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Warner, Marina (2020) Unknowability and pleasure: the case of the vanishing referent. *Social Research* 87 (1), ISSN 0037-783X. (In Press)

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## Running footer: Unknowability and Pleasure

Marina Warner

### Unknowability and Pleasure: The Case of the Vanishing Referent

#### <A>MYSTERIOUS KÔR

Soon after experiencing the Blitz in London, the Anglo-Irish author, Elizabeth Bowen, published a short story that has become one of her most admired and best loved writings: “Mysterious Kôr” (Bowen 1999, 728–40). Kôr sounds to the ear like the *core* of something, and indeed in the story it figures as an ultimate elsewhere, which the story’s heroine, Pepita, yearns to reach. Arthur, “Pepita’s boy,” is on leave, but the lovers have nowhere to go. The moon is full, and London eerily, implacably illuminated; as she wanders with Arthur, Kôr appears to the protagonist in her mind’s eye: an elusive, distant place, its mysteriousness intensified by its name, attached to no known city on the globe, the circumflex on the O adding glamour and exoticism to the monosyllable’s percussive sound. But the word also conjures London as “a ghost city” that cannot be known.

Bowen’s story is spiky, reproducing in its jagged, interrupted scenes and brusque relations the enigma of the imaginary lost and enchanted city where Pepita later drifts. Frustrated, exasperated by the littleness of the here and now, Pepita, sleeping uneasily in her moon-washed room, later dreams of Kôr.

Kôr first appears in the 1886–87 novel *She* by Rider Haggard, a creator of torrid imperialist adventures, including *King Solomon’s Mines*; his virulent fantasies epitomize the passionate repulsion and attraction that the empire-builders felt for the territories the British and others had invaded and taken possession of, which they often cast as female in their mental imagery. (As Hélène Cixous identified in her classic work, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” women were a dark continent too [Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 1976, 877–8]). Kôr is a queendom ruled by Ayesha—“She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed”—who has passed through the fire of eternal life. At the arrival of the explorer hero Leo Vincey, however, She crumbles into dust, her body and her dominion laid to waste by the advent of the white man and the modern world.

Bowen read *She* when she was 12 and, in a radio talk in 1947, singled it out as a turning point of her life. “The book,” she said in a radio interview, “stands for the first totally violent impact I ever received from print. After *She*, print was to fill me with apprehension. I was prepared to handle any book like a bomb.” In this talk for the BBC, Bowen went on to make

the crucial point that “it was not the woman that attracted her ... but the man Holly, the writer [in the story]. It was he [Holly] ‘not ever, really, She-who-must-be-obeyed, who controlled the magic’ ... It was ‘the ‘power of the pen ... ‘the inventive pen’ that was the revelation, the ‘power in the cave’ ....” (Haule 1986, 206).

The scholar James M. Haule comments, very perceptively: “Though it is the writer’s power that Bowen acknowledged openly, the image of the female capable of a power beyond moral control would not be forgotten. It would return in her work in various guises; but like *She*, it would be always ‘veiled, veiled’” (1986, 206).

The image of Kôr communicates a heady fin-de-siècle mixture of women, death, desire, beauty, exoticism. Haggard is riffing on the lost cities of the desert in *A Thousand and One Nights*, and especially the tale called *The City of Brass*, where everything is stilled around the effigy of its queen, who is mummified, her eye sockets filled with quicksilver so she looks alive; round her bier stand automata who slice off the head of anyone approaching her body to take the jewels that cover her. Bowen likewise explicitly invokes territorial ambitions of empire, but Kôr, the matriarchal ghost city, lies beyond their—our—reach. These associations hover in her story, and the effect is highly charged, thrilling as if live adrenalin were delivered directly from the Haggard novel via Bowen’s moonlit scenes into our nervous system as we read. When I was a little girl I read many Haggard volumes, including *She*; later, in 1965, I saw the film. Few can forget—I have never forgotten—Ursula Andress shattering into a pile of dust.

“Mysterious Kôr,” summoned again by Bowen’s own inventive pen, exemplifies the state of unknowability that beckons to writers, artists, and composers: if it can be captured in words, images, and/or sounds, it carries intense powers of suggestion and constitutes a whole territory of aesthetic frisson and delight.

