

“Where Children Play Among the Ruins of the Language”:  
*A Nest of Ninnies and the Literary Legacies of New York Dada*

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**Abstract:** Narration and dialogues in *A Nest of Ninnies* rely largely on linguistic equivalents of what are known as “found objects,” or “ready mades,” in the visual arts. This endows Ashbery’s and Schuyler’s novel with a sense of humor much like the one developed by the New York Dadaists in the years 1916-1920. Because of the high incidence of camp humor in the novel, affinities between it, as well as the camp aesthetic more generally, and the New York version of Dada, may be seen. Yet the principal claim of the article is that this novel is part of the literary legacy of New York Dada, a movement significantly different from the original Dada of Zurich.

**Keywords:** Dadaism, New York Dada, ready mades, found objects, Marcel Duchamp, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Ronald Firbank, camp

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The “Nest” in question is, of course, the 1968 novel by John Ashbery and James Schuyler, and not its English namesake of 1608. W.H. Auden presciently wrote that it was “destined to become a minor classic,”<sup>1</sup> even though spotting “a minor classic” upon its publication usually means placing private taste ahead of, and above, foreseeable critical consensus. While I have no doubts about Auden’s rightness in this case, I suspect the reasons for his judgment had more to do with his admiration of Ronald Firbank’s writing, an admiration he shared with the novel’s authors, than with what I will refer to in this paper as “the spirit of Dada,” or, more specifically, “of New York Dada.” This artistic and literary movement was so named only after it had, by and large, come to an end, in or around 1921. Writing from New York to Tristan Tzara, Man Ray argued with tongue in cheek that “dada cannot live in New York. All New York is dada, and will not tolerate a rival,—will not notice dada... so dada in New York must remain a secret” (Naumann 143). Ray wrote this letter on June 8, 1921; in April of that year, the first, and only, publication to officially represent the Dada movement of America was printed. Edited and designed by Ray and Marcel Duchamp, it was titled *New York Dada* and included a mock authorization from Tzara himself: “Dada belongs to everybody. Like the idea of God or of the toothbrush” (Tomkins 232-3).<sup>2</sup>

But by 1921, the most important work of the New York Dadaists had already been done, and while much of it falls under the rubric of the visual arts and the kind of performances which would later give rise to happenings and performance art, the literary “component” holds its own and has proved influential for future generations, albeit not in the global sense of Duchamp’s or Ray’s breakthrough achievements. William Carlos

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1 W.H. Auden, excerpt from the *New York Times Book Review*, quoted in the blurb to the Paladin edition of *A Nest of Ninnies*, 1990.

2 Man Ray’s photograph of Duchamp in drag (as Rose Selavy) was on the cover, and the four-page sheet included a poem by the Baroness Elsa von Freitag-Loringhoven, accompanied by two photographs of her nude torso.

Williams, Mina Loy, Wallace Stevens, Bob Brown, Maxwell Bodenheim, Elsa von Freitag Loringhoven, Alfred Kreymborg and Arthur Cravan are the most recognizable, and in some cases canonical, poets associated with New York Dada. Among those born two or three generations later I would certainly include John Ashbery and James Schuyler. They co-authored *A Nest of Ninnies* over a period of seventeen years, but the main reason it took them so long to write a 200-page novel of manners was Ashbery's ten year residence in France. In his letters to Ashbery from the time of his stay abroad, Schuyler asks at least twice whether they might continue writing the book in some "virtual" way, for instance, if one of them wrote a paragraph and mailed it to the other, to which he would respond with another paragraph, and so forth. Ashbery's replies to these suggestions have not been published, but in an introductory note to the Dalkey Archive edition of *A Nest*, he admits that this method of writing was not successful, and they soon gave it up. This is significant insofar as we wish to regard *A Nest of Ninnies* as a collaborative work "performed live," with all the immediacy of call and response this entails.<sup>3</sup> Schuyler refers to one aspect of this collaborative process in a letter to Ron and Pat Padgett of January 16, 1966: "It takes us an awfully long time to get anything done, since something like: 'Mr. Kelso is out of town this week. He's at the Mills' can mysteriously break us up for a good deal of our writing time" (Schuyler 159).

