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"A Melancholy Meditation on the False Millennium": Time, nonsense, and humour in the works of Edward Gorey

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ABSTRACT

Edward Gorey's works are commonly set within a hybrid Victorian/Edwardian period and often elicit further confusion by containing comically anachronistic details and a nonsensical approach to time, all of which leads to Gorey's characteristic "bewildering temporality" (Shortsleeve 2018: 104). As this paper shows with examples from *The Broken Spoke* (1976), *The Object-Lesson* (1958), and *The Water Flowers* (1976), Gorey employs manipulations of temporal boundaries within the framework of nonsense, such as simultaneity, digression, and repetition, which suggest timelessness and infinity. These are devices that necessarily draw the reader's attention to the form, structure, and pattern of Gorey's works, and the same is true of his intertextual quotation and nonsensical rearrangement of time-related motifs from other texts, as in the case of his parodic transplantation of Charles Dickens' device of time-traveling ghosts (*The Haunted Tea-Cosy*, 1997). Nevertheless, despite a self-referential flaunting of form, Gorey's works frequently accomplish a seriocomic confusion of tone that complicates any simplified reading of his tales as exclusively humorous. This effect, which has elicited descriptions of Gorey's work as "radiat[ing] a melancholy and an existential unease" (Kindley

2018), is to some extent accomplished by his relatively frequent depiction of ghosts and apparitions, which inherently point toward the question of time, indicating both the past and the future. The paper concludes by exploring what implications such a bidirectional movement can have on the reader's experience when encountering Gorey's mysterious spectres.

Keywords: Edward Gorey, humour, nonsense, spectre, time

"It has occurred to me I erred Two years ago – or three,
Or was it four? Or maybe more When I took Q.R.V.?"
Edward Gorey, *Q.R.V. Ḥikuptaḥ: A Dozen Dogear Wryde Postcards* (1996)

1. INTRODUCTION

In the American illustrator and author Edward Gorey's (1925-2000) picturebooks, time and place are curious, fluid categories, sometimes shifting from one panel to another within the same work. And while the question of where the action takes place in Gorey's picturebooks is certainly never easy to answer, the question of time often requires even more deliberation. Gorey's books seem to be set in a period that is "vaguely Victorian, Edwardian, and Jazz Age all at once" (Dery 2018: 4), exhibiting characteristics of both British and American cultures, while Gorey himself frequently claimed in interviews that his works were set in, or around, 1910 (Shortsleeve 2002). His own style of illustration usually compounds the problem, since his "meticulous hachuring and pointillist cross-hatching, so intensely applied as to be almost painful in its exquisite punctiliousness" (Harvey 2014), are so reminiscent of Victorian illustrators that they lead "most newcomers to his work [...] to think that he is a long-dead Victorian illustrator" (Theroux 2000: 159). Michael Heyman echoes this point, claiming that Gorey's work "*looks* so Victorian- *cum*-Edwardian English that many folk believed him to be English – and dead long before his actual demise" (Heyman 2017: 60). Evidently, there is much within and about Gorey's work that elicits confusion. It is the aim of this paper to explore how Gorey's manipulations of narrative time and the conflations of signifiers of various periods often involve anachronisms, paradoxes, simultaneity, and repetition, as well as what are the characteristic techniques of literary nonsense. At the same time, Gorey's humour will be traced as it emerges from his creation of a comically unstable timeframe, a "false millennium" (Gorey 2007e) that stretches across Gorey's oeuvre while suggesting a

provocative present absence located between his depictions of the Victorian/Edwardian period and the Jazz Age: a spectre haunting our reading of a noticeable temporal gap at the heart of his work.

2. THE TIME IS DOUBLE-JOINTED

As Eden Lee Lackner has shown, most of Gorey's works employ elements of certain genres popular in the 19th century (such as melodrama, detective fiction, or Gothic horror), and his illustrative style integrates ample period-specificity, such as clothing or inventions from a certain decade of the Victorian era. However, "Gorey does not cleave to Victorian realities" and instead "often includes anachronistic details, such as the canvas shoes the creature wears in *The Doubtful Guest* (1957) – a shoe not mass produced until the early twentieth century in the midst of a late nineteenth century setting – subtly signalling the piece's modernity" (Lackner 2015: 12). Moreover, Lackner demonstrates how Gorey depicts "nineteenth century tropes outside of their true historical contexts" (Ibid. 13) as part of his representation of modern misconceptions regarding the Victorian period, using "historical framing as a way to explore popular modern conceptions of the era rather than attempting to faithfully represent nineteenth century life" (Ibid. 12). Gorey himself commented on his unique style, specifically pointing out his fusion of various time periods:

> The whole genre of nineteenth century book illustration—steel and wood engravings—holds a fascination for me. There's something in that technique that appealed to me strongly. I'd pore over these books and of course everyone in them was in period costume. I do think period costume is more interesting to draw. My stuff is seldom very accurate Victorian or Edwardian of course. And at times I have little deviations into the Twenties. I have, occasionally, drawn contemporary stuff, but I wouldn't do it on my own work, simply because my ideas don't lend themselves to contemporary life. (Tobias 2001 [1974]: 21-22)

The confusion of Gorey with some "long-dead Victorian illustrator" is relatively understandable as Gorey uses his "detailed cross-hatching" and "amazingly complicated pen-and-ink work" (Theroux 2000: 159) in his depiction of costumes, environments, types of behaviour, and social functions reminiscent of Victorian society and the period's authors and illustrators. However, as Gorey himself points out in the interview

quoted above, his version of Victorians and Edwardians is "seldom very accurate", and the disconnect between form and content becomes especially pronounced in his infrequent "deviations into the Twenties". Gorey's densely cross-hatched style can appear anachronistic to this period, and the effect is amplified when several time frames appear to overlap within single panels, all sharing Gorey's characteristic drawing style. One example of this can be seen in the illustration used for the cover of *Edward Gorey Coloring Book* (2017), in which Victorian and Edwardian characters are shown together with a woman (seen prostrate in the lower right corner of the panel) sporting a distinct Louise Brooks bob haircut. A similar example is found on the cover illustration for Gorey's *The Betrayed Confidence Revisited: Ten Series of Postcards* (2014), which shows six characters from different time periods, all seen reading or writing a postcard.

