Time and Narrative in Two Short Story Compilations: *James McManus and Eckhard Gerdes*

Past, Present, and Future (salt print, 1854) Martin M. Lawrence and J. A. Whipple, USA

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I like [short] *stories because they leave the writer no place to hide. There's no yakking your way out of trouble.*

— "What Makes You So Sure You're Not The Evil One Yourself? [on Alice Munro]" in *Farther Away*, Jonathan Franzen

We were awakened from our dogmatic slumber by Einstein's critique of objective duration. . . .Time has but one reality, the reality of the instant.

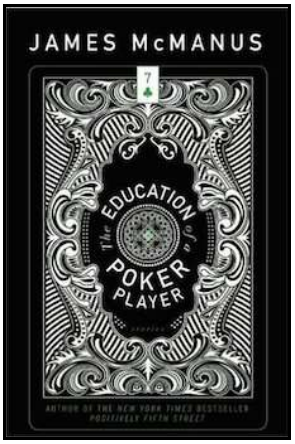
— *Intuition of the Instant*, Gaston Bachelard

A continuous present is a continuous present. I made almost a thousand pages of a continuous present.

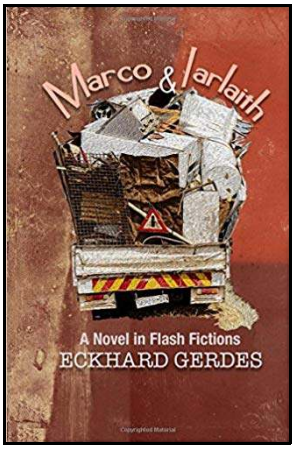
— Gertrude Stein

Anyone who started sitting down *early in life will always be susceptible to the cool ostentation of poker.*

— "The School of Doyle," Martin Amis



Sheer chance, like a drawing a pair of Aces in poker or the role of the cosmic dice in quantum theory, placed before my reading eyes in short succession two collections of linked short stories: *The Education of the Poker Player* (BOA Editions, Ltd., Rochester, NY, 2015) seven connected stories by James McManus and *Marco and Iarlaith* (Black Scat Books, Guerneville, CA, 2018) "a novel in [fifty!] flash fictions" by Eckhard Gerdes. On their respective title pages, each author explicitly states that their stories have been arranged to form a short novel. This use of shorter, independent textual material to form a larger whole has always intrigued me — Patrick Modiano's *Such Fine Boys* (1982), connected stories about boarding school boys, comes to mind. My own 2013 novel *Elder Physics: The Wrong of Time, Stories from an Elder Home* is such a collection and, like the books under review here, involves interactions between father and son. So I felt disposed to



engage McManus and Gerdes's similar efforts. Let me state, I know them personally. Moreover, there is a connection between the two authors: McManus teaches in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Writing Program and Gerdes got his MFA in Writing in the that program and went on to found The Journal of Experimental Fiction publishing venture in 1986, which publishes my books. Gerdes's JEF publishing has celebrated the work of Raymond Federman, Jerome Klinkowitz, Charles Bernstein, Ronald Sukenick, Larry McCaffery, Doug Rice, Harold Jaffe, Lance Olsen, and Mark Amerika. That student-teacher relationship could not have been a pleasant for McManus or Gerdes, so different were (and still are) their respective approaches to fiction. In comparing and contrasting these two very different writers, I hope to elucidate their respective efforts, especially in relation to their differing approaches to time and narrative flow.

McManus's book *Chin Music* (1985) with its noisily nose-diving suicide bouncing down the sides of Chicago's trapezoidal-shaped John Hancock Center, influenced one of my own books, *Something is Crook in Middlebrook* (2012). McManus stresses the supremacy of linear narrative with its progression from past, present, toward the future (allegorically figured in the salted paper print by that name staged in J. A. Whipple's studio in 1854); he is mystified why anyone would want to futz with linear story development as have many experimental writers like David Markson in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988). This chapterless text is composed of atomic facts. These are given by Kate, the sole narrator, as "instants" in Gaston Bachelard's sense: "The instant is already solitude . . . in its barest metaphysical value. . . . the instant isolates us . . . it breaks with our most cherished past." Even her memories are isolates that don't provide continuity to her life. Kate makes an effort to trace her today upon her yesterdays but, as Bachelard notes: "Memory, that guardian of time, guards the instant alone. It preserves nothing [. . .] of duration." The keen treatment of Kate's solipsistic narration proves what Ernest Renan once wrote: "what we say of ourselves is always poetry."