Mr. Kelso is the star salesman for an unnamed company in which Marshall Bush, another of the novel's principal characters, holds a managerial position. His sister, Alice Bush, leads the intertextual dance from the very first sentence of *A Nest*: "Alice was tired" (9), just like Lewis Carroll's Alice in the opening sentence of *Alice in Wonderland*. The Bushes live in upstate New York and spend much time with their neighbors, Doctor and Mrs. Bridgewater, and especially with their college age children, Fabia and Victor. When Fabia lands an entry-level job at Marshall's company, Mr. Kelso and his mother join the cast of what will soon turn out to be a jolly company of globetrotting gourmands, composed of the Bushes and Bridgewaters, as well as Mrs. Greeley and her son, Abel, who also live in Kelton, NY. Jointly and severally, they go on vacation to Florida, where they meet a French traveller in luxury goods named Claire Tosti, and when they follow her to France, she introduces them to her sister, Nadia. From Paris, they go south, as before jointly and severally, and find themselves as far away as Sicily, with Rome on the way there and the French Midi on the way back, having meanwhile made friends with several Italian men. When they return to New York, it is made known that Alice has secretly married one of these men, named Giorgio Grossblatt, and that Victor has secretly married Nadia. Alice and Giorgio open an Italian restaurant in Kelton, which turns out to be roaring success. Fabia remains single, even though she seems to be trying hard not to, and enough hints are dropped

3 Mark Silverberg has catalogued, or at least listed, the collaborations of the New York School poets done within their own circle, as well as those involving people from outside of it. Four of the former were undertaken by John Ashbery with James Schuyler; Ashbery's other collaborative works, in the field of literary and visual art alone, number fourteen. In the same field, Schuyler's also stand at fourteen (Silverberg 211-14; 245-47). The tradition of creating collaborative works in avant-garde circles, including both European and American Dada, was one of the most important forms of contesting the myth of the individual genius as the only genuine source of creative inspiration. Perhaps more to the point, it was also a good way to have fun together.

for readers in the know to peg Marshall as gay. Claire Tosti's imminent marriage to Irving Kelso is announced in the final, operatic chapter of the novel. Nothing ever "happens," and even the occasional blizzard, conflagration or power failure cannot disrupt the steady flow of martinis.

It is not what the characters do, however, but the ways in which they speak, that matters most in this book, although the narrators' passages are no less important to the panorama of linguistic and stylistic registers it displays. Several times in the course of the novel, one of the characters makes a statement that seems to express this authorial approach. For instance, when Paul Lambert, Victor's French pen pal, hears a song on a car radio, he is asked by his American companions to translate the lyrics: "It tells about a girl—a woman—who waits on the mole for her sailor. When he comes back, first she is going to beat him up, then she is going to show him a good time." "Well—does she?" Dotty asked. Paul shrugged. "It is of no importance. The entertainment lies in the low-class argot of her expressions" (108). As several critics have observed, the language of the novel is its principal "focalizer," even though—and this is the paradox I will try to unravel—this language seems to be as incidental as the novel's sketchy plot and cartoonish characterization.<sup>4</sup> Or, I might also suggest, as Duchamp's ready mades. To make this connection clearer, and perhaps more plausible as well, a brief account of the differences between New York and Zurich Dada should be of help.

In his introductory essay to the catalogue of *Making Mischievous: Dada Invades New York*, an exhibition held at the Whitney Museum in 1996-97, Francis Naumann points to the humorous intent of many works by the New York Dada artists. The humor of the original Zurich Dadaists was quite different, and while Naumann does not delve into the reasons for this, I think that the historical circumstances in which each of these movements was born have at least as much to do with their various approaches to humor as any personal traits or inclinations. Richard Huelsenbeck and Hans Richter served in the German army before coming to Zurich in 1916, and Hugo Ball, although physically unfit for service, or, according to other sources, a conscientious objector, visited a wounded friend near the front lines and could see the results of trench warfare and the new technologies of killing. A strong, originating impulse of Zurich Dada was the shock this kind of warfare caused millions of soldiers, including Richter and Huelsenbeck as well as all those educated and sensitive young men who believed they were fighting in the name of ideals they had been conditioned to accept as axioms. Their disenchantment, to put it mildly, led to the total critique of all ideals and axioms, which, by and large, constituted Zurich Dada. Their humor was "noir" humor, easy to mistake for abysmal nihilism. The world had to be built anew, so everything in the present world had to be ridiculed to death and destruction.<sup>5</sup>

4 In his monographic study of James Schuyler, *Nowy Jork i okolice*, Mikołaj Wiśniewski provides a useful account of the critical reception of *A Nest of Ninnies* (Wiśniewski 258-62).