Gorey repeatedly employed the postcard form from the 1950s to the 1990s (Bradford 2014), while occasionally relying on his signature comic anachronism, and perhaps in no other title is this done both so systematically and humorously as in *The Broken Spoke* (1976), a collection of thirty postcards, all related to bicycling. *The Broken Spoke* features many styles of illustration, ranging from cave paintings to medieval drawings and impressionist watercolours, with bicycles either visually represented or referenced in the text. Bicycles appear painted on "the wall of a cave near Afazia, Ohio" (Gorey 1983: 4[1]), worshipped by a kneeling native "in the Tediola Archipėlago" (Ibid. 7), incorporated into a "[n]ineteenth century Japanese stencil: bats and bicycles" (Ibid. 23), and even as an instrument of execution in the medieval "Martyrdom of St Egfroth" (Ibid. 8). If, as Irwin Terry (the prominent collector of all things Gorey and author of the blog *Goreyana*) maintains, the implication is that Gorey intended the book to "look like someone's collection of postcards that had been collected from different parts of the world over a long period of time" (Terry 2009), the book's organization undermines expectations of chronological progression. Instead of beginning with the "cave painting" postcard, as might be expected, the book opens with the appropriately titled "The First Ride", an imitation of a 19th century sepia photograph of a heavily moustachioed man on a bicycle, with an infant precariously leaning out of a basket strapped to the back of the vehicle. This is followed by a postcard, the illustration showing a man in a suit with a bowler hat standing next to his "famous Unreflecting Bicycle": indeed, while the man is reflected on

1 As the pages of most of Gorey's works are not numbered, I will refer to individual panels throughout this paper.

the surface of a lake, his bicycle is not. This enigmatic occurrence, together with the man's outward appearance and the motif of (non-) reflection, suggests a connection with René Magritte's *Empire of Light* (*L'empire des lumières*, 1954) (but may also refer to *Not to Be Reproduced* (*La reproduction interdite*, 1937) and *Golconda* (*Golconde*, 1953). The man's rigid posture and the drawing's focus on his reflection seem to evoke the streetlamp reflected on the water in the 1954 version of *Empire of Light*, while the juxtaposition of the man's reflection against the absence of that of his bicycle points toward the paradoxical combination of night and day in the same painting by Magritte.[2]

This introduction of the nonsensical underscores the non-chronological and apparently random organization of the book, with the cave painting postcard only appearing in third place. As Susan Stewart puts it, writing on nonsense, this is a mode which "flaunt[s] a juxtaposition of incongruous worlds" and "thereby move[s] to a spatial order, away from a temporal dimension", while at the same time denying "the orderliness of this order by celebrating those anomalous categories of everyday life – fate, chance, accident, and hazard, categories that also deny that orderliness" (Stewart 1989: 156). Significantly, the dust wrapper for *The Broken Spoke* shows a wraparound illustration of a bicycle accident involving several cyclists, thus advertising not only the book's overarching theme, but also the denial of "orderliness" pointed out by Stewart. This denial is achieved by Gorey's overlapping of time periods, engaging the reader in moving backwards and forwards from one decade or century to another, achieving jarring jumps both in time and style. The result is a general porousness of boundaries, a nonsensical simultaneity or "the quality of existing, happening, occurring at the same time in more than one space" which "defies both an abstract sense of time and a common sense of time" (Stewart 1989: 146). Like other operations of nonsense, simultaneity draws attention "to form, to method, to the ways in which experience is organized" (Ibid. 147), and Gorey's method of porous boundaries continually draws attention to itself. This is achieved in a variety of ways: some postcards feature hybrid creatures (such as a winged humanoid "demon" (Gorey 1983: 24) or a range of anthropomorphized animals); several, typically for Gorey, contain words from languages other than English (Russian in panel 3 and French in multiple postcards); again, typically for Gorey, many names of people and places are incongruous combinations of words which instantly stand out

2 On the connections between Gorey and surrealism, see Shortsleeve 2018.

(e.g. the Marchioness of Bunworry, Capt. Mousegrave, Nesha Macsplosh); while other postcards point beyond the borders of the book and toward other works by Gorey (e.g. panel 26, suggestively titled "(Advertisement)", references Gorey's *The Epiplectic Bicycle* (1969[3]) or Gorey's authorship itself (by citing one of the anagrams of his name, G. E. Deadworry, used by Gorey elsewhere).