Here past and present events are written down in a manic, time-jumbled stream of utterances (Bachelard's "instants," foregoing Henri Bergson's notion of *durée,* which influenced Gertrude Stein) by an unreliable female narrator. Kate just barely exists in an post-apocalyptic world, which she encounters as discontinuous facts — a riff on early-Wittgensteinian metaphysics as envisioned in his *Tractatus* — where modernity's time's arrow is bereft of its bow. There is no "becoming" in Kate's depleted world. Kate may be the only human on earth, and admits to period of madness, yet she still seeks wholeness; for her, temporal flow only stutters: "On the day before the day after the day after I went to the basement I was still typing."

David Foster Wallace, in his insightful “Afterword” to Markson’s book, identifies its narrative movement as “more spiral than anything else.” Parodying the New Novel’s use of repetition-with-a-difference (e.g., the repeated squishing of the bug on the wall from different points of view in Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy,* 1957), Markson has Kate make repeated references, slightly different from each other. Several reference are made to American writer William Gaddis’s 1955 *The Recognitions,* whose protagonist wears an alarm clock about his neck (clocks are the markers of the historical past; if a clock keeps ticking, then things that happen before "now" have to have happened "then"; without any clocks, there wouldn’t be any difference between the present and the past. If there’s no "today," then how can there be a "yesterday"?).

Wallace could’ve gone on to mention German writer Wolfgang Hilbig’s dissolution of the linearity of past and present in *The Sleep of the Righteous* (2002). Like McManus’ and Gerdes’ book, Hilbig’s is a novel built from semi-independent, named chapters. Therein, the protagonist’s birth town in East Germany (referred to only as “M.” and described as a “perpetually stalled upheaval”) has been “plunged into paralysis, and that collapse had survived the regime change [from Soviet domination to Reunification with the West Germany].” Living in “a state without a past,” the town is described as frozen in time as seen in (and figured by) a twenty-year old photograph a friend of the narrator once took there on “an ice-cold Sunday” at exactly 3 p.m. and in which, “Eternal afternoon prevails.” Since that exposure, the narrator tells us, he’s been “excluded from the soft, relentless onward flow time.” Hilbig here ambiguously conflates memory, photographic evidence, and personal experience: “Time persisted here in dogged immutability,” even the large clock on the local train station facade, he notes, perpetually reads “three o’clock” (but is that so in the town as seen upon his recent arrival there — the result of a long-broken mechanism — or as pictured in the old photograph, or both?). In the town, even something as changeable as the weather (fog, drizzle, snow) is “a mere expression of stagnation and the past.” In the protagonist’s home town, time simply puddles.

In Markson’s book, Kate repeats a story about freeing herself from time by dumping her collection of seventeen watches in a river but, with each reiteration, the river’s name is given as different, as if her memory is uncertain. Vague references to time passing are periodically injected: “As a matter of fact I have now also had another night’s sleep. I mentioned that, this time, only because in a manner of speaking one could now say that it has this quickly become the day after tomorrow,” and “To tell the truth it has actually already gotten to be the day after tomorrow.”

I take time to bring this discussion concerning time up due to its relevance to the books under review. Such a time-jumble of instants is okay in Gerdes's estimation. But it is anathema to McManus's understanding of proper story development in which continuity is a schema of pure possibility (like time as employed in classical physics) and instants are artificial ruptures. Traditional story development is akin to Bergson's concept of duration and becomings where the past projects its forces into the future toward a *dénouement*. He does allow this flow to be punctuated with some happy instants (winning a pot at poker), some brutal (sudden death). Moreover, he condones certain exceptions to linear time, memories of course, but also simple time reversal, as in Martin Amis's 1991 *Time's Arrow,* where the reader can easily follow the inversion: time's arrow is still an arrow, but now hurling backwards. (By the way, McManus and Amis share a mutual love of poker with its vivid instants of winning and losing; both writers participated in, and have written about, the World Series of Poker held in Las Vegas). This tactic of time-reversal is also found in one of British writer Ian Sinclair's Situationist-like *dérives* in his native city. In his latest psychogeographic descriptions, *The Last London: True Fictions from an Unreal City* (2018), Sinclair flips time, mentioning in a Proustian moment that "the only legitimate journey is into the past." He goes on to describe how after one clockwise amble around the route of a circular railway, he decides to repeat the performance, but this time, Amis-like, doing it counterclockwise, describing it as "an erasure, a rubbing out of the original." It is such interesting aspects of time and narrative, well-probed by Paul Ricoeur in his classic *Time and Narrative* (volume three) and suggested in Gaston Bachelard's anti-Bergsonian analysis *Intuition of the Instant*, that drew me to engage these two books.

