, expensive WiFi. And even if she could get the movie onto her phone, no one knows how to get the film from phone to computer to project onto the Royal Court Theatre's screen, and huddling the crossworders around a phone seems less than ideal, like watching a movie on a petri dish.

1100. Ben Zimmer, expert lexicographer, gives a lecture on British-isms vs. American-isms. Got, gotten, film, movie. The packed crowd—mostly Brits, mostly non-crossworders—loves the *Downton Abbey* clips, showing where the writers got it wrong. (Lord Grantham, new to automobiles, and never a driver himself, would have never said "step on it.")

1200. Captain's announcement. This is the only day without a time change. The magnificent Queen Mary 2 is making light work of the weather. Around midnight tonight, we will reach our closest point to the final resting place of the Titanic.

The violent storm affects the QM2's equilibrium to some degree. About every three minutes, just long enough to almost forget, a particularly tall swell will cause the hallways to rock gently, as though we're in a hammock, and everybody will lurch quietly from side to side. Otherwise, activities continue apace. The glasses and plates are subtly, specially weighted to stay in one place.

1700. Spin class on the QM2.

When we were growing up, my brother had a computer game set on the Titanic, in which the object of the game was to stop the ship from sinking and, incidentally, save the world from World War II. As you roamed the ship, certain characters always appeared in certain places, so you could reliably find them to ask for advice or to have conversations that moved the game's action along.

Vletsislav, one of the ship's personal trainers, runs spin on the high seas. Vletsislav typically stalks Deck 7 between Staircases A and B, roaming the gym and the Canyon Ranch Spa, but today, we're in the Knightsbridge Room, a catch-all carpeted basement on Deck 1 that has some leftover posters of the Cunard line in its 1930s glory leaning against each other. Vletsislav is too tall for the Knightsbridge Room, and he can't figure out what channel to use to make the sound system work.

The spin class is an aberration, something that doesn't quite fit onto the cruise. In an elegant crossword, this fill would have been edited out. Spin speaks the language of a crossing in

many ways: a boutique form of recreation, an emphasis on health and wellness, a surcharge. The original Queen Mary, surely, had exercise bicycles and medicine balls.

But contemporary spin doesn't work on the boat. We're clustered into a leaking basement room, and we start twenty minutes late, which would never fly in a city studio, and which is particularly embarrassing in this meticulously and arbitrarily timed life.

1845. Dinner tonight is at the Verandah, the QM2's fine dining restaurant anyone on board can attend, for a surcharge. The *Times* is paying, for both dinner and wine. (Success in Journey #1: free alcohol.)

I ask some of the crossworders, Where were you when you solved your first Saturday puzzle, or when did you first realized you could solve a Saturday? Both Joel and Natan talk about the feeling of falling asleep with a puzzle and waking up knowing the answer. You see your mind at work: you can actively feel that your subconscious is real, because you know something now that you didn't know before simply by deep-diving into the brain's benthic zone. Crosswords become a tool the mind can use to let you see the subconscious, usually invisible, visibly at work.

2100. After dinner, the swells have diminished somewhat, or our tipsiness has made us tilt like the ship. Joel, Natan, Hannah, and I, the Young Quartet, prowl around the decks. The two theaters on the Queen Mary 2 take up about two-thirds of Deck 2, with Illuminations at the prow of the ship and the Royal Court Theatre toward the center; the rest of Deck 2 is the lower level of the Britannia restaurant. Two Games Hallways run parallel to the ship's

two theaters. One or two board games sit at each felt table: Clue; Scrabble; backgammon; the television-show-based trivia game *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*, in German. Someone has started a jigsaw puzzle spanning two tables. Farther up the corridor are lookout swivel chairs, where one sits and watches the ocean swivel by; and the Hallway of Stars, posters about various luminaries who have been on the Queen Mary 2, that are quickly going out of date as stars die. Jerry Lewis, born 1928, no death date on the poster. On board the Queen Mary 2, Jerry Lewis never dies. Time and memory elapse in fits and starts.

We play a round of Clue. It was Miss Scarlet in the Games Hallway with the rope. Mrs. White in the Planetarium with the leather-bound menu. Colonel Mustard in the stateroom with the USB stick.

The Planetarium, in the Illuminations theater, is the only planetarium at sea, the only floating world within the world. In the Christian Science Church in Boston, there is an enormous glass globe that depicts the world as it was in 1935, the year after the Queen Mary Original first set sail, down to the final painting of Iran in parentheses under Persia. The world has not changed, but the names are different. The colors in the glass globe represent the colonies, who owned what in 1935, but loosely; few enough countries dominated the globe from the rose-tinted glasses of Boston that you could kaleidoscope the Earth with a very select code.

The *Times* crossword began in February of 1942. The newspaper of record had gone on the record in the twenties decrying the crossword as "slothful," but after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, readers needed a buffer between themselves and the front

pages. Did the crossword ease readers into being able to face the rest of the news, or provide a safe haven from it?

Now, you don't even have to get the paper to get the crossword. ("Get," as in "obtain"; in the United States, we say we've "gotten the crossword" to say we've obtained it, and we've "got the crossword" to signal the past tense of "get," i.e., that we've understood it. In Britain, "gotten" no longer exists as a possible past participle; you've "got" the crossword when you pick up the puzzle and you've "got" it is to have solved it. To have is to hold and to hold is to understand. It's not that the difference has disappeared from understanding; it's that the meanings have collapsed together under the same clue.)

2300. Deck 12, hot tub. I retrieve my sparkling wine, and we know what to do with it.

FACTS ABOUT WILL SHORTZ.

* Will Shortz (at this cruise's sailing) is sixty-five years old.

* Will grew up on a horse farm in Crawsfordsville, Indiana, a rural part of the state. The horse farm is now pretty much falling apart. Will's parents are no longer alive. He has a sister who still lives out in Indiana, and whom he visits occasionally.

* Will's longetime AOL password was milkadilkadilk, after his favorite pony. (He still uses AOL. The password has changed.)

* Will eats Campbell's Soup for lunch and a chicken cutlet for dinner. 10:30 am to 6 pm is puzzle editing. Then, it's straight to table tennis, back home, chicken cutlet, bed. Will nukes the chicken right on the plate of the microwave oven.