5 Calvin Tomkins, Marcel Duchamp's biographer, presents this aspect of Zurich Dada in a slightly different way: "The original Dadaists were as dedicated to their nihilism as any band of fanatical world savers.... Except for Arp, not one of them showed any evidence of a sense of humor, and the absence of this element—inimical to fanaticism of all kinds—was a crucial factor in Dada's explosive postwar growth and its equally rapid disintegration. In New York, on the other hand, things were a bit more lighthearted. Even such natural Dada personalities as Arthur Cravan and Elsa von Freitag-Loringhoven did not take their antiserious activities too seriously, and the

The New York Dadaists, by comparison, had a rather limited knowledge of the Great War, gained chiefly from newspaper reports and letters from friends or family who were somehow engaged in it (for instance, Wallace Stevens' sister, who volunteered for the Red Cross and was killed by an exploding shell in Belgium). Knowing about the horrors was not the same as having witnessed them. However acute the New York Dadaists' cultural and social critique may have been, it remained a far cry from the total rejection enacted by their Zurich "comrades in arms." In a speech delivered to the Société Anonyme, an artists' organization founded by Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Katherine Dreier in 1920, the poet Marsden Hartley insisted that "Life is cause for riotous and healthy laughter, and to laugh at oneself in conjunction with the rest of the world, at one's own tragic vagaries, concerning the things one cannot name or touch, or comprehend, is the best anodyne I can conjure in my mind for the irrelevant pains we take to impress ourselves and the world with the importance of anything more than the brilliant excitation of the moment.... We shall learn through dadaism that art is a witty and entertaining pastime" (Naumann 17).

Naumann argues that the "essential characteristics of New York Dada find their roots in a specifically American form of humor" (17), but is quick to add that the French members of this coterie relied on their own, characteristically Gallic, form of humor in constructing their works. Naumann also quotes Mark Twain's distinction between the two: according to Twain, American stories are humorous on account of their pacing, while French stories are witty. In other words, the French short-circuit the logical connections between cause and effect, while Americans draw them out to expose, bit by bit, some kind of fallacy. In the visual arts, Naumann contends, Man Ray's 1917 assembly *New York* is characteristic of American humor, and Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* of the French. Naming Ray's *New York* as an example of American humor—which, according to a scholarly study Nauman quotes, is "consciously anti-intellectual... prone to exaggeration... makes fun of minorities" (Naumann 19)—might seem a little forced, but *Large Glass* certainly displays wit. Both strategies, however, the French and the American, have their place in Ashbery's and Schuyler's *A Nest of Ninnies*. In their case, the various "found objects" used by the Dadaists are linguistic, and could be roughly classed as crypto-quotations or paraphrases from a broad spectrum of literary works (from Trollope, Dickens or Austen to pulp fiction, as well as from a variety of poems), mid-century radio soap operas (Karin Hoffmann, Ashbery's biographer, singles out *Vic and Sade* as his favorite),<sup>6</sup> and from the ways in which their parents and neighbors and friends spoke when the two poets were growing up in the thirties and forties. Of course, this does not exhaust the list of their inspirations. Yet the point of my comparison of Ashbery's and Schuyler's *objets trouvés* with the found objects of visual artists does not lie in the fortuitous recognition of potentially useful materials, but in the act or gesture performed by using them.

Institutionalized art, along with the economic and social results and side-effects of its institutionalization, was a frequent target of Dada critiques, which eventually led to the rise of the "Neo-avant-garde" and its own, fated institutionalization. In his history of Dadaism, Hans Richter lashes out at the neo-avant-gardists, accusing them

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brouhaha over *Fountain* was played out in a key of larky humor" (193).