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In contradistinction to McManus's conventional realism, Eckhard Gerdes writes experimental fiction. In *Cistern Tawdry* (2002), *Three Psychedelic Novellas* (2011), *White Bungalows* (2015), and *Three Plays* (2016), he pushes the boundaries way beyond realist conventions, what critic James Woods has infamously dubbed "hysterical realism." In "Counter Narratives," writer and critic Andy O'Clancy reviews Gerdes's "transgressive, disorienting, and complex" novel *White Bungalows,* adding that ". . . Gerdes plays with an expansive array of ideomatic registers, but in ways critically decentering linguistic hegemonies." In that novel, one character exclaims, "Away, Nineteenth Century Fiction writers!" Gerdes's writing is often non-linear and indirect, yet not as dense and difficult as that of, say, James Joyce. He is fond of meta-levels where puns and wordplay foreground language (McManus argues this tactic quickly gets boring) and the many stories in *Marco and Iarlaith* don't disappoint in this regard. The father's Irish name (pronounced Yar'-layth) is well-chosen by Gerdes as it references a saint in Irish lore known for his calm,

composed and well-balanced nature who brought happiness to those around him by a smile, a favor, kindness, tact, diplomacy, and even cunning. Saint Iarlaith's natural inclination was to beauty and perfection; he was of a scrupulous nature and was very sensitive to his perceived responsibilities towards his family who he was concerned about disappointing. We see these qualities manifest throughout these stories in his relationship with his son.

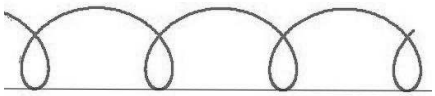
To amuse each other, father and son often play word games: One is called "conflated clichés," during which "a nephew had offered 'time will tell all wounds.' The turns went around. He'd [Iarlaith] withdrawn into his own thoughts, and then, with the last category, he'd spoken the answer without even thinking. A niece, who was an English major, named [a new word game] 'subjects of gerunds,' and he'd replied, robotically, 'Your possessing me has done me in." Iarlaith would agree with Bachelard's close friend, Jean Lescure, when he wrote: "As I ponder things in their given names, they come to awaken endless reveries in me, resonant word-forming reveries."

In *The Education of a Poker Player* McManus tosses in his share of puns and wordplay, but they are age-appropriate to the narrator, so don't read as explicit postmodernist *modus operandi*. This author is best known for his forays into professional poker and this book doesn't disappoint. In fact, it sojourns into the origins of the author's own love of the game. Arthur Crowson in "James McManus Q&A: New Book, Unwatchable Poker Movies, Idiotic Laws" (*Poker Listings.com,* July 27, 2015) writes that "McManus wrote the book on poker. His 2003 *Positively Fifth Street* is widely regarded as one of the best poker books ever written and to this day remains a best-seller in the category. It was pretty much the perfect storm as McManus chronicled his participation in the 2000 WSOP Main Event just as the game was getting ready to hit the big time. Since then McManus has released *Cowboys Full: The Story of Poker* (2009) and teaches a course at the Art Institute of Chicago about the history of the game."

Poker is a game that flows inexorably forward in time, yet is constructed out of many "fragments" of individual decisions and play where "the gift of a fertile instant" (Bachelard) can make you rich. It mimic life's ups and downs, our personal bluffs and revelations, both money-wise and emotional. It has its own colorful jargon — recall the con man Mike's (Joe Mantegna) use of such in David Mamet's 1987 film *House of Games*. No surprise, then, that McManus is able to work poker so well into this book, not just as content, but stylistically. It is the concurrence of content and style that makes *The Education of the Poker Player* so effective in taking the reader on a journey into the origins of (we presume) the author's own fascination with the game.