* When Will was at IU, he was the president of his fraternity. There are photographs from him in college, full-color mustache.

* If editing runs late, interns can stay over in the attic bedroom in Will's house, because the commute back from Pleasantville to Brooklyn is over two hours. Will microwaves an extra chicken cutlet.

* When Natan was a summer intern, one of his jobs was to cut out crossword-themed articles but mainly advertisements in the *New York Herald Tribune* from the 1920s. Crossword galas of the 1920s. Crossword-themed ads, both ads targeted for the crossword itself, and ads that used the theme of the crossword in the advertisement for another product. (For long-distance telephone service: Call your friend across the state for help with that tricky crossword clue!) Fashion: crossword dresses.

* Natan says, Will once asked me: *Drumming: Is that the crossword of instruments?*

* During the Sudoku craze of the mid-2000s, Will and his publisher were able to pump out Sudoku books rapid-fire because computers can churn out the number puzzles extremely quickly. Essentially, Will was printing himself money.

* Will has played at more than 300 table tennis centers around the world. In 1999, Westchester County residents Steven and Stefan founded a table tennis club that rotated to different centers each night: Monday, Tarrytown; Tuesday, Scarsdale. By 2008, Will wanted a permanent facility. He spoke to his accountant and dropped two million to build the nation's premiere table tennis center about three blocks from his house in Pleasantville. Will's best friend is Robert Roberts, the table tennis pro who manages the club. Will loses money on that table tennis center, says Joel, because the space is so huge, like a warehouse, and he charges people very fair prices, and on top of that cuts deals.

* From 2012-2016, Kai, a prodigy ping-pong player from China, trained at Will's table tennis facility in Pleasantville and lived with Will in his house, staying in the attic bedroom. Usually, Kai stuck to his routine, but one night, he took the train into Manhattan and stumbled back in the wee hours. He was late to school the next morning, and hadn't done his work. Will asked Joel what Joel thought he should do about the situation. *There are probably few people who are less paternally equipped to do this*, thought Joel: *Will has never had kids, and I'm twenty-three.*

Day 4. Sea Day.

1530. Constructing a 15 x 15 crossword with Joel and Natan, Part 1.

Dramatis Personae, Selected:

* Joel, Acting Secretary, his Word document projected onto a screen so we can all see our brainstorm. He's also got crossword grids going, on his crossword software, so we can play with grids

* Natan, Master of Ceremonies

* Captain Rebecca

* Captain Carol

* Salt-and-Pepper Goldilocks

* Lady in Fuchsia

* Gail and Sandy

* Lady in Black Turtleneck

* Yellow Rose of Texas

* Man in Green Fleece

* Michael Rosenthal, the Retired Radiologist

* Lady in Blue Cableknit

* Leslie and Christie, in coordinating black-and-white outfits, kibitzing in the back, doing crosswords in their own collections

* Crowd

Cunard Connexions, a windowless conference room, thickly carpeted. The ConneXions seminar room has been set up with the games felt tables in two long lines. Over half the crossworders have turned up. Chairs in the back for overflow, or kibbutzers. Joel won't make any promises, but the chance that our puzzle will appear in the Times *thrums in the air like the steady thrum of the QM2's engines.*

We begin with the Theme Brainstorm. Boats. Seas. Ships. Crossings. Write What You Know.

Salt-and-Pepper: I have a word that pulls all these ideas we're talking about together: SHIPSHAPE.

Joel types SHIPSHAPE into the center of a grid.

Natan: How about black squares moving across the board like a boat.

Lady in Fuchsia: Wet 'n' wild. Rocky. Deck. Rolling. I'm just spitballing.

Bunny: We should have all the crew members! Purser. Yeoman. Captain.

Captain Rebecca: How about the oceans looping around the grid like the lines of a globe. ATL // ANTIC, IAN // INDI, IFIC // PAC. Phrases that begin with IFIC: If I Cared, If I Could.

Crowd: Sea Change. Bering Sea. South China Sea.

Natan: Anagrams?

Man in Green Fleece: Wouldn't it be great if we could get a JUNK crossing the SOUTH CHINA SEA?

Lady in Fuchsia: We've got to work "nausea" in there.

Joel: ARAL anagrams to LARA, Dr. Zhivago. RED to DRE. What about ships?

Crowd: JUNK, LINER, SLOOP, CLIPPER, CUTTER, WHALER, OILER, TANKER, CARGO, WHALER.

Bunny: I like "whaler."

Captain Rebecca: What about honomyms. Whaler / wailer.

Natan: Does anyone remember that puzzle with NINAS in it – putting a word in the middle of other words.

Scattered murmurs from Crowd.

Natan: NINA and PINTA might work (SPINTABLE), but probably not SANTAMARIA, so, scratch that.

Joel: What are words and phrases that include the ship somewhere hidden in them.

Crowd: CARGO, ESCARGOT. KETCH, KETCHUP.

Captain Carol: JUNK, JUNKEMAIL.

Joel: ENDLESSLOOP for SLOOP.

Murmurs of appreciation from Crowd.

Michael Rosenthal: NAILCLIPPER.

Joel: LACLIPPER. SPOILER.

Natan: RAFT. KRAFTMACNCHEESE, KRAFTDINNER.

Salt-n-Pepper: We have ships crossing bodies of water, ships crossing the ocean. What if the embedded ships are the across clues, and then the oceans are the downs?

Joel: If we're going to use ENDLESSLOOP we're going to need another 11-letter phrase to match, so we can place our theme answers in symmetrical places on the board.

Captain Rebecca: KRAFTDINNER is 11, but it's a Canadianism, it's what they call Kraft Mac 'n' Cheese.

Sandy: What about BOATNECKSWEATER?

Lady in Fuchsia [aside]: Boatneck sweater, that's such girl knowledge.

Joel: Okay, NAILCLIPPER is 11.

Lady in Blue Cableknit: So is JUNKYARDDOG.

Murmurs and nods of appreciation from Crowd. Someone claps lightly.

Lady in Blue Cableknit [*aside*]: Took me a while to come up with that.

Captain Carol: LINER. EYELINER, LINERNOTES, but that's 10.

Joel: Is LINEREADING (11) a thing? What an actor does to learn lines? Or is that Reading Lines?

Crowd mutters in slight disapproval.