Any such "metacommunicative gesture" is necessarily "involved in making a statement of simultaneity, since it points to two coexistent events whose existence is a mutual contradiction" (Stewart 1989: 150). Gorey's approach therefore affects the reading experience by establishing a movement through the text which "diverge[s] a focus, that interrupts[s] the direction of attention and subvert[s] the hierarchies of relevance characterizing such focusing and attention. We 'don't know where to look'" (Ibid. 148). And if we search for an overarching story hidden among Gorey's various bicycles, our attempts are undermined, for each postcard implies a separate storyline: "We cannot 'turn to a conclusion. Rather, we are left with an infinity of divergences by which an ending is deferred" (Ibid.). And yet, ironically, the final, wordless postcard in Gorey's book flaunts the very symbol of endings: it shows a skeleton, perhaps a personification of death, riding a bicycle (at a time which could be either early morning or dusk, another unclear boundary), its headlight casting not light but a beam of ominous shadow.

Whereas in *The Broken Spoke* Gorey plays with simultaneity, in *The Object-Lesson* (1958) and *The Water Flowers* (1982) he engages with two different forms of the manipulation of boundaries, both provoking concepts of timelessness and infinity. The title of the former book seems to suggest a didactic lesson in something, but both the text on the front dust jacket flap ("a Moral Tale about Nothing-at-all") and the book's story function as a joke at the expense of both didacticism and the reader's expectations. In fact, if the book is a lesson in anything, it is a lesson in the surrealist technique of free association. The motif of time is invoked in the very first panel, in which it is stated that "It was already Thursday" (Gorey 1972: 1), but any semblance to a logical story is immediately abolished by the

3 *The Epiplectic Bicycle* is itself concerned with temporal confusion, which is initiated by the opening statement: "It was the day after Tuesday and the day before Wednesday" (Gorey 1972c: panel 1). The book's structure is entirely nonsensical, with apparent gaps between chapters (chapter two is followed by chapter four, chapter seven leads to chapter eleven, etc.). The story reflects this absence of coherence, culminating in a temporal paradox when the two protagonists come across "an obelisk which said it had been raised to their memory 173 years ago" (panels 28-29).

second panel. It shows an Edwardian family searching the gloomy rooms of a large house while a bearded, aristocratic-looking man hops in place, angrily holding up an empty leg of his trousers: "but his lordship's artificial limb could not be found" (Gorey 1972: 2). Each panel introduces another bizarre turn in the story which rarely seems to have some logical connection with the one preceding it, thus disrupting both our sense of causal order and, as Stewart terms it, hierarchical order, "events contingent upon the import of other events" (Stewart 1989: 116). Although the succession of panels propels the story forward, accumulating digressions without returning to incidents which are introduced and immediately abandoned, the reader is continuously compelled to work backwards in an attempt to establish some sort of meaningful connection between the events. Importantly, what stops the accumulation of bizarre digressions is not some logical conclusion but another disconnected event: the discovery of "a card on which was written a single word: Farewell" (Gorey 1972: 29–30). Despite the absence of narrative logic throughout the story, the final word ironically brings closure (like the appearance of death on a bicycle in *The Broken Spoke*), yet in a self-reflexive way which draws attention to the very act of ending the narrative, as well as to the book's structural pattern of mutually unrelated digressions. According to Stewart, works which draw attention to their "pattern of digression" through the potentially endless accumulation of digressions threaten infinity by threatening to collapse the boundaries of their form (Stewart 1989: 99). The events in Gorey's tale function as a "series of integers", elements which, through their very accumulation, place more emphasis on form than content: "And when the focus is placed [...] on the 'form' and not on the 'thing' [...] the play with infinity tends to nonsense" (Ibid. 134). In fact, Gorey creates what Stewart terms the "nonsense of infinite causality" (Ibid. 142), a collapse of causal relations between the integers within the chain which "undermines the sense of contingency and necessariness underlying the everyday sense of causality. In nonsense, anything can cause anything else and everything causes everything else" (Ibid. 138). What this leads to, ultimately, is a text in which "causality is everywhere in all directions, and is as arbitrary as the list" (Ibid.). Gorey's series of arbitrarily multiplying digressions thus suggests endless accumulation, while only ironically retaining the "sense of events as characterized by distinguishable beginnings and endings": it is a text that mimics boundaries while simultaneously undermining them in its "play with the possibility of infinity" (Ibid. 116).

The Water Flowers engages with the same type of possibility but arrives at it by using a different method: the process of potentially infinite repetition. The story involves a woman called Jane who, finding herself snowed in one winter afternoon, decides to make dinner out of a box of soda crackers and "a delicious white sauce" consisting of flour and water (Gorey 2007: 11). As Jane is preparing the sauce, several other characters (another woman, Anne, and three men in almost identical ankle-length fur coats: Charles, George, and William) appear individually to comment on the quality of the sauce, prompting Jane to add either more flour or more water. The repetition of the same scene, consisting of the arrival of a character who tastes the sauce and proposes alteration, threatens to continue indefinitely, both literalizing and hyperbolizing the familiar proverb of "too many chefs spoiling the soup". In fact, the reader is told that the preparation of the meal "went on until there was so much white sauce, it filled every available receptacle" (Gorey 2007: 22), further exaggerating the central repetitive act. Once the members of this household (whose relationships are left unclear) finally seem to break the cycle and sit down to eat, another round of repetition begins by showing the same scene of the women and men (now joined by a fourth male character, Henry), seated around a dinner table in three successive panels, with the changes in the women's dress representing the sole signal of the passage of time. We are told that there was so much sauce that "[i]n the ensuing weeks [it] appeared at least once, and often two or three times, at every meal, even breakfast" (Ibid. 24), implying that the repetition exceeds the mere three panels shown to the reader. By thus moving the repetition beyond the borders of the three panels and towards another suggestion of infinity, such repetition draws attention to the borders themselves, illustrating Stewart's claim that "[i]nfinity and repetition implicate each other, and both are marks of the movement towards form for form's sake" (Stewart 1989: 121).