In McManus's compilation, the protagonist lives his pre-teen and teen years growing up in the suburbs of Chicago in the late 1950s and early 1960s, struggling against a repressive Catholic environment, where he is being pressured to become a Church Latin-responding altar

boy (as I was once) with familial expectations he become a priest. In this context, the poker-playing figures the boy's rebellion, his growth toward maturity and individuality (a move from holy cards to holding cards), in a *Bildungsroman* built of *seven* stand-alone stories (a clever play on the "Seven Last Words of Christ" or the "Seven Sacraments," the "Seven Cardinal Sins"?): "Altar Boy," "Concupiscence," "Detention," "Holy Week," "Kings Up," "Picasso," and "Romeoville." These stories do develop a coherent, progressive narrative and are interlinked on the level of content by awakening sexuality, the resulting religious guilt, hints of creepy boy-touching priest-pedophilia, and the forbidden pleasures of smoking and poker. The narrative flow of the stories follow a profane linear historical time forward as the narrator matures, yet also running alongside time's arrow is the sacred circular time of the Catholic Liturgical Calendar (Advent, then Christmas, then Lent, then Easter, then Pentecost, etc.) as well as the brief flashbacks of personal memory. Combining and diagraming the combined flow of these different times, one arrives at a cycloid.



This bicycle-pedaling form of motion is stage-center in McManus's *Going to the Sun* (1996) where, at 29, Penny Culligan, a jazz-loving student of Irish literature and victim of diabetes, is writing her doctoral thesis as she bicycles from Chicago to Alaska to confront a past trauma. She's bicycling back to the place where her lover, David, was mauled by a grizzly. The bicycle moves slowly toward a destination, a conclusion, as the repetitive, circular motion of the pedals figures the return of memories that haunt the protagonist.

This cycloid form is also woven into *The Education of a Poker Player* where it figures the relationship between the progress of historical progression (marked by references to Sputnik, JFK's election and assassination, the Viet Nam War, the *Bonanza* TV series, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Singing Nun, radio disc-jockey Dick Biondi, murderer Richard Speck, the Bears famous football championship, and the boy's progressing birthdays), with the ever-renewing Liturgical Calendar and the excursions backward in time that the boy makes via his memories and revelations of his family's past, as in the dated transcriptions from his grandfather's World War I diary. One telling glitch in objective time (a rare instance of the warp of subjective time) occurs in the story "Kings Up" among a plethora of finely observed detail describing a rollicking poker game with his friends. During a poignant climax in the play of cards, "Time speeded up as we showed down our hands, or my vision got blurry and jerky." The only other hint of such derangement of the senses occurs when the boy describes sexual intimacy (from French kissing to "third base") with a free-wheeling, sports car-driving girl dubbed "Picasso" by classmates due to her asymmetric face.

The Education of a Poker Player is written from a youngster's naive perspective (I think of Maisie in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* and recall Martin Amis's confession in "The School of Doyle": "My big poker period was in my teens. Ever tell l you about the time I lost my busfare at lowball?"): "Every other year the Holy Ghost plants a baby seed in a married mom's tummy. Nine months later a slit opens up underneath across the bottom and the baby slides out. It's not like a zipper." Then he adds, implying that he's *not* a naive kid any longer, "That storks delivers babies is mere superstition, of course." Humorous family revelations are given: "If a kid said something Grampa didn't like, he'd say [with his East Coast accent], 'A-rink-a-dink a bottle of ink, da cawk fell out and you stink." Nuances of expression in a battle of words between the boy and his annoying sister is cleverly captured by the author: " 'I'm not saying,' he said, 'I'm just saying." The author superbly captures the ideation and expression of his protagonist as he grows from pre-teen to teen, family upheavals, navigating the harsh rules of Catholic probity (the proper length of Catholic school girls's skirts are obsessively dwelt upon) with its corresponding Catholic guilt: "In Religion, Sr. Francona said girls' throats aren't wanton or concupiscent 'in and of themselves,' unlike breasts, which are a sin of delectation to look at unless it's by accident and only for a couple three seconds."

The boy discovers avid poker players in his ancestry, identifies with them, begins to study the art of poker, reading Herbert O. Yardley's 1957 book *Education of a Poker Player.* He is seduced into the challenges of "the hairiest game in town," despite of (or because of) its supposed sinfulness as proclaimed by the Jesuits and re-enforced by his strictly religious mother. This passion for the game culminates in the story "Kings Up," a masterful description of poker play: "'*Andale,'* he said. 'Let's play some high draw.' We were already playing it. What he meant was, things would change now that *he* had sat down. The price of poker was going way up in a hurry." It is in this story that the quirk in time I referred to above occurs, "a gift of the fertile instant" (Bachelard), as the boy's "ace outkicked Swede's jack," winning the pot.