Natan: If we do LINERNOTE (9), we can do LACLIPPER (9) as our symmetry.

Joel: SPOILER (7) in the Bingo spot in the center works nicely, because we don't have to figure out anything symmetrical: if you have an odd-numbered word in the center, says Joel, because of the way that the puzzle's symmetry and black squares work, you don't have to figure out a matching word, because you automatically have the same number of black squares on either side of the word in the center; an even-numbered word, on the other hand, will automatically force you to have lopsided arms of black squares around it, necessitating a matching couplet.

Natan: Bodies of water have to cross the parts of words that are actually the ships. So the N of ENDLESSLOOP cross with the N of ATLANTIC because the ship wouldn't be crossing the ocean.

Yellow Rose of Texas: "Aren't there a specific Seven Seas?"

Captain Rebecca: No, that's what great about the seas, there are so many of them that you can pick any seven.

Natan: OK. We have to decide: do we want to use any three bodies of water for our crossings? Are we only using oceans, or ocean / sea / lake?

Man in Green Fleece: Ocean, sea, lake.

Michael Rosenthal: Only oceans.

Yellow Rose takes out an iPad.

Yellow Rose: Yes, there are the specific seas that are the Seven Seas.

Black Turtleneck [*wonderingly*]: Did you Google that just now?

Natan: Whichever way we choose, we have to make sure that they correspond as some sort of set: either all three alike or all three different.

Crowd: Three oceans, not ocean / sea / lake.

Natan: Then we have to use only three oceans—Atlantic, Indian, Pacific—and not four, because if we include Arctic, then the only one we've left out is the rare Southern Ocean, and while missing two shows a representative sample of oceans, not a comprehensive understanding, missing only one feel lopsided and random.

Captain Rebecca: We should put all of them in

Natan: It will be very tough to cram all five oceans into a 15-by-15, but we can do three.

Joel: OK. Back to LINER. LINERNOTE is nice, and it lets ATLANTIC be 1-Down, which looks nice – but then, with SPOILER in the center and LACLIPPER at the bottom right, we're locked into some massive chunks of symmetrical white space in the corners.

Natan: That's going to be much more difficult than if ATLANTIC could cross the ship a little further down.

Joel: ONLINERADIO, is that a thing? "Pandora, for exaample" as the clue? "For example," in this case, is probably preferable to "e.g.," as the latter might incorrectly cue an abbrev.

Crowd murmurs in general assent to ONLINERADIO.

Black Turtleneck: Line dancing! Inline skating!

Man in Green Fleece: No, you see, it has to include that "r" of "liner."

Michael Rosenthal: Maybe she's got some non-rhotic tendencies.

Session is over for the day. Crowd pulls out phones and takes pictures of the grid's final incarnation-in-progress on the screen.

Black Turtleneck: I just never would have thought to think about words this way before this trip! Marvelous.

Bunny: Where is the whaler?

1730. I log into WiFi for the first time in days. There's been a subway explosion in Times Square, right by Port Authority. Nobody was hurt.

2100. The Young Quartet plays a card game after dinner: we're in pairs, and each pair has to develop a code that will signal what the other member of the team has in her hand, but the pair does not want the other pair to guess the code. Natan and I come up with literary references: the first letter of the last name tells what card we need, and the number of letters in the first name tells the number of cards we have. Joel and Hannah use Clue references, but all of the Clues are noise; their code is entirely semaphore, all body language. When they wipe their glasses, it is three of a kind; fold the cards, four of a kind.

2200. Deck 11, Stairway A, the Atlantic Room. By day, the Atlantic Room is for contract bridge; by night, contraband meetings. There is a spotlight shining on one chair at one table. My father's house has many mansions.

All the prices on the ship are in dollars, all the grammar and spelling is British. We speak in British and spend in American. (LINERNOTE, a singular combining form of "liner notes"; LINERNOTE, the currency of the ocean liner itself, whatever bank note we're calculating with as we swipe our key cards.)

The crew members are all on an enormous switchboard. All of the passengers are assigned assignations by their stateroom numbers. (Those in double staterooms, most of the ship, are distinguished by other codes, primarily male/female, or age, or hair color for same-sex siblings and same-sex couples. 6270A and 6270B, for example, although I, in my own stateroom, am simply 6270.) All our wires are crisscrossed across the giant board, somewhere between a games compendium, a topographical map, and Risk.

The crew assigns us routines before we know our own routines. I wake up and go to the fitness centre each morning, but not so early that I'll arrive for breakfast in the restaurant. I never arrive for either breakfast or lunch in my assigned restaurant. On Floor 6 aft, the crew can serve all the early breakfast in beds before even knocking to see whether or not I'm awake. I'll be at the gymnasium, so they can make up my stateroom; I'll come back and shower and then leave again, and it's fairly moot whether or not they make up the room before or after I shower, there will be time between, say, 10 or 11 am and 4 or 5 pm. I'm

typically wandering the ship in the middle afternoon hours. The head waiter and the stewards know when I'll be having a hurried muesli and coffee in the buffet area. "Good morning, Ms. Raphael."

Every whim is chartered, and already circumscribed. There are infinite possibilities, infinite wires to be crossed in infinite ways on the switchboard, yet when something has been done once, it's very difficult to un-lay that track, to switch pathways entirely. We are creatures of habit even before we recognize that our behaviors are habitual. A one-time decision has already been long pre-chartered for us.

The crew person, in official formalwear crew attire (black jacket with gold buttons, black pencil skirt), inspects the Atlantic Room and is startled to see me here. She hasn't expected to find anyone here, since it's a daytime room, and it's night. When does an aberrance become a routine? If you do something once, you're expected to do it again. Have I made a routine for myself, now? Am I going to get a glass of wine every night, for the daytime Atlantic Room?

Humans change. This is a clever crew; they know that we cannot be expected to return to the exact same thing, nor that we would want to; indeed, that we would think we're choosing what we will each day, that we're choosing for a perceived change, has already been built into the crew's anticipations.