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Unknowability ranges widely: either it implies a mystery lying behind the object that is perceived to exist but whose nature remains unknown, or it conveys a sense that there is a space where something unknown exists that ipso facto cannot be known. It is a quality of the divine for these reasons, linked to the ineffable, the invisible, the inapprehensible.

Unknowability is not the equivalent of unintelligibility or of incomprehensibility—they convey different shades of meaning. Something unknowable isn’t known to anyone else, whereas incomprehensibility rises and falls in relation to its surroundings and receivers: Dutch is double Dutch to me, but clear—comprehensible—to anyone who knows the

language. Something can be incomprehensible for mutable reasons—a weak radio signal, lack of preparation beforehand in approaching a task, growing deafness, or a language one does not know and cannot even identify—after Babel. But there is a form of unknowability that offers no purchase on sense. Its meaning edges close to the attributes of God, as I said: ineffable, hidden, secret, resistant to interpretation or understanding, asking to be accepted for what it is as far as it is manifest at all. It does not signify a referent beyond, at least not one that is available.

(Incidentally, the aphorism about known unknowns and unknown unknowns, which has been so widely and admiringly credited to Donald Rumsfeld, is done so quite wrongly. I had heard it years before, in a talk given by Robin Grove-White, who was then the director of Greenpeace. The phrase was circulating in environmental circles at the time (and has older antecedents, as several participants in the “Unknowability” conference pointed out) (Aaradau and Van Munster 2011, 6–7).)

Unknowability overlaps with unintelligibility and inscrutability and hints at unpredictability, as with the oracles at Delphi, which were not incomprehensible but riddling: they promised to reveal something about the future, and when their words were fulfilled, the meaning had moved from opacity to clarity but in an unexpected and unknowable direction—the referents flipped and switched trickily. The weird sisters foretold that no man born of woman would harm Macbeth and that he would not be defeated until Birnam Wood had moved to Dunsinane. What the words said is not unintelligible, but what they meant, the knowledge they conveyed, was hidden. Unintelligibility can result from a deliberate intent to frustrate knowledge; childhood riddles, playful nonsense, and oddly memorable forms of enigmatic expression belong in this unreachable, seductive territory.

Opening a window onto these states of the unknowable reveals how language reaches far beyond known data, how words pass beyond the epistemic border to create beings and things that cannot be verified but are nevertheless experienced (Cave 2016). In its cognitive, aesthetic manifestations, unknowability contains expressions beyond testing, tending to nonsense, meaninglessness. Furthermore, because this form of unknowability can also lead to surprise and delight, the perspective afforded by affect theory, as explored by Karin Littau, Lauren Berlant, and others, applies to understanding its attractions (Littau 2006; Berlant 2011, 53). Unknowability produces sensations; perplexities are sources of pleasure, and the wide field of nonsense excites responses that will make a reader or an audience shiver, gasp, and smile inwardly ... and even outwardly (Sewell 1952, Stewart 1989). Jonathan Swift praised writing nonsense as an exercise in comic energy, in the will to live: “I am now trying

an experiment which is very frequent among Modern authors; which is to write upon Nothing: when the subject is utterly exhausted, let the pen still move on; by some called the ghost of Wit, delighted to walk after the death of its body” (Stewart 1989, 143).

From the Bible to nursery rhymes, much-loved stories and poems are filled with words, images, and allusions, which are purposefully baffling. They may have once meant something that was generally known and understood, but these referents have vanished. Or they may have begun as pure delight in rigmarole and nonsense. But in either case, they have acceded to a state of unknowability, unknowability as impenetrability and impossibility.

Many Biblical phrases, for example, have become proverbial, but have lost connection to common knowledge, and have thereby gained in that seductive power that Mysterious Kôr embodies: “rose of Sharon,” “eyeless in Gaza,” “Gadarene swine,” “the golden calf,” “the widow’s cruse,” and “balm of Gilead.” The mind of the reader or listener constructs these images without effort, in spite of their distance from lived experience. For example, in a damp, wet country like England, rain isn’t longed for as keenly as it is in the Psalms (at least not until recently, when climate change has brought drought). Yet the many verses casting God as a generous rainmaker, dropping dew from heaven and plumping the harvest, reflect the needs of inhabitants of arid, stony landscapes. And many more examples could be given of depths of disconnection between the imagery of the Bible and the climate and circumstances of its readers in, say, New Jersey or Surrey. Yet the lines are thrilling: “*I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. / As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters*” (Song of Solomon 2: 1–2). Like so much of the imagery of the Bible, such lines infuse the territory where the sacred stories happen with sensuous, voluptuous pleasures.