McManus's story "Kings Up" is followed by "Picasso," which narrates the pot-winning poker player's first sexual encounter, thanks to good timing. While walking, the boy fortuitously encounters the school's sexiest girl, Picasso, in her hot sports car; she offers a ride and slyly gets his sympathy, and eventual arousal, by dissing the school's moral strictures: " 'Those fucking nuns worship werewolves,' she said, grabbing my forearm and squeezing, which gave me a nuclear doozer." The boy is often embarrassed by his uncontrollable erections. The boy plays his cards right, gets the girl in her bedroom, plays "poke-her"and wins "the pot." Here we are approaching the end of the boy's worldly education which sees him achieving his release from childhood strictures through two variations on the term "poker." Importantly, timing, in both poker and love, is revealed as essential.

The instant is, says Bachelard, “both a giver and a plunderer.” Timing is critical in poker and in the struggle of life and death. As the adage goes: “Life is an instant poised between two eternities.” The poker-playing boy has yet to encounter Death. He does so in McManus’s concluding story, “Romeoville,” a town 26 miles south of Chicago whose name connotes ill-fated romance. The story could’ve been titled “What a Difference an Instant Makes.” A friend and poker-mate, Mike Figueroa, in a brutal instant, is killed minutes after leaving one of their hotly contested night poker games; ironically, he left “seventy bucks in the red.” His Impala is totaled in an intersection collision with a big truck (Gerdes would, punfully, have him *impaled* on the steering wheel of his Impala). Bad timing — had their poker game ended a hand or two earlier, Mike would still be alive: “I’m saying he takes one extra second, or one second less, before calling or betting — as of us do. Any hand, any street. Or he shuffles my trey one card over.” Instead, he did what he did and sheer chance (one thinks of the mere probabilities espoused by quantum theory) dealt the Dead Man’s Hand. The boy has now been given his final lesson, Lady Luck’s capriciousness.

Uncannily, in reading this book, I felt like I was vividly reliving details from my own Catholic school childhood. It was like he’d downloaded my own memories. And, yes, at times it made me feel uncomfortable as it peeled back unpleasant recollections from my own journey through pubescence, my struggle for independence.

Marco’s fifty “flash fictions” (most are only three to four pages in length) are written from the God-perspective of the author, not in first-person as in McManus’s stories. His numerous story titles are longer, more overtly humorous than McManus’s Seven Words of Christ approach: “Marco at the Innuendo Festival,” “April Fool’s Cheese Fondue,” “Iarlaith and the Phantom Pebble,” and “Iarlaith and the Suicide Chickens”; moreover, these super-short tales (“instances” that makeup the complete novel) could be shuffled like a card deck and dealt out as new sequences without destroying the book’s coherence. That could not be done with McManus’s stories without confusing the overall storyline — a major difference in their writing styles.

We are introduced to Iarlaith and Marco — albeit they could’ve been named Hic and Nunc as each story can stand alone as an *instance* in the life of this pair. Father and son, like poker-boy, live in a suburb of Chicago. Their cabin sits near a river (a figure for the flow of time) which flows on in contrast to this familial pair stuck in their own atemporal existence of mutual survival. In a repetition of everyday activities that recalls the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, they cook meals together, take trips to the local convenience store, drink together at home or in bars, watch TV, try to better their financial status, and mundanely take coats on and off. Abstraction and lived-life, truth-seeking and daily schlepping are brought into harmony.

As poker enthusiasts will enjoy McManus's keen evocation of the game in his compilation, so will writers appreciate Gerdes having Iarlaith confess to his youthful attraction to Concrete Poetry, the poetic works of Apollinaire and Kenneth Patchen (Gerdes's Journal of Experimental Fiction gives an annual Kenneth Patchen Award, a prize of $1,000 for an innovative novel in honor of that writer). Iarlaith — a sensitive, emotional, and intuitive soul — passes on this love for creative endeavor to his son.

Unfortunately, Iarlaith works a drudge job at a typeface foundry, a creative writer forced, *literally*, to be a wordsmith: "Iarlaith liked to say that *Romain de Roi*, a typeface designed in 1692 for King Louis XIV, was the font of all wisdom. It had been designed according to purely mathematical and philosophical principles. Unfortunately, the lead-cast typefaces the foundry had Iarlaith sorting were rather dull." His job-overseers are akin to industrial robots in a system which has no need for creative thought and disparages it. Figured in the foundry scenes is the contrast of the artistic mind — one who can take fonts and produces the magic of literature — to the sheer materiality and economics of day-after-day brute production.