2245. In *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier's loose adaptation of *Jane Eyre,* the unnamed heroine marries the dark, handsome, rich, tortured Maxim de Winter and moves into Manderley, his

elaborately enormous mansion that flows on and on across the English countryside. Maxim's first wife, the eponymous Rebecca, has recently died; our protagonist, a young governess serving as hired help to an obnoxiously gauche old dame in Monte Carlo, is a mirror for the reader herself. When our heroine first arrives at Manderley, it is evening, and there is a fire in the library. The next morning, after breakfast, she returns to the library; it is the place she knows how to go to in the enormous house, the house that is so disproportionate to herself as to become an optical illusion. There isn't a fire in the library, none of the lights are prepared, and our heroine is chilly and adrift; she asks Frith, the head butler, to make a fire, and he acquiesces smoothly—but she catches the nearly imperceptible hesitation that he drops very carefully to signal the slight snag, his displeasure. Mrs. Danvers, the housekeeper, is scrupulously deferential, but unmistakably right about everything; our heroine is expected to always already have known all of Rebecca's preferences.

Our heroine makes a fatal error when she hires a new ladies' maid who is her personal assistant at her toilette. The new ladies' maid becomes, unbeknownst to her and to our heroine, the pawn, the revealer of the game that we didn't realize we were playing until now. For the annual Manderley costume ball, Mrs. Danvers tells our heroine to make a dress that's a specific copy of a ballgown in a hall portrait, the portrait of one of Rebecca's beautiful ancestors. The ladies' maid and thee heroine keep it a surprise, working in cloistered cahoots. When our heroine arrives at the top of the stairs in full dress, moments before the ball, Maxim nearly faints; "Rebecca," whispers Maxim's sister.

But in the end, Mrs. Danvers loses. Though downstairs, in the case of our governess heroine, has become upstairs, downstairs always ultimately loses. Grimly, the incident pulls

Maxim and our heroine closer together, ultimately, and he remains loyal to her, rather than to the memory of Rebecca. Mrs. Danvers burns down Manderley, like Dido, and like Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, leaps into her own flames. By sacrificing the queen, our heroine keeps her king.

2330. Crossword constructors typically build around their theme, but there's one final clue that tells the solver how to draw the theme together. This clue, the "revealer," is typically in the bottom right-hand corner, the end of the puzzle, and it's often written toward the end of the construction process. Did Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie know who is going to commit the crime? Or, if they know who, do they know where and how? Or, if they know where and how do they know why? Does the "why" matter?

"Why," in a crossword, on a crossing, becomes more and more arbitrary. There's an apocryphal philosophy class at every college in which the final exam is a single essay question: "Why?" An A answer is, "Why not?" A B answer is, "Because." Any answer longer than that is a C or below.

When you think you're being spontaneous, the crew has already been there before you, has paved the way of our seemingly independently arrived-at decision. The order in which you receive things allows you to think or not think in certain thought patterns.

There are many worlds in tension with each other on the crossing. Most of the time, tensions produces harmony. The Golden Lion Pub, the sports pub with a lively trivia night, is a necessary counterpoint to the Commodore's Club and the Churchill Cigar Lounge, the stately blue bar with a grand piano and white leatherette chairs and a Boardroom. The

Golden Lion gives a buffer zone before the buffet, the diner-like atmosphere on Deck Seven that cheerily serves food at all hours.

But some dissonances don't work. You can always upcharge for services, or charge for drinks, without creating a jarring tone; after all, something has to be valuable. But the chintzy tables outside the promenade of shops feel garish, and strange, like discounts on certain duty-free perfumes while you're on an airplane. The economics, like the time changes, are strict, yet arbitrary: time is money. A USB drive that should be free costs $32; a single-malt aged Scotch costs $10.25 for 2 ounces and could be at least double. Though this last, perhaps, makes some sense; they can only gouge moderately because the cruise certainly wants people to buy drinks, and more of them.

2300. The programme for tomorrow touts the Christmas Market, held outside Deck 3's Promenade of Shops. The Christmas Market is a rare and unique opportunity to find that special something for someone on your list, or for you.

Day 5. Sea Day. Christmas. First Night of Hanukkah

0800. December 12 is Christmas aboard the Queen Mary 2. Each previous day's Daily Programme has advertised the Coming of the Christmas Market. A bold red square in the Programme reminds us to buy those Christmas gifts that we can only get aboard the Cunard, and those great sales and deals. Life-size nutcrackers stand sentinel outside the King's Court buffet, like waiters.

0930. On the treadmill, MSNBC. Morning Joe is on, making staticky comments about the senate race today. There's a special election for a senate seat in Alabama: Rick Moore, a sexual assaulter, is the Republican candidate; Doug Jones, the Democrat, might actually turn one of the reddest seats in America blue. A woman is wearing a "Doug Jones for Senate" campaign button pinned to her vest in King's Court, the canteen, which feels like someone has broken the fourth wall.

1100. Constructing a 15x15 crossword, part 2.

Today's lesson: the fill. Building a good theme is the first step; now, we have to get a grid that's going to function.

NORM: I know one we can put: HOTLANTA.

Crowd murmurs, equal parts assent and apprehension.

JOEL: There are customs of the crossword. Will will not accept a grid that has more than seventy-eight words. On a Friday or Saturday, that cap decreases to 72, because those puzzles are about wide-open grids rather than themes. There are certain patterns, or patterns within patterns, that are tried-and-true shapes, like the right-to-left staircase descending on either side of the puzzle's middle.

A few of the ladies want to get fancy, drawing anchors and other shapes, or setting a little tugboat of black squares across the board. But grid art, like latte art, takes time, skill, and a lot of wasted material. Since we've already set theme answers, we have to abandon ship; anchors, away.

NATAN: For the fill, we also should be cautious about how nautical to go. Natural density is excellent; we don't want to go overboard. PEGLEG as a serendipitous answer, fine; cluing some non-sea-like words with an oceanic bent, good. But "A pirate might have a peg" for "LEG," gilding the lily.

No long answers that compete with the theme, so fifteen-letter answer running down the middle won't stay, because solvers might think that it's supposed to have something to do with the theme, but they'd be wrong. Building a grid and creating answers is less like building a house and more like building a hypothesis in Clue. It can't be Mrs. White in the library with the lead pipe, because we've already deduced from the sets of revelations that the pipe is most certainly out of the picture. Besides, why would Mrs. White, the cook, be going in the library at all, much less bearing a lead pipe? In my father's house, there are many mansions.