The event that ultimately interrupts this repetition is the sudden death of the fourth male character, who we see slumped down on a settee, his back toward the reader, his face never revealed: "Just after the meal concluded Henry suddenly died" (Ibid. 26). In classic Gorey style, Henry is both introduced and dispatched from the world of the living in the same panel, thus preventing any possibility of establishing empathy toward the character. What replaces interest in Henry are the unresolved questions surrounding his death (for instance, was it the exclusive diet of white sauce, and therefore *repetition*, that killed him?), which arrives like a grim punchline to the joke of repeated panels preceding it. However, even this is

sustained for a single panel, for the one immediately after the depiction of Henry's corpse informs us that "[i]t was Christmas eve as it happened" (Ibid. 27). This new interruption finally provides a time-related anchor that pulls us out of the closed circle of preceding repetitions, allowing us to situate the story in the Christmas season. If our common sense of the category of time is rooted in a paradox of understanding it simultaneously as "infinite, beyond any knowable origin and end" *and* composed of discrete events with "discernible beginnings and endings", the latter giving "everyday life a model of order", then the Christmas that arrives at the end of *The Water Flowers* should represent one such event "characterized by temporal limits" that stands in tension with the infinity suggested by nonsensical repetition (Stewart 1989: 117). Instead, this is precisely where Gorey hides his closing punchline, depicting a celebration of Christmas in which the surviving characters, perhaps in a travesty of mourning for Henry, "painted all the ornaments a dull black" and decorated the Christmas tree with "black candles" (Gorey 2007: 28-29). The result of this is a comically dark, bleak Christmas, symbolized by the sparse little tree with a small black figure perched on its top: an angel announcing Christ's birth and, at the same time, Henry's morbidly funny death. In an ironic twist, Gorey's Christmas does not return us to a sense of "discernible beginnings and endings", but to a sense of both beginnings *and* endings contained within the single symbol of the Christmas tree: a sense of ambiguous borders which are as difficult to distinguish as the bemused and virtually identical faces of Charles, George, and William.

3. SEASONAL CONFUSION

And yet, despite their framework of nonsense, the endings of Gorey's tales retain a sense of poignancy: is the ending of *The Water Flowers* a mere jocular travesty of the Yuletide season or is there more to the bare room seen in the final panel, emptied of its human inhabitants? Observing the frail Christmas tree, which appears almost engulfed by the emptiness of the white wall in the background, with snow still falling outside the window as if to underline the frigid lifelessness of the scene, we are reminded of the enigmatic last word at the end of *The Object-Lesson* which suggests that it "is not all nonsense. Its wintry 'Farewell' leaves a bittersweet taste after the preceding quizzical content and gives the reader pause" (Whyte 2021: 126). Such seriocomic ambiguity is frequently found in Gorey's works that focus on the celebration of Christmas or the expectation and

arrival of the new year, filtering our culturally conditioned habits through the prism of nonsense. For instance, Gorey's *Verse Advice*, published in the print edition of the January 11, 1993, issue of *The New Yorker*, contains illustrations accompanied by humorously mundane advice for the new year, written in rhyming verse. We are thus offered such keen insights as "A one or two inch piece of string / Cannot be used for anything"; "It's possible to pick up crumbs / By pressing on them with the thumbs"; or the supremely unhelpful advice that "The helpful thought for which you look / Is written somewhere in a book" (Gorey 2007a: 1-2). Such pieces of advice parody the profundity usually found in holiday greeting cards or magazine articles published around this time of year. Among similarly themed shorter works that expose the nonsensicality of our holiday observances are one-page pieces such as *Christmas Wrap-Up* (Gorey 2007b). This wordless illustration shows a family of four adults and two children attempting (and entirely failing) to wrap an enormous plant in brightly coloured wrapping paper. Interestingly, the huge, curved branches and black leaves of the plant resemble those of the black, menacing plants in Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, leading to a comical incongruity, as well as intertextual implications that complicate the light-hearted tone of Gorey's piece.[4]

Gorey also created many Christmas cards which regularly poke fun at holiday customs, beliefs, and festivities while establishing similar unnerving intertextual ties. The card entitled *Ettie Lou Stooper does a tinsel dance at a tree-trimming party in Gumsville, Nebraska, Christmas Eve, 1923* (1981) references Josephine Baker's scandalous "banana dance" in 1926. However, the incongruity between, on the one hand, the small-town setting (a wallpapered living room in Nebraska) and the bemused audience of family members and small children and, on the other, the extremely short holiday-themed skirt in the shape of leaves of holly (in place of the famous banana skirt) comically undermines Ettie-Lou's attempt at injecting some metropolitan excitement into this somnolent "tree-trimming party". A further layer of incongruity is added by the fact that Ettie Lou's posture and use of tinsel in her dance implies a connection with Salome's dance of the seven veils (for instance, as represented in the painting *Dance of Salome* [1898] by Armand Point), thus offering another instance of Gorey

4 For other pieces by Gorey that refer to the holiday season and achieve a similar darkly humorous effect, see the ironically titled "A Heart-Warming Christmas" (published in the December 1971 issue of *National Lampoon Magazine*) or "A Chthonian Christmas" (published in the December 1966 issue of Esquire Magazine).