In *Poker Player*, the boy is tangled in the rules of religiosity; in *Marco*, father and son are marginalized by an unforgiving capitalist system. Marco adds to the family's resources by repeatedly walking along the nearby river bank (Bergson and Borges's image of time moving forward) scavenging detritus for collages and sculptures, *bricolage* he can turn at a profit: "An escaped plastic grocery bag attacked Marco and attached itself to his leg. He pulled the bag off, and an idea struck him. He began to collect all the rubbish he found along the path on his way home." He sells these constructions to tourists: " 'Yes,' he would say to the tourist. 'I have seen so much art that is dishonest. It is trash masquerading as art. I, at least, am honest. This is obviously real trash.'" Marco's task, of course, recalls Kurt Schwitters's Dadaist collages, his *Merz* productions, also made during a troubled time when, as Schwitters put it: "Everything had broken down . . . new things had to be made from fragments . . . new art forms out of the remain of a former culture."

This recalls a scene in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (a seminal text influential on later experimental writers) in which Kate performs a similar activity, an activity that also refers to the manner in which Markson's dissociating narrator willy-nilly tries to patch together events in her life: ". . . when I went for a walk along the beach, or was picking up shells as I sometimes do, I must have said the word *bricolage* to myself a hundred times." We can also view Marco's aesthetic transformation of junk into "significant form, and into greenbacks" as a kind of "transubstantiation" analogous to the mystery of bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Christ during the Catholic Mass, an event often referred to in *Poker Player*. Of course, not to

be ignored is that such cobbling of diverse fragments by Marco into new wholes figures Gerdes's own transformation of brief stories into a novel.

The theme of an "underground" economy runs through both books. Marco "wins the pot," like the young poker-player, when he successfully sells his artworks, transforming rubbish discarded by tourists into commodities resold, ironically, back to those very tourists as under the aegis of "local art." The meager profits so gleaned are used to keep father and son financially afloat, fending off the wolf at the door. Their struggle with perpetual pennilessness is just barely made tolerable by their mutual enjoyment of music, art, literature, wordplay, and the saving power of booze: "Marco all of a sudden developed a headache, the kind that only a bottle of bourbon would cure. He went home, turned on the TV, and tried not to think." I quickly became fans of Marco and Iarlaith (loosely based on Eckhard and his son Ulysses's close relationship). Thanks to the humor pervading the book, I identified with their tribulations and triumphs, even thought the pair reminiscent of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Of the Zen koan-like flash fictions here, my favorite is "Iarlaith and his Coat." Marco doesn't figure in this story where "Yar Yar" (an acquired nickname he dislikes, yet his friends annoyingly still call him that) puts his coat on, takes it off, puts it back on, takes it off — simple instances of decision which don't cohere into a stable duration: "He put his coat on again. This time he'd go and make his way to the convenience store down the street. The blizzard outside wouldn't stop him. Except there was no blizzard. The day outside was actually very pleasant." These events may seem incon-sequential, but they recall to mind a clever line in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* about the "inconsequential perplexities" that "become the fundamental mood of existence." Besides exemplifying Bachelard's insight that "life is the discontinuity of acts," this deceptively simple story gives insight into the mood and character of Iarlaith. It reveals Gerdes at his best when seemingly absurd acts take on import.

Another story ends in a comic impasse. Upon awakening, Iarlaith spies a bag stuck in an old black oak outside their cottage's window. Knowing how much Marco hates such environment-harming trash and wanting to live up to his namesake, wishing to be the ideal father (we sense this affection of father for son throughout the book), he attempts to get it down before Marco awakes. What follows reads like a script for a silent movie comedy; finally he gets stuck up in the tree when his back goes out. He'd have to wait until his son awoke to help me down: "The problem was that 'morning' for Marco was sometimes several hours later than morning for Iarlaith. Iarlaith noticed a roof was being repaired on a house across the river. He saw the roofer scrambling up a ladder, hauling a bundle of shingles. That would have been the perfect ladder. He waved to the roofer, but the roofer didn't notice." The end. We are left — chuckling —

imagining how long it took Marco to wake up (a holding back time's forward progression) and how he might have rescued his well-meaning father.

Gerdes's flash stories are sort of one-liners, often hilarious, sometimes sad, sometimes painful, but always revelatory of the human condition and its ability to sustain itself despite life's vicissitudes. And he uses the simplest of means to do so. It is this terseness, the economy of means, that Gerdes employs to speak of larger issues that gives his compilation such power.