Regarding “Balm of Gilead,” the expression is usually used figuratively, to mean solace. The phrase can also be used interchangeably with “manna from heaven”—a sudden windfall, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow (calls for funding from supporters sometimes invoke it: the magazine *Cabinet* asks donors, “Please mark the envelope ‘Balm from Gilead’”). But mostly, the phrase conveys a hope for a reprieve from discontent, for a return to wellbeing of mind and body. Balm of Gilead acts as a broad-spectrum panacea (it was offered as a remedy against male masturbation by a Victorian apothecary, who thereby made a fortune). Since the first classification systems, botanists have hunted high and low to match the Bible’s mention with real-life species: they seem to have settled on the myrrh bush, *commiphora*. But not many of us, hearing the phrase, Balm of Gilead, would call up in our mind’s eyes that dry, barbed, scraggy desert shrub. “Balm of/from/in Gilead” thus represents another of those proverbial sayings from the Bible that stick because they’re unfamiliar: they

contract their claws into the mind even though they elude immediate meaning. Again, the referents are lost or at least vague; the words have become disconnected from shared circumstances of author and reader and moved closer to nonsense. They then exercise on us the strange and sensuous attractions of unknowability.

Throughout the Bible, the ultimate sacred places are conjured by equally strange and exotic substances; paradise itself is clothed in incomprehensible words, no longer attached to phenomena close at hand. God says to Moses, “Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight: And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy” (Exodus 30: 34–5). Stachte, onycha, galbanum—they sound wonderful, opulent. But what are they? Likewise, in the New Testament, the vision of the New Jerusalem, arrayed as gloriously as a new bride, emblazoned with jewels, descends from heaven. When I first encountered this vision in the course of readings during the Mass, I was dazzled but knew nothing of what was being invoked. I still have only a fuzzy idea of what in the real world her apparel might consist of: “Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone *was* thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created” (Ezekiel 28: 13).

What is sardius? What is a carbuncle doing in Eden? What are tabrets?

This arcane lexicon includes pervasive, accepted instances of unknowability, occurring in the foundational text of Western society, sacred scripture, which has provided English speakers with catchphrases that beckon readers and listeners from beyond the horizon of existing knowledge. No matter what the words mean or refer to or how these subjects exist in reality, they make music, and the sounds and pictures they create are seductive and palpitate with life.

The experience is not confined to ancient texts. Encounters with secular literature, especially early on in a reader’s life, can inspire the shock of recognition through the sheer music and pattern of the work, not its meanings: the first time I came across “The Waste Land,” in *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (Roberts and Ridler, 1959), I was transported, finding myself somewhere never known till then and yet, while startling and wonderful, altogether recognizable, even as I did not grasp what T. S. Eliot was writing about. The precise referents did not matter, but rather the weave of images and sounds and their intrinsic

unknowability produced a potent and long-lasting alteration in my receiving consciousness: this was a new, potent source of pleasure.

Kôr—the core—forever beckons us, an intimation of an ultimate and magical elsewhere.

**[Comp: Section break—set first line in small caps]**

In this short essay, I can only offer a rough sketch, a *bozzo*, and I know I shall be trampling on rich fields carefully drilled and seeded and planted by philosophers, linguistics scholars, and philologists. However, I am trying to feel my way towards a zone of aesthetic and literary delight, where unknowability edges towards impossibility, holds the attention, and provokes laughter and gaiety alongside puzzlement. As the Queen in *Through the Looking Glass* declares to Alice, “Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!” (Carroll and Haughton 1998, 174).

I am going to single out expressions of this state of unknowability on a rising scale of deliberate unintelligibility. First, nursery rhymes: anonymous, vernacular songs and verses, they offer a case study in expressions that no longer convey knowledge of what they once meant, if they ever meant anything at all. Secondly, works of wild acoustic improvisation, such as Edith Sitwell’s *Façade*, present exercises in verbal play beyond the borders of sense. Thirdly, the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters’s *Ursonate* dispenses with words almost completely, to stage a performance of virtuoso babble, with hardly a glimmering of sense, which still releases a blast of joyous, liberating energy.