1215. Mr. Brad Meyer would like to play us something on his guitar. What is this guy with a guitar doing in the middle of a puzzle constructing session?, he asks us, the question nobody is asking. He sings country songs that feature acronyms. "It ain't no BFD because he's got his CMT, no S-E-X, that's OK; // Ain't no SOB like that PHD who ran off with his EX, ran off to LA."

1315. Here on the Cunard, it's Christmas, and it's a very Cunard Christmas. There are traditions that you can't know about until you've been on a crossing. Throughout the Queen Mary 2 are posters describing the history of the ship; the boat we're on is a museum of the very traditions we're enacting.

Over two hundred passengers gather up and down the Grand Lobby: on the third floor, they circle the balcony and peer down; they fill both sets of stairs; on the second, they ripple in circles around the piano, which is under the tree at the center. Your Social Director, Tommi, as well as Your Director of Entertainment, Jo Haley, Your Director of Entertainment, guide us through each carol. There's a glossy brochure like the Daily Programme, all Cunard white and black and red and gold, listing lyrics of various Christmas carols. There's a mixture of "traditional" and "fun" carols; the most radical of the bunch is "Jingle Bell Rock." I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, the crowd sings. There are several crew members milling around, as the Carols take place right on top of the touted Christmas Market, which turns out to be a glorified version of the sales tables that normally set up right outside the normal shops. The Carols are infections. Even the crew members, who have seen it all before, creep over.

The longer I stand here, the less I can resist. O come let us adore him, O come let us adore him, Venite adoremus, Dominum.

1415. Eighteen degrees Celsius, sixty-four degrees Fahrenheit. I take a run along the boardwalk that runs around the ship. This promenade is a proud hallmark of the Queen

Mary 2: on a calm day like today, you can stroll all the way around the boat. Each lap is exactly a third of a mile, and something else in kilometers.

I'm mainly going around the Promenade to peek into the Grills and Grills Lounges, upper-hierarchy areas I can't see from inside, but get to peep surreptitiously from without. The china is nicer, the food itself is coiffed and brighter, both more curlicued and simpler. The grilled cheese and frisée in the cordoned-off Grill has crusts elegantly removed and is cut elegantly, like a sandwich for high tea.

Gym culture has always been widely promoted on board the QM2 as the antidote to endless buffets. In the thirties, after dinner, racing was a popular pastime: passengers would bet on paper cutouts of horses going around a track, or frogs, presumably the more whimsical you got into the voyage. Taking a turn about the deck is de rigeur. The language of health and the language of indulgence mirror each other; as in the sky, so in the sea.

Outdoor life is a game. On Deck 12, the Sports Centre, Chris, your Sports Director, is leading a game of shuffleboard. There's a crowd tossing quoits. Four natty gents in khaki shorts play what looks like doubles ping-pong – tennis with paddles (pickleback? has it got a British name?) – on a miniature, Astroturf-covered court. Everyone has just the right outfits for every season of outdoor expedition: light waterproof jackets that aren't windbreakers, polo shirts, puffy vests; these are deck outfits, just as specific as ball attire. Everyone circumnavigates on the promenade in the same direction, without printed arrows. You could walk in the other direction, but would you?

Natan and Hannah are in a hot tub on Deck 8, splitting a piña colada.

1530. *Wordplay* D-Day. Rebecca 'n' Rachel are pressing their fingers officiously to their iPhones, making something happen, but it isn't going to work.

Wordplay turns into an impromptu crowd word games session, led by Your Crossword Social Director, Joel, mustering his best ersatz Will Shortz. He splits the crowd into two teams and stands in front of an easel. Deb becomes an unflaggingly jolly judge, with between-rounds patter and semi-homemade prizes. No one leaves the theater.

"You know those words he gave us, where we had to transpose them – I cannot do that without a pencil and paper. Although I did get 'Las Vegas.'"

1730. After the constructing session, I ask Joel and Natan the question on everyone's mind: is it good enough for the *Times*? "They're pretty good at constructing," Joel and Natan agree. "I think it would be a good puzzle for the ACPT," the annual crossword puzzle tournament Shortz hosts. "They won't like that," says Natan. "They want to have their puzzle in the *Times*."

1800. Tonight is the first night of Hanukkah. There's a menorah in the Britannia Restaurant.

At dinner tonight, I sit with a gaggle of ladies and Joel. Joel orders the token latkes, which the ship is serving with baked beans, a combination I've never seen before. The ladies flutter over Joel. My only job has been with the *New York Times*, he says.

Isn't that wonderful, say the ladies. Aren't you something! Are you the next Will Shortz? How does it feel to be the heir apparent. Oh I don't know if I'm that, says Joel, I don't know if I'll be doing this job my whole life. But for now, yes, it's pretty amazing, I pretty much have only had my dream job.

The fish knife is biased against left-handed people, one lady mutters.

As the meal ends, Edith asks me about doing the crossword. "Do you get that AHA moment?" Edith asks me. "You know – that sudden AHA thing, when you feel it, you know the answer." I turn the tables on her: when was the last time she got this AHA orgasm? "Sure," she says, unperturbed. "I got it on this Sunday puzzle. I had figured it all out – that it was a rebus – and then I was looking for the last theme answer, I knew it was an actor's name that was going to have a body part as a rebus in it somewhere, but I thought it would come later in the name. I figured out (EAR)THA KITT, DENZEL WA(SHIN)GTON, and I was looking for the rebus later in the name. But then I had my AHA moment – LIVER – OLIVER PRATT."

"Oliver Pratt!" says Carol. "Chubby fellow." She's had her most recent AHA on the cruise, too. "I've never solve with other people," she says. "The crossword is something I like doing by myself." But, she says, doing that Sunday solve with Deb's coffee klatsch was a revelation to her. "I never knew I could like doing it socially!" she says. It's easier to get it by yourself than to get it with others, but it's not only possible, it also might be enjoyable.

Christi does her mimicry of ladies in the gynecologist's office reading this Outlander series: her eyes widen; she darts her eyes back and forth; she licks her finger as she mimes turning the page; her eyes turn into round O's; she shimmies up straight in her chair and crosses her legs.

1930. As I'm leaving the dining room, Captain Rebecca calls across to me – "We heard you're good at Boggle," she says. "What are you doing right now? We're going to play Scrabble, but do you want to play Boggle first? You can play Boggle with Scrabble tiles."