Comparing the two authors' differing approaches to narration: the *final* story in *Marco* opens with what might just as easily be an establishing scene at the start of the book: "Marco walked in through the door only to find his father Iarlaith asleep on the couch, beer in hand, head back and snoring while the TV blared. How long would his father be able to keep this up? His father hadn't had a real job in years." If McManus was writing this book, he'd probably use this description as the opening scene in the first story. *Poker Player'*s first long story depicts the child narrator deeply immersed in Catholicism, in the mysteries of the Immaculate Conception, the Trinity, and the Transubstantiation. Those mysteries are humorously evoked through the difficultly in properly referring to them.

In one family discussion, the boy's Gramma corrects his *gramma*r (yes, I'm pointing out a homology that Gerdes would like): " 'Remember it's *who* planted," she says [referring to Mary's virgin birth]. 'The referent isn't the entire Trinity. For that you'd say *that* or *which.'"* Musing on all this, the boy then tells us: ". . . but when it comes to the Trinity the rules for pronouns and capitals keep changing. Luckily for me, if your grandmother works in the rectory, she sometimes know the rules better than even the nuns do. Hard to believe, but still true." Rules — the book could've been titled just that, as the boy is trying to follow, but also reject, rules laid upon him by his overseers, even as he is learning the forbidden rules of poker and loosening the strictures of childhood. This hyper-concern with grammar is also found in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, where the disturbed narrator mentions a book called *Baseball When the Grass Was Real* and, thinking about *when* that game is played, declares: "In which case the book would appear to have been astonishingly ill-edited [. . .] *Baseball When the Grass Is Growing* would have been more appropriate yet." A further play on Wittgenstein's celebrated analysis of language and its relationship to reality.

In *Marco*, unlike *Poker Player,* the oversight of female relatives and rules is missing. The pair have been left to improvise their lives both economically and existentially: "The two had been on their own for four years already, and Marco was still having a hard time getting over his mom's departure. She had remarried into money, but the only time he ever talked to her was when he called her for funds for his dad." This absence of a woman in the house lays the foundation for the comedy of male comradery that has developed between father and son, such

that they've become equals ("men," not just father and son which hints of dominance and subservience) living their own solipsism *à deux*: "Iarlaith and Marco walked home with the groceries. Iarlaith boiled the hot dogs, and *the two men* [my emphasis] stuffed them into buns ands squirted yellow mustard on them. It was the same dinner they had at least three times a week. They washed the dogs down with beer and watched the news on television." The pair's isolation from a larger society is adumbrated in a sentence that also brings to mind Martin Heidegger's analysis of modernity in his notion of "the world picture": "Television was a window into worlds that for them would never exist."

The exposition in both story compilations is forthright, a direct presentation of facts, making the stories accessible. Generous doses of humor are provided in both, often through marvelously sketched ancillary characters: the poker-curious boy's relatives, his poker buddies, and Iarlaith's wacky drinking buddy Feargus. In "Iarlaith and the Duelogue," Iarlaith and Feargus "were at it again, arguing over trivialities at the bar" and Iarlaith says, "This is just duelogue, man," as the pair get into a play on words: "Not *duologue*, knucklehead. I said *duelogue,* which is a portmanteau word combing *duel* and *dialogue*. In case you haven't noticed, our conversations are duels, not discussions." Gerdes characters thrive on such portmanteau word combinations.

Marco exhibits a deadpan approach to humor, a verbal analogue to Buster Keaton's invariant facial expression. The initial story in Gerdes' collection begins: "Barbed wire," said Marco, meaning Barb [the reader doesn't yet know that she is his much disliked ex-wife] had wired him the money, but as usual he was drunkenly slurring his sentences." The closest Gerdes's stories get to revealing anything akin to the moral probity haunting McManus's text is: "Well, at least Barb wasn't here, he thought. She'd be yelling at him for being sick. To her, sickness was a sign of impurity of thought, and that meant Iarlaith must have been lusting after other women. Barb had no sympathy for the ill." Once when very ill with a bad cough, she'd cruelly told Iarlaith, ironically turning his love of puns against him: "I hear your coffin, but you can't come in." Of course, it's a riff on the rock song "I Hear You Knocking" (Gerdes is a knowledgeable devotee of rock and jazz music).