6 Hoffman 36-7.

of making empty, formal gestures without any of the aesthetic and ideological impetus that characterized Dada, whether in Zurich, New York, or, with some reservations, Berlin and Paris. While he does not say this literally, he regards their work as career-oriented and institutionally bound.<sup>7</sup> I am not competent to judge the fairness of his attack, but I know of many cases which show that it misses the point, or at least an important point which, in an old-fashioned manner, I would call the freedom of the artist, especially the freedom to mean nothing in particular, even as critics sweat over endowing that artist's works with some kind of relevance.<sup>8</sup> It is precisely this kind of freedom that Ashbery and Schuyler exhibit, or flaunt, in their novel.

Or should we say: "novel"? To classify it in the simplest, most worn-out terms, we should probably call it a comedy of manners cum marriage novel. The classic marriage novel, however, most famously Jane Austen's, relies for its dramaturgy on the heroine's decision-making process and the incidents that complicate it. Once she reaches a decision, the novel ends, as if her life after marriage were not a suitable subject for polite fiction. None if this can be seen in *A Nest of Ninnies*: the marriages, except for Claire's to Irving, are announced post factum, are not controversial, and we see the newly-weds eagerly going about their business, or rather the businesses they start once their cohabitation begins. This suggests a Bildungsroman plot and an actual, rather than merely symbolic, integration into the middle-class world of family businesses, with its financial rewards and the promise of offspring they enable. But, differently than in the typical novel of growth, the characters who get married never rebel against the values of their parents or their social class. When there are disagreements, they concern the shape of someone's sunglasses, or the color scheme of a boutique. In that sense, *A Nest of Ninnies* may be called an idyll. Yet these disagreements, while chiefly of an aesthetic nature, are not "merely" aesthetic, since their performance relies on linguistic and cultural found objects, with all the ideological implications of such a practice discreetly making their presence known.

Some of the "Ninnies," as I shall from now on call the novel's characters in aggregate, are conscientious about "bettering" themselves culturally and intellectually. Fabia reads Proust, Alice reads Tolstoy and is a serious student of music, capable of naming the source of a little-known tune hummed by someone at a boring party. They both read art historical journals, and attempt to fit the knowledge gained therefrom into the practical advice offered by magazines devoted to home decor and related manifestations of good taste. The results of their efforts are rather grotesque, as the narrators at first take pains to imply, but later describe at length. Alice and Giorgio's

7 Richter 346-63.

8 In his polemic with Peter Bürger, Richard Murphy brings to light another aspect of artistic freedom: "the possibility of reconceptualizing social practice is itself predicated upon the privilege of attaining a certain independence from the real (rather than being merged with it) and upon a sense of *critical distance* from the object to be criticized. In other words, the possibility for criticism and social change appears to be predicated upon precisely the aesthetic autonomy which the avant-garde according to Bürger is supposed to overcome" (27). Bürger's theory of the avant-garde gave rise to many, well-founded polemical responses or rebuttals, but I cannot recall a single one which locates his initial error in taking the Dada imperative of integrating art with everyday life and forcing it into a Marxist critical matrix. That is the price one pays for taking Dada at its word.

Italian restaurant, located in a shopping mall in Kelton, seems to be faux-Tudor on the inside, and its business policy, as we might surmise, is to get the customers drunk long before they are served food. Fabia's brother Victor, who, along with Alice, unsuccessfully tried to open a curiosity shop early on in the story, starts an antique business with his wife Nadia and her sister Claire. Claire buys "antique" junk in New England and ships it to Paris, where the newlyweds are trying to kick-start a fashion for such kitschy bric-a-brac. Needless to say, both ventures turn out to be smash hits. Yet they both rely on a kind of cultural recycling, on "found objects" which are eventually (mis)placed in accordance with market logic. It is not unlikely that these couples' enterprises ironically thematize Ashbery's and Schuyler's cannabilization of the kinds of language on which commercial fiction relies for plot progression, as well as for expressing tensions or conflicts between characters. There are, however, no such conflicts, and no plot to speak of, in *A Nest of Ninnies*. These traditional components of a novel have been replaced by their simulacra, and not a little of the characters' chatter may be taken as a commentary on this substitution or displacement.