Captain Rebecca and Smee take me to the Godiva Bar, a lounge sponsored by Godiva. There's a glass case outside that features, in addition to cocktails, luxury chocolates, like jewels. I ask Captain Rebecca and Smee if they've done anything else while being on board. "Nah," says Captain Rebecca. "Too busy!" They keep us busy with things to do during the day, she says, and then at night, she and Smee play games.

Captain Rebecca has a custom-built Scrabble board that looks like a bowling ball pressed through one of those souvenir penny machines that turns your coin into a flat oval disk: it's swirled lavender plastic, with a perfect deluxe Scrabble board grafted on top. The board swivels, and folds in the center. Captain Rebecca shakes out a five-by-five square of letter on the corner of the Scrabble board, building it with her glasses off, so we know she's not cheating. I win four rounds. The Captain wins one. Smee sips a stinger from a snifter.

After the fifth game, they transition to Scrabble.

"Well, I'm really not very good at Scrabble," I say. "I wouldn't give you much of a game."

"We know," says Captain Rebecca. "We'll do a consultation match for you. You'll watch."

2000. They play Scrabble at me.

There are several ways to cheat at Scrabble, says Captain Rebecca, and they all have to do with how you pick out the tiles. You're supposed to look away when you pick, but if you can distract your opponent, you can peek into the tile bag. There was a kid who palmed the blanks. There was a woman who hid them in her bra. Why would you want to, murmurs Smee. There's only a couple of thousand dollars in it. "Bragging rights!" crows Captain Rebecca.

For the consultation game, Captain Rebecca and Smee play open-face, walking me though their decision points. Smee's got ENTAIL plus an A, which won't form a bingo, because GUV PORKS FEM, I like that one, says Captain Rebecca, since "entail" means going to the eldest son. There's a whole bunch of these common six-letter bingo hooks; you can use anagram mnemonics. RETINA.

Captain Rebecca and Smee tell me that they know most of the crossword logic from Scrabble: your balance of vowels and consonants, how to build out a board that balances grid construction and letters.

"I've got a bingo but it won't play," says Captain Rebecca, showing me: MILLION[S]; the blank tile she always saves for a bingo. She's memorized all the two-letter, three-letter, most of the four-letter words, most of the seven- and eight-letters as well.

In tournament Scrabble play, there's no Sunday breakfast test: FUCK, SHITTER, everything goes, as long as it's in the Scrabble dictionary. There's no time to get embarrassed in front of a Scrabble board; play your CUNT and move the FUCK on. In a real tournament, it's not embarrassing to bingo BASTARD on the first move, then keep rotating it back and forth, BASTARD, BASTARD, BASTARD. But I won't do it here, says R.S.; too many people around, and besides, we're just playing for fun, we aren't timing it or anything.

2200. The game is winding down. Journey #1: Alcohol resumes. Smee offers to buy me a drink. I accept a whisky, but the game ends before I can finish it, so I carry it away, my trophy.

2230. The bar on the ninth floor is the Commodore Club, "CC" etched on the drinks menu, not to be confused with the other CC, Churchill's Cigar room, across the hallway. "I've found a typo in the menu," the rosy bald man at the center of the bar tells me conspiratorially. For spirits, they give two columns, one with prices for a one-ounce pour, the other with prices for a two-ounce pour, but in the cognac page, they've printed "$/2oz" on both columns. "I was a proofreader," Mr. Rosy tells me. "I'm retired, but when I see a mistake, now, I can't not see it." It runs in the family: his mother was a garment checker, he says, so whenever she saw someone in a sweater that had a mistake in it, she couldn't not see it. Don't think of a pink rhinoceros.

2300. Francois Marie Charles (1772-1837), one of the founders of utopian socialism, proposed the structure of a phalanstery for an ideal community. The phalanstery—a portmanteau of a phalanx and a monastery—is a self-contained community, combining both urban and rural features, with a central section for quiet meetings and two lateral wings, one for noisy labor and children's play, and the other for balls and other entertainment functions. The wealthiest people lived on the top floors, the poorest on the bottom. (Fourier was also anti-Semitic and placed traditionally Jewish trade work at the bottom of his hierarchy.) In Fourier's ideal world, there would be millions of phalansteries, each comprising 1620 people. Lust is both physical and intellectual, and members of the phalanstery live in a constant orgy.

In *How to Live Together*, Roland Barthes proposes the utopia of idiorrhythmy, that is, a collective of subjects co-existing in the same space but on their own individual schedules, governed by their own individual desires, each person living according to his or her own rhythm. Barthes suggests that rhythm in general has the connotation of group repression. Families and religious systems also create a group dynamic that outweighs individual goals. Barthes's ideal number for such a community is eight to ten. The four thousand or so aboard the QM2 makes us large for either a phalanstery or idiorrhythmy: we're less on rhythm and more on holiday, with the peculiar rigidity of lack of anything to do.

2330. Tomorrow's programme, pre-printed for tonight, features an insert with a promotion on laundry and ironing. The sales and deals are a clue to the outside world, since they're tethered to time and space: they remind us where we are geographically in our journey, and then make assumptions about our physical and mental needs based on how deep into the

cruise we've got (gotten?), and how close we are to the beginning or the end. The early sales and deals were all about getting a package deal, a bundle that would allow you to save some modest amount. A $100 Spa Pass for the week, $47.95 of 120 minutes plus 15 bonus minutes of the Internet. Now, mid-crossing, the programme has laundry programmed into it; ladies might need their delicates re-washed, the progammers suggest to us; gents might want their tuxes re-pressed before the Ascot Ball.

Day 6. Sea Day.

1400. About a quarter of our crew attends the Mini crossword constructing session, where Joel leads the group through making a five-by-five grid; we do a group mini, but the energy palpably picks up when Joel passes out blank grids for people to make their own minis. Joel uses the mini as a place to be more topical, easier. Joel's Mini-Me, Sam, is Joel's test-solver. Joel explains the basic setup: he finds a five-letter word he wants to use (say, COMEY) and builds around that. Six easy clues to one or two hard clues, says Joel.

1500. In today's crossword constructing session, the third of four, we're focusing on the fill again, finishing the hat. The theme answers, of course, are set; Norm's HOTLANTA has remained (I still don't know about Hotlanta, mutters Yellow Rose of Texas); the black squares are in place.