complicating the humorous tone of his work by introducing the grim, unspoken reference to the story of John the Baptist's beheading. Several other cards take Christmas decorations as their theme, such as *In Stubville, Nebraska on December 23, 1911 Christmas tree ornaments fell from a cloudless sky* (1987), which stands in an intertextual relation with the French Symbolist Odilon Redon's eerie paintings of floating eyes (e.g., *... And Eyes without Heads Were Floating like Mollusks* (*...Et que des yeux sans tête flottaient comme des mollusques*), 1896), a reference previously found in Gorey's *The Iron Tonic* (1969).[5]

As in *In Stubville, Nebraska...* and its intertextual connection with Redon's *noir* drawings (and, indirectly, with E. A. Poe's works, referenced by Redon) and the symbolism of their imaginary world of *le rêve* (Jirat-Wasiutyński 1992), Gorey commonly unites the comic and the Gothic, two modes which are inextricably connected (Horner and Sloznik 2005). In his reworkings of holiday motifs, Gorey takes this comic/Gothic connection further by transplanting certain tropes from literary templates such as the works of Charles Dickens and rearranging them in ways that draw attention to their artificiality. In *The Haunted Tea-Cosy: A Dispirited and Distasteful Diversion for Christmas* (1997) Gorey plays with many of the main narrative components of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) within the framework of nonsense. Time plays an important role in Dickens' tale – it is personified by the ghosts representing the past, present, and future, whose aim is to caution Ebenezer Scrooge and ultimately correct his behaviour. In Gorey's version, the main character, called Edmund Gravel, a penny-pincher "known as the Recluse of Lower Spigot to everybody there and elsewhere" (Gorey 2007d: 1), and thus a stand-in for Scrooge, is visited by three ghosts who all show him supposedly moving and distressing scenes. However, the ghosts themselves are nonsensical, emphasizing the non-existence of the events they show Edmund in their very names: they are the Spectre of Christmas That Never Was, the Spectre of Christmas That Isn't, and the Spectre of Christmas That Never Will Be. Some of the most iconic elements of Dickens' story, the ghosts that convey Scrooge backwards and forwards in time as part of their lesson for the old miser, are thus reworked into parodies of Dickens' device until their narrative purpose from the source model is thoroughly subverted. As Lackner shows in her analysis of the scenes displayed to Edmund by the ghosts, Gorey "lines up the strikingly tragic – an orphan abandoned in a graveyard – alongside far lesser disasters – lost tuning forks,

5 For the connection with Odilon Redon, see the chapter on *The Iron Tonic* in Whyte (2021).

stolen wallpaper, and inaccurate clocks", thus "giving each equal space and severity" and achieving a pattern of events in which "everything is the same level of disaster, a satire of melodramatic tragedy". Crucially, since Edmund is not exposed to a moral message, "Gorey removes the pedagogical heart of *A Christmas Carol*" (Lackner 2015: 66).

The Haunted Tea-Cosy was followed by a sequel, *The Headless Bust: A Melancholy Meditation for the False Millennium*, published in 1999. The story continues immediately after *The Haunted Tea-Cosy* ends, after Edmund's party guests have left, and ends the arrival of the new year at its close. Between these two moments, Edmund, together with a human-sized, insect-like creature, the Bahhumbug (his companion from *The Haunted Tea-Cosy* whose name references Scrooge's expression "Bah! Humbug!"), embarks on another confusing adventure, led by a giant insect called the Whatsit. The Whatsit takes the pair "from place to place / Where there is shame, also disgrace" (Gorey 2007e: 4), and although the purpose of the journey is for Edmund and the Bahhumbug to determine the truth or falsity of the scenes they witness, the conceit is eventually abandoned when Edmund's companion dismisses the issue, causing the Whatsit to disappear. The closing panel shows Edmund and the Bahhumbug back in Edmund's home, sipping tea just as the new year arrives, experiencing no change as a result of their adventures: "They saw it was about to come: / The end of the millennium, / So find themselves perforce to be / Into another century" (Ibid. 30). The refusal to attach value to the truth of the events shown by the Whatsit, rendering them irrelevant to the experiences of Edmund and the Bahhumbug, extends to the characters' ambivalence to their entry into the new millennium, thus subverting the importance culturally ascribed to the New Year[6]: "Gorey's Christmas and New Year are utterly ambivalent and lacking in the sentiments associated with these holidays in popular culture: there is little cheer, hope, love, kindness and charity presented here" (Lackner 2015: 77).

An uncanny connection between time and ambivalence is the central issue of Gorey's *Seasonal Confusion* (2000). Published by *The New Yorker* in the year of Gorey's death, it is one of his one-page pieces consisting of four panels accompanied by rhymed verse. At first, all four panels seem nearly identical: all show the same man, called Fred, in or immediately next to his bed, from the same angle of view. Having just awakened, Fred is startled by

6 And, given the widespread publicization of so-called Y2K fears in 1999, when Gorey's book was published, the characters' ambivalence toward the new year is made especially humorous.

his uncertainty regarding time: "'Time changed in the night,' murmured Fred, / 'And now it is different instead: / Is it early or late? Should I hurry or wait? / Perhaps I shall go back to bed'" (Gorey 2007c: 1–4). We observe Fred, wide-eyed with wonder, as he leaves his bed, only to decide to return to it in a final surrender to his lack of understanding: the fourth panel shows him perched on the edge of his bed, a pillow clutched in his hands in an almost defensive gesture. If the topic of this short work is seasonal observance of daylight-saving time, it illustrates well the, most likely, quite common confusion this practice causes. But Gorey's piece is more complex than this, and points toward other readings, not least of which is the possibility of recognizing ourselves in poor, confused Fred. For, significantly, the final panel does not show Fred safely back in bed, but in the process of returning to it: "Perhaps I shall go back to bed." If our last glimpse of petrified Fred is in a state of liminality, caught between actions and decisions, just as he feels peculiarly caught between incompatible time categories of early and late, his "seasonal confusion" is equally a metafictive reflection of our very own often confused experience of navigating the comically unstable time of Gorey's narrative worlds. If Gorey's works invite a recognition of signals suggestive of very definite eras such as the Victorian and the Edwardian and then simultaneously subvert clear demarcations between such timeframes, perhaps the only remaining response is to abandon, like Fred, any attempt at working out the correct time, season, or period in which a particular work by Gorey is set, and simply enjoy a good laugh: our own version of Fred's return to the comfortable bed.