Let us now consider several samples of style from *A Nest of Ninnies* and some earlier works. The following sentences end Chapter IV of Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*: "The horses were put in—the driver mounted—the fat boy clambered up by his side—farewells were exchanged—and the carriage rattled off. As the Pickwickians turned round to take a last glimpse of it, the setting sun cast a rich glow on the faces of their entertainers, and fell upon the form of the fat boy. His head was sunk upon his bosom; and he slumbered again." And this is the final sentence of *A Nest of Ninnies*: "So it was that the cliff dwellers, after bidding their country cousins good night, moved off toward the parking area, while the latter bent their steps toward the partially rebuilt shopping plaza in the teeth of the freshening foehn" (191). (The "cliff dwellers" are those of the party who live in high-rise buildings in Manhattan). In many of the novels "we know best," chapters begin with a mention of the time of day and a brief description of the weather, and end on a parting or departure, if only to bed for the night. Ashbery and Schuyler follow this pattern in their novel, preserving a convention most likely established because of the serialization of novels in the nineteenth century. Yet there is something strange about an expression such as "bent their steps," made even more unconventional by the "freshening foehn," "in the teeth" of which their steps are bent. The language calls attention to itself rather loudly here, but its clamor is tempered by the fact that this is the last sentence of the novel, so readers' attention is naturally more focused on events than the style of their representation.<sup>9</sup>

Table talk pervades *A Nest of Ninnies*, unsurprisingly since the characters spend most of their time eating, drinking and talking "nineteen to the dozen." The following two excerpts should do justice to the general mode of their board-side intercourse. Marshall, his secretary Miss Burgoyne, her parents, Irving Kelso and Fabia Bridgewater are on their way to lunch somewhere in Manhattan.

9 This may also hold true for some opening sentences. Harry Mathews said so, referring to the first sentence of the narrator in his novel *Cigarettes*: "The gabled house loomed over us like a buzzard stuffed in mid flight" (3). Asked about the odd comparison, Mathews explained that in the opening sentences of a novel one "can get away" with all sorts of idiosyncrasies which would later draw too much attention (Mathews, In conversation with Tadeusz Pióro).

‘I make it a rule never to cross against the light,’ Mrs. Burgoyne said, stopping short at the curb.

‘I’m afraid you’ll get us all arrested, Mother,’ Miss Burgoyne said, mystifyingly.

‘The perils of the machine age, Fabia said. Despite these, however, the party was soon comfortably seated at one of the larger tables in Childs.

‘Why don’t we all have the oysters Rockefeller?’ Marshall said.

‘I don’t see those on my menu,’ Mrs. Burgoyne said.

‘Mr. Bush was joking,’ Miss Burgoyne said. ‘The menu has the cheese fondue on toast tips I told you about,’ she added. ‘But I don’t know if you’d like it.’

....

‘I always wonder what men talk about at their lunches,’ Miss Burgoyne said archly. The cheese fondue seemingly had gone to her head like wine. ‘I suppose they talk about business,’ she went on, ‘but that isn’t what they look like they’re talking about.’ She lapsed into a sudden silence. (23-4)

The next conversation takes place at a party at Irving Kelso’s and his mother’s apartment. Besides the Bushes, Bridgewaters and Claire Tosti, the Kelsos have invited the Turpins. Mr. Turpin used to be the French consul in Honolulu. The talk is of the Bridgewaters’ planned visit to France which, according to the head of the family, should “broaden [his] children’s horizons.”

‘Good,’ Claire said. ‘When you have mastered the Louvre, and other notable spots, you may proceed with the provinces.’ To Victor she added, ‘Should you come in the summer, you may have the use of my season pass to the Bains Deligny.’

‘Is that a place to take a bath?’ Victor asked.

‘No, to swim—as the English say, to sea-bathe,’ Mrs. Turpin said in kindly tones. ‘This summer Mr. Turpin and I hope to be at my little farm. You must come and see the true country life. The very hogs are fed on chestnuts.’

‘What else do you grow on your farm?’ Alice asked.

‘My wife merely owns the farm,’ Mr. Turpin said. ‘She does not dig and delve.’

‘In the fall,’ Mrs. Turpin said, her voice rising excitedly, ‘when the chestnuts are ripe, hogs are driven up the hills. With sticks, by boys. Later, they are driven down again.’