But before I continue, I must acknowledge that to be at a loss in a morass of unknowability can be very unpleasant indeed. In the UK, the continuing process of Brexit shows us that while the maze of incomprehensible documentation in which refugees find themselves adds greatly to their ordeal. And what the future holds for us all after the coronavirus lockdown remains a painfully unanswerable question.

**<A>NURSERY RHYMES**

Creating unknowable scenes by acts of imagination serves multiple literary and intellectual purposes: it flourishes the promise of ungraspable mysteries made by language but beyond all known languages, beyond Babel, and, as mentioned above, it consequently sharpens epistemic vigilance—or should do—by drawing attention to the creative and meaning-making power of language itself. Such nonsense offers the chance to exhibit virtuoso ingenuity in making verbal music; it provokes physical responses—laughter and pathos and puzzlement, and

sometimes delight; it allows the pleasures of the light fantastic, gives permission to frivolity, even silliness, a faculty of our story-making species. It also sobers us up: delivered into the liberty of unknowability, its inventions indicate the infinite potential conjugations of language and sounds.

Nursery rhymes rarely have identifiable authors and they are recorded with multiple variations, as they are found in different parts of the country and the world. The English literary tradition is exceptionally rich in evoking the unknown and the unknowable, often through the nursery tradition:

How many miles to Babylon?  
 Three score miles and ten  
 Can I get there by candlelight?  
 Yes and back again.  
 If your heels are nimble and light  
 You can get there by candlelight. (Opie and Opie 1997, 73–75)

Scholars hunt down the origins of these rhymes and produce revealing research, but when you discover that the fine lady on a white horse was so-and-so, or that Lewis Carroll had such-and-such in mind when he summoned the fabulous Jabberwock, the mysterious Kôr-like character of the verses remains undiminished. These forms of literature, including fairy tales, riddles, and proverbial phrases, deliver a frisson of mystery and/or absurdity that is often memorably sensuous and enticing.

Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle  
 The cow jumped over the moon  
 The little dog laughed to see such fun  
 And the dish ran away with the spoon. (Opie and Opie 1997, 203–4)

Playfully, they proceed by concatenations and accumulation, heaping up travesties of cause and effect:

There was a man of double deed,  
 Who sowed his garden full of seed;  
 When the seed began to grow,



'Twas like a garden full of snow;  
 When the snow began to melt,  
 'Twas like a ship without a belt;  
 When the ship began to sail,  
 'Twas like a bird without a tail;  
 When the bird began to fly,  
 'Twas like an eagle in the sky;  
 When the sky began to roar,  
 'Twas like a lion at my door;  
 When my door began to crack,  
 'Twas like a stick across my back;  
 When my back began to smart,  
 'Twas like a penknife in my heart;  
 And when my heart began to bleed,  
 'Twas death, and death, and death indeed. (Opie and Opie 1997, 286–87)

The poet and literary scholar Susan Stewart, in *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, first published in 1980, commented warmly on the infinity of possibilities that such poems unfold. Although she does not place the genre in a landscape of unknowability as such, her analysis flourishes this prospect:

All these forms of play with infinity—nesting circularity, the series, and the causal chain—are ways of showing the infinite connectability of all things and the arbitrariness of most connections—the mechanics of the composability that is textuality. The problems of “where to begin” and “where to end” are placed in a paradoxical context of timelessness that is the fictive universe itself....

With this method of making nonsense the center—the place of privileged signification—drops out and all that is left is a voice infinitely tracing itself into an infinite domain. (Stewart 1989, 143)

The rich fictionality of the poems, and their undercurrent of unease and violent matter-of-factness, inspired the Portuguese-born artist Paula Rego to make a series of prints illustrating *Nursery Rhymes* (1990). The sooty chiaroscuro of her heavily inked plates, the

fearsome disproportionate scale of animals to humans, and intensely realist renderings of the fantastic events the verses describe, intensify the strangeness of this traditional material. (see images at <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/paula-rego-nursery-rhymes-little-miss-muffett-iii>) Further examples of artifacts made by known artists and authors, to which I am now going to turn, were created close to each other in time, during a period in the early 1920s when artists in all media set out to shatter complacency, disrupt received decorum, and explode aesthetic conventions.