LAUREN can be filled as either LAUREN, crossing with BEE, or LAURYN, crossing with BYE. This crowd likes LAUREN. Ralph Law-ren, says Rick. No, says Bunny, Ralph Lau-*wren*! I know his sister, Claire Lipschitz—she's a painter.

O blank blank Y. ORGY, says Bunny, ORGY on the SEA! The answer turns into OBEY.

This crowd doesn't like ASICS, a sneaker brand; ALIG splits them down the middle (as in, Ali G of Da Ali G Show, aka Sasha Baron Cohen, Captain Rebecca explains, anytime someone objects to ALIG, which is several times.)

1750. The Ascot Ball is tonight, which is the last formal night, which is also the last Formal cocktail hour. The waiter brings me a champagne cocktail. I ask for a glass of wine for dinner before the clock strikes. With the time change and my late rising, I haven't eaten since breakfast, and I'm not sure if it's the freeness or the rising swells, but I'm swooning from the champagne.

2245. Hat Parade at the Ascot Ball. EUGENE AND DARYA have done their demonstration dance for us, a slow foxtrot that looks exactly like their Viennese waltz, except that Darya's smile is a bit more frozen tonight, and Eugene's mouth is perpetually open, a Ken-doll bubble. Sister Christi joins the hat parade, in a wool cloche; Rebecca 'n' Rachel are wearing fascinators that match their outfits, but no one can beat the ramrod-thin lady in red, eighty if she's a day, posture that matches the nutcrackers standing sentinel at King's Court.

2300. What does the crossing have to do with the crossword? You can choose to enter a crossword completely arbitrarily, but once you're in, you have chosen to abide by the rules it's set out for itself. The outward-facing appearance of the crossword is far more uniform and far simpler-looking than the internal sets of choices, Boolean paths, and logic loops that go into the switchboard of the crossword: if 32-Across wants to do this, 15-down will probably have to want to do that. There are small, regular groupings that happen in the corners. Sea Shanty Singing with Social Host Tommi-with-an-I. Watercolour. Flower Arranging. Masonic Meeting. Tanzanite Seminar with our Jewellery Ambassador, Brian. Anything on any subject might happen, but once you've made just a handful of choices, symmetry and space constraints require that only a certain limited number of options are possible anymore. You can figure out where you are both by knowing where you're going vertically by virtue of the clue, or by reading the grid and figuring out where you are in relation spatially to the rest of the letters. In other words, you can situate yourself directly where you're going, or you can read a map to figure out where you are and where you want to be. In constructing, you're confronted with an open map, fifteen by fifteen squares, and it is up to you not only to fill in the letters but the spaces between the letters, much as a music composer has to fill in not only the notes, but the rests.

You lurch; you're not sure whether you're drunk or focused, and you're probably not the former.

We all seek repression.

Day 7. Sea Day.

0130. The ocean is rocking and it's not rocking me to sleep. I almost finish Wednesday's crossword and I almost finish Thursday's as well. For Wednesday, I have the theme, and for Thursday, I think I know the theme, but I'm not quite sure. Something with AX-ing letters, because this is how the theme answers are filling in; there aren't enough squares for the answers I think are correct, so I assume there's some sort of rebus going on, if my intuition is to be trusted. SIT BACK AND (RE)LAX. NONE OF YOUR (BE)ESWAX. How much money am I spending on this boat? (When it's a surcharge, it's a boat; when it's a ball, it's a cruise; when it's about a crossword, it's a crossing; when it's compliments of the *Times*, it's a liner.) Even though all the meals have been paid for, there are upcharges, like the internet, that drips at an excruciating pace, but is billed by the minute, not by the page.

In Scrabble, it's how the tiles play; in a crossword, it's how the clues solve. I'm halfway through an Agatha Christie that's reading quickly, but I can't focus to read; Hercule Poirot is grilling the characters, where were you when Arlena Marshall *née* Stuart was murdered this morning? My heart creeps into my throat. Where was I? What square was I in? Was the crew lady doing her rounds in the Atlantic Room at 2300 surprised I wasn't there tonight? If once is a routine and twice is a rite, are you supposed to do something here every night? Am I a suspect if I switch things up? I went to the gymnasium later than usual this morning and didn't see the usual people I see; were they looking for me? If I notice them, do they notice me? What goes unseen?

And what goes assumed? Everyone learns the crossword from parents, or grandparents, or parental figure; it's a skill that's passed down, usually over generations, though occasionally

laterally, a roommate, a friend, a sister. You might pick up the crossword if you're a people pleaser, interested because the other person is interested, and then it's a space where you get to exert control, you get to be bossy.

The crossword is a space of control, but it's also a way to put off dealing with things. Buffering, buffering.

The crossword, like the cruise, is pre-programmed, but you can go anywhere within it, and you can get to any square by any means. The programme for the cruise is more arbitrary, and does not entail whether you win or lose the game; it's a means for whiling away the time, and everything happens in code, but if you don't do any of the suggested cues, you'll still get to the same place at the end. On the other hand, if you don't go through the programmed answers in the crossword, you won't get to the end at all; you and the non-crossworder will have the same grid, but yours will be filled in. How different, though, is a solved from an unsolved crossword? The answers are already there, as we know from the answer key to yesterday's puzzle, printed right beneath. There is a foolproof way to fill in the puzzle perfectly, which is, to wait until the following day and copy the grid, letter for letter. But is copying the answer solving the puzzle. "I don't believe in cheating," says Deb. "It's your puzzle. You bought it, you own it." Why not. But on the other hand – why?

0330. In *Franny and Zooey*, the Glass family children star in a radio programme, "It's a Wise Child"; when one wise Glass ages out of being the titular child, the next fills the slot. I am good at trivia by osmosis, because my brother is very good; he is the Jeopardy champion,

and I am the chameleon for him, ready to be a blank to be filled in. It's my biggest talent, and my biggest curse. I can be anything you want me to be, but what do I want to be?

A wise child, a child-adult. Christ the Savior is born. The Christ-child is always a baby; Athena, that other wise child, springs full-formed from Zeus's head.

0930. Ellen, who hates crosswords, is doing the crossword over coffee.

1100. Final construction session. Blitz cluing. GRASS: Kind of skirt, "Weed," Writer Gunter (no one likes). Some words get us riled. AIR: Folk tune, Fresh, Light as ____, ____ Supply, Scuba diver's need, Tank supply.