However, Gorey's works rarely allow such simple solutions. Indeed, if we look closely at the panels of *Seasonal Confusion*, we may find that we have missed some illogical changes that occur between them and, while hidden in plain sight, echo those of the time that "changed in the night". Alterations are found in the picture on the wall behind the bed depicting a knot which resembles the symbol for infinity; the vortex pattern on the carpet changes direction in each panel; and the pattern on Fred's matching duvet cover and pillowcase consists of pictures of what seem to be falling leaves, which also change position from one panel to another. Are such alterations comical commentary on Fred's silly confusion, or are they proof that his distress, so plainly seen on his face in the final panel, is not unwarranted? Whatever the answer may be, the constant inconstancy signified by such changes, revealed only upon careful examination, complicates an easy, humorous response. Again, like Fred, we find ourselves caught between possible reactions to Gorey's nonsense, poised (as we are so often when reading

his works) on the double edge of mirth and dismay. The protagonist's dazed look, we come to understand, is our own, and we recognize ourselves staring back at us from Gorey's deceptively simple piece.

4. HAUNTED BY THE PAST HAUNTED BY THE FUTURE

One characteristic shared in many of the examples of Gorey's work examined so far is the striking presence of absences: traces of something we expect to see but is missing. The "unreflecting bicycle" invisible on the surface of the lake in *The Broken Spoke*; the sudden absence of human characters at the end of *The Water Flowers*; the word "farewell" that closes *The Object-Lesson*, written on a card left by a ghostly someone; the unseen source of the falling ornaments in *In Stubville, Nebraska...*, reminiscent of Odilon Redon's uncanny *noirs*.[7] These are absences that raise questions, haunting us like the spectres described by Derrida in his *Spectres of Marx* (1993) which escape complete understanding or comprehension. Gorey's works teem with such spectres, whether in the shape of literal ghosts (as in *The Haunted Tea-Cosy*) or in the form of disturbing ambiguities, "fissures, gaps and points of crossover" (Shaw 2018: 2) that haunt our reading of Gorey's texts. And, importantly, these are absences that participate in the complication of the mood of Gorey's works, disturbing the humorous tone and asking that we read in both directions simultaneously: to laugh at the wordplay and the nonsense, but to also consider such odd moments as the mysterious "wintry 'Farewell'" (Whyte 2021: 126). Like Fred in his condition of in-between, the spectre occupies a paradoxical state of both being and non-being, absence and presence. In fact, "one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence", for the spectre seems to signify something that cannot be grasped by cognition: "One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge" (Derrida 2006: 5).

Spectres appear with some frequency in Gorey's books. In *The Glorious Nosebleed* (1974) the ghost of a woman "appeared on the roof Vaporously"

7 To continue this list of absences, we might even look towards Gorey's private life. As Dery points out in his biography of Gorey, *Born to Be Posthumous*, some of Gorey's closest friends and associates claimed that he remained an enigma to them and that they knew little about his inner life (Dery 2018: 408-409). Interestingly, Gorey himself expressed uncertainty about his own existence in one letter to Peter F. Neumeyer: "There is a strong streak in me that wishes not to exist and really does not believe that I do" (Ibid. 409).

(Gorey 1983a); in *The Iron Tonic* a huge hand emerges from the clouds within a beam of light, pointing at a place in a stream; in *The Object-Lesson* the Throbblefoot Spectre "loitered in a distraught manner" near the edge of a lake (Gorey 1972: 6); Theoda in *The Tuning Fork* (1990) seems to occupy a liminal position, a boundary between life and death; a skeletal apparition stands on what seems to be a balcony overlooking a moonlit sea in *The Prune People* (1983); in one of the illustrations collected in *Edward Gorey Coloring Book* (2017), two ghosts skate on a frozen lake around a gazebo, in which a group of seemingly aristocratic Edwardians sit at a table, as if at a séance, while a gust of wind (or ghostly agency?) lifts various items off the table and high into the air; and one of the postcards about the mysterious miracle substance Q.R.V. informs us that "She lacked in faith until a wraith / Of Saint Hermione / Appeared to her and said 'You err / Not taking Q.R.V.'" (Gorey 2014a). Populated by supernatural phenomena and filled "with a pervasive yet unfocussed sense of doom" (Lackner 2015: 140), *The West Wing* (1963) is perhaps the most spectral of Gorey's books. Presenting the reader with wordless images of rooms, the book is a study in atmosphere and suspense, with "each panel [...] a glimpse into a dark, brooding black and white world consumed by texture" (Ibid. 142) and every room, "from the most innocuous to those most rife with paranormal activity, provid[ing] an unsettling tableau of otherwise mundane surroundings" (Ibid. 146). This effect is advertised on the front cover of the book, which shows one corner of a building (presumably the west wing of a mansion), one window of which is bricked up: beginning with this initial mystery, the book remains silent throughout, never showing the room located behind the window. Gorey relies on such an emptiness full of foreboding in order to visualize a silence "that is full of the weight of the unspoken and unknowable" (Ibid. 142). Furthermore, by employing the tendency of the spectre to act as a "paradoxical incorporation" (Derrida 2006: 5), to defy logic, to appear contradictory, Gorey's illustrations suggest that even when the rooms of *The West Wing* appear empty, some object points to the present absence of something "both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal" (Derrida and Stiegler 2013: 39): in one of the panels a lighted candle hovers as if held aloft by an unseen hand (Gorey 1972b: 30); in another, two white sheets are seen floating in mid-air (Ibid. 13).