### <A>EDITH SITWELL

*Façade* was set to music by the composer William Walton and was first performed privately in 1922 (Sitwell 1953; excerpts from the recording are available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5AlUOJs2dI>). The sequence of poems and songs has gone through many changes of selection and arrangement; the final 21 poems were chosen by the poet 20 years later, while the final score was only published in 1951. But in all its permutations and performances, the work displays virtuoso linguistic high jinks: tongue-twisting, riddling images, names, and words cascade rapidly from the performer's lips. Properly structured according to syntax and grammar, the images are purposefully dizzying and bamboozling: sense swerves by, half-glimpsed, fugitive, and when it does assemble into some kind of a mental object, its meaning can't be grasped: it is what it is, not anything known or knowable.

The work is a *jeu d'esprit*, a *capriccio*. It is now rather neglected, and it has stirred up convinced detractors, as does Edith Sitwell herself. She was her own principal masterpiece, presenting herself as a highly wrought effigy, her unusual, elongated features elaborately jewelled and coiffed and photographed by numerous famous photographers, like the queen from the City of Brass). *Façade* is carefully named: the sequence is highly artificial and mannered and somehow resolutely mandarin, eccentric, and highfalutin. But in its defense, I would say Sitwell consciously fashions a tone of double-edged solemnity and heightens her poetry's prancing eccentricities by exaggerating her languid society airs on purpose—gleefully mocking herself and the social status she and her family belonged to.

As she wasn't trained to be a singer—indeed she deeply resented her lack of any education at all—her voice was too weak to be heard over the orchestra, and she therefore used a megaphone from behind a curtain, adding a twist to the general mischief of the event. Rosemary Hill has commented, “With *Façade*, ... she [Sitwell] invented something new, a

kind of Symbolist/Futurist performance poetry. Like her appearance, indeed her entire life, *Façade* treads fearlessly the fine line between the sublime and the ridiculous” (Hill 2011). In 1953, Sitwell recorded several poems from the suite, including “Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone.” She explained in a memoir, “It is about a couple of cats, do you see, having a love affair” (Salter 1967, 182). But this of course explains nothing at all.

The sequence weaves a cat’s cradle of different strings from various sources: Anglo-Saxon kennings or riddles, children’s verses, anonymous rhymes and ditties, skipping songs and ball game catches, the limericks of Edward Lear, parodies of hymns in the style of Lewis Carroll and any number of French Parnassians, European Symbolists and Surrealists, American modernists and Imagists. To this potent mixture, Sitwell tosses in lots of loan words and quirky proper names that give her the opportunity for rococo flourishes – for example, rhyming “Don Pasquito” with “mosquito.” But Sitwell isn’t derivative; she has her own distinctive ear and a remarkable facility for making new shapes with words, especially odd ones that in other hands would defeat rhyming. Walton set the poet’s verbal vortices to wind instruments and cello only, and similarly took his inspiration from folk tunes and dance rhythms, some very old—hornpipes and a tarantella and yodelling—and others more contemporary, but still popular, vernacular music—pasodobles and waltzes and foxtrots and polkas—and the sparkling tunes contrast absurdly with the frequently recondite lexical devices of the words. The resulting suite is packed with atmospheric, mimetic swoops and glissandos, rhythmic changes of pace and meter, chasing internal rhymes, and every trick of the verbal sound palette—onomatopoeia and assonance and alliteration—they are all there in a controlled but madcap profusion (see Greene (2001)).

Thirty years after *Façade*’s first performance, Noam Chomsky invented a sentence, which has become very well known, to illustrate how language can be arranged to be coherent syntactically but meaningless semantically: “Colorless green dreams sleep furiously” has a Sitwellian ring, though it is not quite as barbed or dandyish (Chomsky 1957, 15).

*Façade* and its accompanying music are not entirely nonsensical, as it happens. After listening again and again, certain themes in the poems emerge. Hell is there, and there are heavens elsewhere in many exotic, sunny, distant places—all of them mysterious Kôrs. Sitwell’s satire of the social background in which she was brought up inspires some characteristic stinging images. For example, the song “En Famille” ends with the couplet:

For Hell is just as properly proper  
As Greenwich, or as Bath, or Joppa! (Sitwell 1950, 94)

Certain personalities make repeat appearances: Lord Tennyson, Queen Victoria, lots of animals, and a whole host of fanciful black and “Oriental” figures who, like Eliot’s Madame Sesostris, and Haggard’s She, inhabit the realms of the beckoning unknowable.