Though the others waited, this was the end of her tale. (74)

While both conversations seem to be absurdly inane, they are also funny or humorous in several ways, but not really at the expense of the characters involved, since their “ninnyness” is already established by the time we reach these passages in the text. In the first excerpt, when Mrs. Burgoyne insists on obeying the rules of pedestrian traffic, her daughter “mystifyingly” claims that this might lead to their being arrested, intending perhaps that since no one else obeys them and crosses “against the light,” they might be charged with blocking traffic. Or, to put it differently, that in Manhattan transgression is the norm. What kind of transgression is really on her mind may be gleaned from her final lines, which seem to come out of nowhere, but which may have something to do with the fact that she is lunching with her boss, whom she has observed

lunching with men, and it didn't look like business was what they were talking about. I take this to be a hint that she knows Marshall is gay, especially since she unexpectedly "lapses into silence," as if she were afraid that this casually mentioned topic might lead to an indiscretion. Then again, unconsciously, she might have been responding to a feeling that her mother had hopes she would make an advantageous match with Marshall, but that is probably a little more than needs to be assumed.

At the Kelsos' dinner party, Mrs. Turpin's enthusiasm over the chestnut-fed hogs reveals the force and extent of Ronald Firbank's influence on *A Nest of Ninnies*. Like Miss Burgoyne, she ends her "tale" abruptly, as if she thought it might be unwise to go on. Some readers might be at a loss to say what makes her voice rise "excitedly": the chestnuts, the hogs, the taste of their meat or just the quaint old country ways, while others would be quick to guess that the boys and their "sticks" are responsible. But apart from this rather discreet bawdiness, considerably toned down in comparison to Firbank's, it is "the very hogs" that bring to mind his use of the English language. Firbank wanted to make his writing sound odd, or queer, partly by using the camp banter of "queens," and partly by employing French syntactic structures, French word order in sentences, and literally translated idioms or ready-made phrases. Some, although not all of these strategies, may be seen in the following passage from *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, in which a royal dinner in the land of Pisuerga is described:

the Queen of the Land of Dates... seemed to be lost in admiration of the Royal dinner-service of scarlet plates, that looked like pools of blood upon the cloth.

'What pleases me in your land,' she was expansively telling her host, 'is less your food than the china you serve it on; for with us you know there's none. And now,' she added, marvellously wafting a fork, 'I'm forever spoilt for shells.'

King William was incredulous.

'With you no china?' he gasped.

'None, sir, none!'

'I could not be more astonished,' the King declared, 'if you had told me there were fleas at the Ritz,' a part of which assertion Lady Something, who was blandly listening, imperfectly chanced to hear.

'Who would credit it!' she breathed, turning to an attaché, a young man all white and penseroso, at her elbow.

'Credit what?'

Lady Something raised a glass of frozen lemonade to her lips.

'Fleas,' she murmured, 'have been found at the Ritz.'

'.....!.....?.....! !' (Firbank 27-8)

Queen Thleeanouhee (for that is her name) seems to be disparaging the royal cuisine of Pisuerga while praising its presentation, or, in other words, expressing her preference for form over content. In her Land of Dates, content is everything, form does not exist: perhaps the excellence of the content makes it superfluous. Yet now, she admits, she is "forever spoilt for shells," meaning china in a literal sense, but, more importantly, form in its broader meanings, including, perhaps, the form of the novel as an attractive container for *n'importe quoi*. It does not matter much whether we assume the Land of Dates to be a public toilet, even though the interior design of such conveniences is

discussed with gravity by some of the leading matrons of Pisuerga, or whether the meat in the Land of Dates, even it comes from chestnut-fed hogs and is tenderized by boys with sticks, is superior to the meats of Pisuerga: it is the shock effect of scarlet plates upon a white cloth, on which meat of any kind is served, that makes the conversation perversely meaningful. A shock effect was also what Firbank tried to achieve through his (mis)use of English. The lines about the fleas in the Ritz can be adapted to fit any meaning we choose for the lines preceding, even though these fleas inaugurate a leitmotif which pops up throughout the novel for comic effect.