Of course, even when no actual spectres appear in Gorey's works, a certain ghostliness or spectrality, combined with Gorey's characteristic humour, often dominates: consider *Les Passementeries Horrible* (1976) and its giant tassels spying on humans and animals, hovering as if possessed

by spirits; or the indistinct *something*, never shown in the illustrations, that one day begins to fall through a family's home in *The Sinking Spell* (1964), slowly descending as "[t]he weeks went by" (Gorey 1972a: 8) until it comes to rest "beneath the cellar floor" (Ibid. 14), that most Gothic of places in a family house. And let us not forget that many of Gorey's characters, especially his Victorians, seem dressed for a funeral, the women frequently wearing mourning veil hats, as if embodying Derrida's claim that the "work of mourning, in a sense [...] produces spectrality" (Derrida and Stiegler 2013: 39).

What is achieved by this presence of so many ghosts (and so much death) in Gorey's work? They have been read, for instance, as part of Gorey's play with the trappings of the Gothic genre (Lackner 2015: 146-147) or as components of his black humour, "predicated on an ironic inversion of the Victorian cult of sentimentality" (Kennedy 1993: 182), but Gorey's ghosts also invite a consideration of that important element of Derrida's model of the spectre: time. The spectre is something that returns from the past, invoking the concept of repetition because it "*begins by coming back*" (Derrida 2006: 11, emphasis in the original). Spectres disturb and defy temporal boundaries, "challenge limits between states of living and death, past and present and, in doing so, question notions of historicism by disrupting the linear pathway of historical time" (Shaw 2018: 8). Importantly, they point toward the future, for although "the specter represents something past, spent and ended, [...] its (re)appearance in the present gestures towards a series of new beginnings" (Ibid. 9). In other words, the spectre is "always both *revenant* (invoking what was) and *arrivant* (announcing what will come) – as operating on a number of temporal planes, most crucially the future and its possible interactions with the present and the past" (Blanco and Peeren, 2013: 13).

If haunting "looks back to the past and points forward to the future from the moment of the present", signalling "towards a legacy as well as to a promise of something to come" (Shaw 2018: 7), what future event is being signalled by Gorey's ghosts? Perhaps the most prominent absence in all of Gorey's works, at least when one takes into consideration the Edwardian setting of many of his books, is any mention of the immediate future of his characters, or at least what we might expect their future to be: the period of the First World War. His stories take place either in that strange hybrid of Victorian/Edwardian time or in the silent movie era of the 1920s (with only very rare excursions into more modern times of the second half of the

twentieth century[8]), therefore effectively skipping over, and rendering silent or invisible, the globally significant conflicts of the period 1914-1918. As previously mentioned, and as testified by Gorey himself, much of his work is situated in or around the year 1910 (the year of the death of Edward VII, after whom the Edwardian period was named), on the threshold of the war that would envelop all of Europe. Despite the absence of direct references to this looming conflict, Gorey's numerous depictions of picnics, idle afternoons, and aristocratic families at play is not engaged either in the perpetuation of the myth of the Edwardian "golden summer" (O'Neill and Hatt 2010: 1) or in the projection of such an untroubled vision into the future of his protagonists, beyond the year 1910. Instead, when Gorey sets his stories in an Edwardian timeframe, the experiences of his characters are marked by a sudden irruption of a foreign or uncanny person, creature, object, or event into their placid lives. Therefore, although the clashes between nations in the period 1914–1918 are never addressed in Gorey's books, many of his works carry spectral traces of some (visible or invisible) disturbance which haunts our reading of Gorey's books, by provoking us to look toward the absent presence of the years beyond 1910 and before 1920, as the unspoken *other* of both the Edwardian period and the Jazz Age. As we read about Gorey's Edwardians, their lives disrupted by humorously unnerving objects falling through their homes (*The Sinking Spell*), illogical sequences of events that take them on unplanned journeys recalling *Alice in Wonderland* (*The Eleventh Episode* 1971), or an environment that turns evil and devours them (*The Evil Garden* 1966), we are haunted by the absence of something not shown but suggested by the proliferation of ghosts. Gorey's spectres urge us to look into the gap between 1910 and the 1920s, while armed with Derrida's notion that "what seems to be out front, the future, comes back in advance: from the past, from the back" (2006: 10).