Any member of the audience or reader of the poems would be hard put to give an account in other words of what is happening or summarize what is taking place, for example, in the rightly celebrated envoi “When/ Sir/ Beelzebub...”.

([https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=15083](https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=15083)) In 2007 the *Guardian* music critic made the ringing claim: “Rap music was invented in England by Dame Edith Sitwell in 1922 ... The words to the poems were chosen for their sound, colour and rhythm, and make very little sense ... they conjure up a sense of wonderment and weirdness” (Moore 2007).

Sitwell was drawing on a deep common well of acoustic associations as well as folklore and its patterns of rhythm and sound. It would be very misleading, however, to conclude that the aesthetic pleasures of the unknowable that she explored so playfully derive from forms of so-called low or demotic literature only. Much of her exoticism depends on allusions to sacred scripture, which is woven into the shared fabric of the English language, even among nonpractising Christians. Such exotic phrases as I explored above reverberate in Sitwell’s fancies, and make themselves heard in the cadences of her verse.

## <A>KURT SCHWITTERS

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a little before the making of *Façade*, the Dadaists took a primal nonsense syllable for their movement’s name, doubling the sound as babies do. One of their leading figures, Tristan Tzara, produced the movement’s irreverent manifestos in the form of kinetic and percussive prose, which glories in its affinity with nonsense. One of the most famous of these, the Dada Manifesto of 1918, declaimed in capital letters:

DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING

It then spun off into a delirious prose poem of associations, fertile, funny, rebellious, bad-tempered—raw kinetic and acoustic energy. The same year, one of Tzara’s co-conspirators, the artist and photographer Raoul Hausmann, began experimenting with phonetic poems, including, in 1919, “*Seelen-Automobil*” (Car-Souls), which does a fair imitation of a car of the period being cranked up and spluttering off. Hausmann pushed Dada’s mischief-making to new extremes of zaniness and pleasure, and experimented further with

sounds and invented languages. But, as in “Car-Souls,” his method was mimetic. His friend, the collagist and artist Kurt Schwitters, pressed even further into the territory of the unknowable. He was inspired by a poster poem Hausmann had made the year before, using random sequences of letters sampled from a page of type fonts. This strange beast came with the unreadable, unpronounceable title *fmsbwtözäu*.

If this cluster of letters were notes of music, we might not feel that something knowable was being deliberately withheld from us. But because these Dada works are made of language, not music, the relation of linguistic expression to communication of sense and knowledge is severed to explosive effect.

Following Hausmann’s cue, Schwitters then tackled making meaning from sheer noise in his wonderful eruption of sounds, the *Ursonate*. Written over a period of several years from 1921 to 1932, the *Ursonate* or *Sonate in Urlauten* (Sonata in Primal Sounds) is a supreme classic in the history of the iconoclastic imagination. It asks for a solo performer to sing four movements, marked “Introduction and Rondo,” “Largo,” “Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo,” and “Presto,” leading finally to the “Denouement” and a cadenza for the performer to improvise before the “Finale”. With this work, Schwitters was taking the idea of gobbledegook in a different direction, towards inspired, expressive, utter gibberish with almost no precise referents in sight or earshot.

*Ursonate* is 38 minutes long, and a tour de force for any singer—the English writer and artist George Melly was an outstanding interpreter. Like the word DADA itself, most of the sounds seem to be struggling towards meaning, without ever becoming fully intelligible.

One or two of the repeated sound clusters do form knowable concepts. “Rakete” is a rocket, for example, revealing the *Ursonate*’s creation in the aftermath of the first world war; the context of that carnage was brought out by the artist William Kentridge in 2017, when he performed it in the midst of an installation of his own drawings of the fighting. Schwitters also mixed into the Sonata “shortened inscriptions on company plaques and on printed matter, but especially ... inscriptions on railroad switch towers which always sound so interesting because one has no way of understanding them.” (Schwitters, 2002, 235)

This weird, tragicomic, unfamiliar music has a strange expressiveness, an array of emotions and responses, from jubilation to fury. Certain passages demand a certain stance from the performer, as Schwitters himself instructed, and these give motive to the dynamics of the outpouring. He commented for example on “the pure lyricism of the sung ‘Jüü-Kaa’ [to] the military severity of the rhythm of the quite masculine third theme next to the fourth theme which is tremulous and mild as a lamb, and lastly to the accusing finale of the first

movement, with the question, ‘tää?’”