SKIPOLE: "Mogul's personal assistant" says Leslie, which gets a laugh, but, as Joel points out, doesn't quite work, because the mogul isn't the one using the pole; the mogul is being poled around. Natan enters "Winter plant?" which mostly gets a thumbs-up.

LAUREN (LAUREN, not LAURYN, and not Ralph LAUREN): "Humphrey's bride" gets axed because we want Bacall to earn the clue in her own right, not just through Bogie. "She taught Humphrey how to whistle" gets approved.

PEC. Michael says, "How about, 'short kiss.'" "That's 'PECK' with a K," the crowd chimes; "That's the point," says Michael; it's a "short" kiss. We have forty minutes, says Carol the retired State Department librarian; let's move on.

There are clues no one really cares about, LLC, RNA, INDIE, ALIG, they go without a fight. ELAN: Brio, that's nice, because it's also four letters. OOPS: Two alleys, Michael suggests, which gets little crowd support.

IT WORKS, can't be "It might be broken but" because there's an "it" in the answer; Triumphant shout; or, Joel suggests, Reason to keep an old appliance. Is it "it works" with a shrug, or "It works!", i.e., Eureka?

Captain Rebecca is a champion of theme density. GRASS, "Kind of skirt" is nice, she says, because it sort of brings to mind a Polynesian hula dancer. But precision trumps theme. She likes the idea of "Scuba diver's need" for AIR but can't quite get behind it because "It's not just a scuba diver who needs air – everybody needs air."

"But a pirate doesn't really have one leg – it's really a peg leg," Captain Rebecca says, so "Flamingo's support" edges out pirates, despite the theme.

1400. The final crossword event of the crossing: The Tournament. About 40 of the 60 are in ConneXion, the second-largest of the gatherings. Deb is our Master of Ceremonies, "Little Miss Sunshine," she calls herself. The other experts and their partners are judges.

There are three rounds to the crossword tournament.

The puzzlers divide into three camps. The expert solvers break away from the pack: Carol, Cathy, Captain Rebecca. They arrive early, stake out their seats, arrange their pencils and

reading glasses, make sure they have a clear sight line to the timer. The largest group is the happy medium. They want to do well, but they're not concerned with coming in first. Participation trophies, all around. The third group are the competitive complainers, loudly proclaiming their lack of skill, either to defend themselves against their poor result, or to cry wolf and act surprised when they pull out a victory. "I'll sit in the back of the room!" says Claire. "I'm hopeless anyway. I'm so slow. I'm never going to finish this."

In between the crosswords are more crosswords. When the puzzlers finish the competition solve, and they've a few minutes to themselves before the time runs out, they do more crosswords. Leslie and Christi pull out books of crosswords, *NYT* compendia. Carol pulls up a word game on her iPad, something between a crossword and Scrabble, building a board as the clues float up at you.

A few renegades find other activities. Andre, the Bloomberg journalist, brings out a book with words that run in sentences and paragraphs. Claire pulls out her phone but keeps her palm surreptitiously over the screen; she's playing Solitaire.

Michael the retired nuclear radiologist, quibbles with a clue in the third puzzle: "10-Down was OXYGEN, and then there was a clue that said, 'Compound with 10-Down,' DIOXIDE, but that's not technically a compound."

Solitaire Claire isn't in the running for the win, but despite her remonstrations, she finishes all three puzzles with enough time to spare between them that she also finishes her solitaire hand. "Yes," she says to her phone in a stage whisper.

1700. Cathy pulls off the win, we learn. Captain Rebecca, a hearty second. She's not pleased, but she'll accept.

1800. "What have you discovered?" Leslie leans toward me, the last night at dinner.

2300. Final deadline to settle up the bill and make any cash payments at the Purser's Office. The claws come out. The woman in front of me, every curve visible under her red cocktail dress, waves her shellacked red nails at the receptionist. See, she says, I paid for this manicure on board, and they cut my fingers here, and here, and here, I want this charge taken off. Did you speak to the manager at the spa, says the receptionist, that's a different company, and they're closed for the night. I spoke to the person who did my nails. But did you speak to the manager. I want the charge taken off. Did you fill out your comment card, the receptionist finally tries. Yes. But did you put it in the box. No. You should do that, the receptionist says.

The man in front of me is paying his bill entirely in cash, pulling out an infinite array of crisp twenties from a slim wallet case as capacious as Mary Poppins's carpet bag.

0000. By midnight, our bags have to be outside our staterooms, tagged, to be disappeared into the stockhold. The "Mr. and Mrs." sign is still intact outside the stateroom on Deck 7, and there are two suitcases with twinned ribbons outside their berth, so I assume that they've survived Norm's Curse of the Cruise Newlyweds.

0100. No one can sleep. Ben Zimmer, the lexicographer, and his wife, Maria, and I find ourselves in the Carinthia Lounge. Ben says that Captain Rebecca was in it to win it. She had the fastest time in the tournament after the first and second rounds, but was edged out easily in the third puzzle, only came in fifth or sixth. To be fair, there were timer issues, and the judges had to figure out a system on the spot, and in the kerfluffle and the whispering that Rebecca had to shush, she might have been rattled, lost her groove, been thrown off her flow, and so Cathy could swoop in for the overall championship.

Maria hypothesizes that some of the crowd has picked up crosswords because of studies showing that crosswords can stave off dementia. My father, she says, has started doing those Jumbo Easy Crosswords. But your father isn't demented, Ben says to her.

Chicken-and-egg: if you've the kind of mind that likes crosswords, or wants to prevent yourself from getting dementia, perhaps you aren't as prone to dementia in the first place. Studies don't quite show that crosswords stave off dementia; they put it off, to be sure, by a good two to three years, but then once the mind starts to decline, it goes fast, even more rapidly than the gradual decline of a non-solver. You can put off losing your mind, but the mind will still lose you: you can run, but you can't run away for ever.

Day 8. Port Day.

0645. Wake up in Southampton. I go out on the promenade, run around and around on solid ground. The smokers are out smoking. A line of white cars is driving by beneath me,

too close together, but then I realize it's one white car, towing the rest, like a chain of rubber ducks.

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