However, there remains a further problem. While the spectre represents "the visibility of the invisible", Derrida reminds us that "[t]he specter is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects – on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see" (Derrida 2006: 125). Therefore, if Gorey's ghosts are a visualization of *nothing*, of his many mysterious silences, and if the reading of the temporal gap in Gorey's work outlined above is a reading that ultimately projects itself against the "imaginary screen" of Gorey's spectres, such spectres

8 Among the works set in more recent times, one piece concerned with the topic of time, more specifically the change of seasons, is *Signs of Spring*, published in the April 24, 1988 issue of *The New Yorker* (republished in the collection *Amphigorey Again*).

come to function as an impetus for another self-reflexive realization: that by reading Gorey's texts we are brought back, inevitably, face to face with the movements of our own reading – of how we interpret the Edwardian spectre's gesture toward the future. In other words, are we, by projecting a reading of Gorey's temporal gap onto his ghosts, not only *seeing things* "where there is nothing to see" but *noticing ourselves seeing things*? If the spectre "provokes the one it haunts to a response or reaction" (Blanco and Peeren, 2013: 13), a "something-to-be-done" (Gordon 2008: xvi, qtd. in Blanco and Peeren, 2013: 13), do Gorey's apparitions haunt us into examining what we choose to project onto the ghostly-white sheet of Gorey's spectres? And if all this induces a sort of vertigo in the reader, it is only part of the spectre's provocative effect, "for a specter does not only cause séance tables to turn, but sets heads spinning" (Derrida 2006: 159). Perhaps not spinning out of control, but into a self-reflexive turn which pushes us to gaze back at our own methods of reading.

5. CONCLUSION

Gorey's approach to the representation of time is obviously variegated. His works are commonly set within a hybrid Victorian/Edwardian period and often elicit further confusion by containing comically anachronistic details. As indicated, in the examples such as *The Broken Spoke*, *The Object-Lesson*, and *The Water Flowers*, Gorey employs manipulations with temporal boundaries within the framework of nonsense, such as simultaneity, digression, and repetition, which lead to a suggestion of timelessness and infinity. These are devices that necessarily draw our attention to the form, structure, and pattern of Gorey's works, and the same is true of his intertextual quotation and nonsensical rearrangement of time-related motifs from other texts, as in the case of his parodic transplantation of Dickens' device of time-traveling ghosts. Nevertheless, despite a self-referential flaunting of form, Gorey's works frequently accomplish a seriocomic confusion of tone, regularly leaving the reader with that "wintry 'Farewell'" that complicates any simplified reading of his tales as solely humorous. This effect, which has elicited such descriptions of Gorey's work as "radiat[ing] a melancholy and an existential unease" (Kindley 2018), is to some extent accomplished by his relatively frequent depiction of ghosts. Such apparitions inherently point toward the question of time, indicating both the past and the future, for the spectre "represents something past, spent and ended, yet its (re) appearance in the present gestures towards a series of new beginnings"

(Shaw 2018: 9). And if the logic of the spectre is to return in order to provoke the reader into "a response or reaction", a "something-to-be-done", that action may be the very act of turning to examine how we read Gorey: what do we project into the suggestively blank gap between the Edwardian period and the Jazz Age that Gorey chooses to represent, however inaccurately? Gorey's ghosts dot the pages of his books like question marks or floating signifiers, and if we find ourselves returning to his gloomy mansions and desolate plains, again and again, in search of something that would make those spectres speak, something that would unlock the secret of all the bricked-up windows of Gorey's pages, do we not find ourselves caught in his patterns of repetition, do we not enact, in some way, the very logic of spectral return? If we follow the trace of our returns, do they not gesture, like the spectre's, toward the future, "towards a series of new beginnings" – toward new (re)readings? In other words, is the identity of the revenant haunting the seemingly empty rooms of *The West Wing* – the reader's own?

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SAŽETAK

„MELANKOLIČNA MEDITACIJA O LAŽNOM MILENIJU“: VRIJEME, NONSENS I HUMOR U DJELIMA EDWARDA GOREYJA

Radnja djela Edwarda Goreyja često je smještena u hibridno viktorijansko-edvardijansko razdoblje, a u toj vremenskoj neodredivosti nerijetko sudjeluje i Goreyjevo korištenje komično anakronih detalja. Kao što se u radu pokazuje na primjerima slikovnica *The Broken Spoke* (1976.), *The Object-Lesson* (1958.), i *The Water Flowers* (1976.), Goreyjeva poigravanja s postupcima kao što su simultanost, digresija i ponavljanje unutar okvira nonsensa pozivaju na promišljanje bezvremenosti i beskonačnosti. Riječ je o postupcima koji neminovno privlače čitateljevu pozornost i usmjeravaju je na oblik i strukturu Goreyjevih djela, a sličan je i učinak njegovih intertekstualnih citiranja vremenskih motiva iz drugih tekstova, kao što je slučaj s parodijskom transplantacijom Dickensovih duhova koji putuju kroz vrijeme (*The Haunted Tea-Cosy*, 1997.). No, unatoč takvu ogoljavanju oblika, Goreyjevi tekstovi učestalo postižu ozbiljno-smiješnu kombinaciju tonaliteta kojom se komplicira njihovo pojednostavljeno čitanje u jedinstveno komičnome ključu. Riječ je o osobini koja je potaknula komentatore Goreyjevih djela da u njima prepoznaju „melankoličnu i egzistencijalnu nelagodu“ (Kindley 2018.), a koju Gorey, između ostalog, postiže i relativno učestalim pojavljivanjem sablasti. Radi se o pojavama koje nužno upozoravaju na pitanje vremena, pokazujući istovremeno na prošlost i na budućnost. Rad se zaključuje pitanjem o tome što takvo dvosmjerno kretanje može značiti za čitateljsko iskustvo u susretima s Goreyjevim tajanstvenim sablastima.

Ključne riječi: Edward Gorey, humor, nonsens, sablast, vrijeme