(<http://members.peak.org/~dadaist/English/Graphics/ursonate.html>)

Schwitters performed it himself, by heart, and improvised a new cadenza each time. In this sense, the piece was unknowable till it was newly performed. One early recital, which took place in Potsdam in 1924 or 1925, was organized by a patron of the artist, and she invited her neighbors, some of the highest-ranking old country gentry of Prussia. Hans Richter, the filmmaker and artist, was present and reported on the event afterwards. Schwitters began to perform the *Ursonate*, “complete with hisses, roars and crowings... As he recited, ‘Lanke trr gll (munter)/pe pe pe pe pe /Ooka ooka ooka ooka,’ at first the old Junkers in their white ties and tails boggled at what they were hearing and tried to contain themselves, but soon they went pink, then puce, then blue until one finally could not control himself any longer and with his sudden burst of laughter, the whole audience could not contain itself ... Schwitters crescendoed, drove his voice to rise above the uproar, and re-asserted his command of them.” (Richter, 1965, 142-3); quoted Shaw, 12; Feiereisen and Merley Hill 2012, 147). “The result was fantastic,” concluded Richter, “the same generals, the same rich old ladies, who had previously laughed until they cried, now came to Schwitters, again with tears in their eyes, almost stuttering with admiration and gratitude. Something had been opened up within them, something they had never expected to feel: a great joy” (Richter, 1965, 142-3); quoted Shaw, 12; Feiereisen and Merley Hill 2012, 147).

The rise of the Nazis drove Schwitters into exile; he fled to England and was interned on the Isle of Man. There he performed his work for his fellow inmates. One amused listener reported, after one reading of the poem, that internees began greeting each other with the expression “ooka ooka,” a sound taken from *Ursonate*.

Once in London after the war, Schwitters found his work did not have the same effect on London friends, and he decided to translate it. “English word play is not German word play,” he wrote in a letter to Edith Tschibold on December 10, 1944. He recognized that even in the state of raw, pre-semantic noise, verbal locutions belong to a particular language. Primal sounds aren’t universal: even *Ursonates* belong phonetically to distinct languages, however Ur-like and universal “Mama” and “Dada” might be in the dim dark mists of time. There is no passkey to sound and meaning, as culture forms the noises of nonsense just as deeply as it forms the sounds that make sense. This is a fascinating aspect of the nonsense poetry tradition: it needs to be rendered into another language, and can be, by agile interpreters.

The original *Ursonate* has continued to have extreme and wonderful impact on listeners. George Melly, for example, found himself one night alone—and no doubt a bit oiled—in the small hours in a town in the English provinces, and was set upon by muggers. They thought they had an easy mark on their hands, but Melly began to blast out Schwitters's *Ursonate*—at which his attackers took to their heels (Melly loved to tell this story, with associated sound effects).

During the early 1920s, in the Soviet Union, another poet artist, Velimir Khlebnikov, also experimented with nonsense and composed poems in invented languages to confound his readers' expectations that they would encounter something comprehensible. The extraordinary, exuberant experiments of the Russian poet and wordsmith of the invented language called *Zaum* make the point that rendering language goes beyond semantics into the vast regions of sound sense (Haughton 1988, 371–75; Gussow 1987).

The decade was exceptionally active in these journeys beyond the known, firm ground where language is designed to convey meaning and verbal artifacts form the building blocks of knowledge. Paradoxically, encounters with Sitwell, Schwitters, and Khlebnikov add to our sum of knowledge of what is possible, even while they disrupt our reliance on language as a vehicle of communicating something that can be understood and lead to knowledge. Or, you could say, their innovations test the general understanding of what knowledge is and how it is gained.