In the final, “climactic” chapter of *A Nest of Ninnies*, which the narrators call its “Walpurgisnacht,” several new characters appear, the most important among them an English architect, Godfrey Mullion. Mullion has settled in Kelton, probably due to lack of metropolitan employment, and designed the interior of a pub called Sir Toby Belch, which Alice and Giorgio take over and remake into their own Osteria Trentino. They throw a grand party to celebrate its opening. In the course of the evening, Mullion discovers a fellow soul in Henry Scott, Alice’s music teacher. Unisono, they recite from memory a passage from Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*, and exchange views on Victorian fiction for adolescent boys, novels set in boarding schools, where the opportunities for homosexual experiences outnumber a pupil’s chances to avoid them.<sup>10</sup> When the festivities come to an end, he is offered a lift home, but declines, saying that a walk through Kelton at midnight never fails to inspire him. Then he adds: “only a European can appreciate what goes on here—,” at which point Fabia takes this for sexual innuendo, and quotes “The Tale of the Ancient Mariner” as if that part of Coleridge’s poem referred to gay cruising: “and he stoppeth one of three.” After this interruption, Mullion completes his sentence: “where children play among the ruins of the language” (188). Although this does not blunt Fabia’s insinuation, Mullion’s use of the definite article—“the language”—indicates a specific language, British English, perhaps in its Victorian or Edwardian phase of literary development. And since Ashbery and Schuyler, from the beginning of the novel to its blithe and winsome end, have been at play among the high and low and—this in particular—medium registers of this language, Mullion’s remark casts them as children in the act of chanting, or just murmuring, “dada.”

But be that as it may, the more important point of Mullion’s remark comes with the word “ruins,” which could be understood as the remains of an edifice or structure which has been broken to pieces, and all comers can pick and choose among them for their amusement, even as the past wholeness of that structure now reveals its transitory essence. Where everything once had its proper place, the very notion of a proper place seems to have lost its usefulness, and even its original purpose. In such an environment, “the language” no longer serves the aims of what Fredric Jameson termed “the will to style.” The stability of the edifice of language made the will to style thinkable and performable, just as the relative stability of the definitions of fine art made possible the gradual institutionalization of post-Academic and early Modernist painting. Dada exploded these definitions and exposed their ideological implications. Its followers could play among the ruins, as long as they did not try to recreate the system Dada had set out to destroy.

10 For the likely sexual implications of this conversation, see Wiśniewski 261-65.

Duchamp's found objects are not creative art works, but objects of everyday use, intentionally misplaced and parodically endowed with the artist's signatures. The ready phrases and clichés of *A Nest of Ninnies* are also objects of everyday use, serving both practical communication and safely conventionalized literary creation. While this kind of writing lends itself easily to parody or pastiche, hardly anyone bothers to parody or pastiche such styles as are not driven by the "will to style," with sentences constructed out of ready-made phrases, along with ready-made plot lines and all the other elements of novelistic narrative familiar to the point of total predictability. Thus it is, finally, this kind of writing in which the "ruins of the language" are to be found and played with.

To conclude, two sentences from *A Nest of Ninnies*. Alice and Victor are sitting in a drugstore in Florida when Claire Tosti, whom they have not yet met, enters and orders a sandwich.

'*Voulez-vous me passer le sel, s'il vous plait,*' Alice said to the woman.

'*Comment?*' the expensively turned-out dish said in sincere bewilderment when she realized it was she who was addressed. (48)

The word "dish" is, *toutes proportions gardées*, like the moustache Duchamp placed under La Gioconda's nose. Here it means an attractive-looking person, although I believe that this usage was more common in gay, rather than straight, parlance. "To dish" also means to chatter or gossip and, again, I have encountered it only in reference to gay or campy banter. The presence of "dish" in an otherwise perfectly "well-behaved" sentence may be taken for a camp gesture, just as Mona Lisa's moustache and goatee. Duchamp's Dadaist joke, an integral part of which is its title, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, shockingly brings in Mona Lisa's sexual appetite at the same time as it makes her into a transsexual (let us add, quite convincingly). His slightly later work, *Rose Selavy*, presents Duchamp himself in drag, but looking very much like the man he was. In each case, however, the Dada spirit is also the spirit of camp. By way of their camp jokes and stylizations, Ashbery and Schuyler expose the affinities and identifications of that aesthetic with New York Dada.

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