## <A>CONCLUSION

Absurd concoctions, contrivances, and sound actions have gained favor with audiences and readers today because certain conditions of contemporary life have increased the recognition they inspire and increased the attraction of the liberation they offer. Like the years of tension and disaster in the early twentieth century, the first decades of the new millennium present unresolvable difficulties. In some ways, turning a pig's ear into a silk purse spurs on artists and writers, and they attend to the global traffic, the flows of peoples and of information on the world wide web, and the babel-like hubbub around us in order to find inspiration—and reprieve. Travelling on the tube or the subway in great cities, surfing the web, we encounter many more languages than ever before. In the last two years, I have heard many refugees in Sicily, who have crossed the Mediterranean, speaking languages whose names I did not even know before: Bambara, Fula or Pular, and Wolof, all widely used in West Africa. Deriving pleasure rather than fear from their unfamiliarity can be thought of as a powerful, transformative stratagem—by analogy with tragedy, which turns horror and calamity into an

audience's emotional and aesthetic satisfaction. Such works reel us into their toils in ways that help us relax into strangeness. They also exhilarate because they suggest the infinity of permutations possible in sound systems and potential languages.

The attraction of the unknowable appears to be intensifying, as many recent and current forays into this area, many of them by women, seem to be receiving attention. The Italian artist Ketty La Rocca, for example, who died in 1976 at the age of 37, was searching through her work for freedom outside the given languages of postwar conventions in Italy. She was active in the *poesie visive* (visual poetry) group in the 1960s and '70s, and began to experiment with works called *Riduzioni* (Reductions): she treated found photographs of leaders—General de Gaulle, Moshe Dayan—and of femmes fatales—Ava Gardner in *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, Marilyn Monroe—and of socially acceptable customs—first communions, weddings, for example. She “reduced” them, emptied them of their designs on the beholder and the ideology they carried, by tracing their principal outlines in handwritten texts she called “*testi nonsense*” (La Rocca 2001, 186–88). These quote directly from English nonsense songs and riddles and jumble up fragments, rather as the Fool does in *King Lear*. She would then carry on, across a sequence of drawings, with the process of disfiguration, until the original image disappears into a mesh of light and heavy lines and strokes; in other words, it becomes erased, reduced to nonsense, unknowable—and then emerges in a new, inscrutable form. A classic bourgeois ideal, an image of a mother and son, for example, was submitted to this process of iconoclasm in 1974 (“Madre e Figlio” 1974; La Rocca 2001, 158–59; [https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2017/02/mostra-pittura-fotografia-fondazione-del-monte-bologna/attachment/ketty-la-rocca-una-madre-1974-courtesy-of-the-ketty-la-rocca-estate\\_xl/](https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2017/02/mostra-pittura-fotografia-fondazione-del-monte-bologna/attachment/ketty-la-rocca-una-madre-1974-courtesy-of-the-ketty-la-rocca-estate_xl/)).

More recently, I witnessed another radical experiment in abolishing sense, at a startling concert in Ljubljana in May 2019: two young female singers, standing close together facing each other, improvised a duet, beat-boxing in counterpoint, in a sustained babble of gurgles, gargles, whistles, whines, snorts, clicks, and hisses. They were taking cues from each other, improvising and ad-libbing in an astonishing feat of vocalized music and meaningless babble. As an act of reciprocal cue-giving between young women, it was exhilarating—hilarious and extreme. (An earlier performance from 2016 features one of the singers, Tea Vidmar, improvising with Anja Kravanja at the opening of the Mirko Malle exhibition, *From a miniaturist's diaries*, April 5, 2016; see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttgi\\_K\\_CH98](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttgi_K_CH98).)

It seems that the spirit of Dada—and of the playground—still leaps with life in the Baltic.



In relation to the threatening era of digitized artificial intelligence, such exercises in unknowable meanings make startlingly original clusters and patterns with words and sounds. I am told by a friend, who is far more cybernetically agile than I am, that encryption, so essential to transactions on the web, is constantly striving to attain a state beyond knowability to prevent the code being cracked. If this is the case, the capacity of generating unknowable mental objects, such as a cow jumping over the moon or Sir Beelzebub calling for his syllabub, might be considered a desirable and unique mark of the human, a space of human distinctiveness from the robot.

### <A>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Antonia Karaisl very much indeed for her help with this research; Spela Fric for her invitation to Ljubljana; and Arien Mack for inspiring thoughts on the topic in the first place at the stimulating conference she organized in 2019.

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