As already broached, Gerdes gives his stories a good dollop of puns, portmanteaus, and oxymorons. My favorite of the latter is the found in "Iarlaith and Virtual Reality," in which Iarlaith sees parked in front of his favorite watering hole a panel truck owned by a concrete firm named "Abstract Concrete." When I read this, I recalled Ezra Pound's dictum against mixing detail with generalization: "Don't use such an expression as 'dim land of *peace,*' It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete." This tendency to play with words reaches its peak in "Marco at the Innuendo Festival," where Marco decides to go upriver to a town celebrates

every June 29 “National Innuendo Day.” The story is chock-full of puns: A sausage vendor sells “Kid-Size Wieners”; a booth marked “XXX” with giant cross-stitches advertises a small zoo containing “tit mice and tit finches as ‘Tits for Tats!’”; anticipating rain, an umbrella booth sells “Rubbers for Protection”; an “all-woman jug band” named “Hidden Cave and a hard guy band called the Indiscriminate Thrusters” are featured to appear on-stage. No surprise that the event’s main ride attraction is “the Relationship, with all its twists and sudden upturns and crashing plummets landing in hot water.” It isn’t open yet and Marco thinks, probably recalling his troubled affair with Ariane: “He doesn’t feel like doing that again, anyway. He’s been on that ride before.”

Yes, Marco, like the young boy in *Poker Player*, has his love interest: “Ariane. ‘The Lass with the Cider beside Her,’ as the song he’d written for her called her.” At first, he needs to sell his guitar at the hockshop to raise needed family funds, but then realizes he will need the instrument to write that song, so he can’t sell. As he’s ambivalent about the sale, he’s ambivalent about Ariane as well; for one thing, she works in that hockshop and it’s owned by her on-again off-again husband. This means he has to see her even when he doesn’t want to for this is where he displays his Dadaist-like artwork for sale, giving the owner a percentage. Gerdes’s comic figure and friend of Iarlaith, Feargus, gets into woman trouble as well. The bar conversation turns to this subject: “ ‘He found out that Feargus was seeing his wife, so her went ballistic on Feargus.’” There is the reply: “ ‘What? But Feargus is old. Why would a hot young blond like Feagus?’” Then, the punch-line: “‘Oh, that’s not what happened. She wasn’t seeing him. He was seeing her.’”

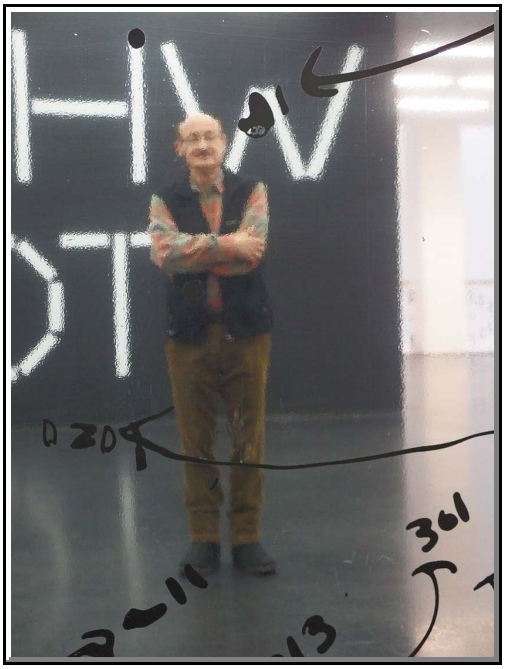
This compilation of connected stories culminates with a sad meditation on how both father and son — wacky in their creativity and their refusal to compromise — have been excluded from elite society with its class privileges and accesses. Gerdes has his character complain how “the connected fed at the teats of the federal government, producing art that praised the government, or at the least attacked its enemies. Plus they had the academic world all cordoned off for each other, swapping guest lectureships and public speaking engagements like they were trading bubble-gum cards. . . . Marco, like his father is also excluded. They had never gone to the right schools. They had never toed the right lines.” During this meditation on exclusion, Marco sympathetically watches his exhausted father snooze and thinks: “let the old man sleep. Perhaps his dreams were the only happiness he’d ever really know.”

But this *perhaps* is an important qualifying term. It suggests that rather than exemplifying a doctrine of *eternal return*, these flash fictions lean more toward a doctrine of *eternal reprise*. There is a continuity of courage within the discontinuity of the various attempts Marco and Iarlaith use to cope with life’s hardships. Father and son endure their mutual situation like

a pair holding tight in a small rubber raft caught in swirling maelstrom (Poe's famous story comes to mind) after their ship has capsized, but it *just might* break away. And if it doesn't, they at least have each other. Markson's Kate, alone in a devastated world, has no one. Unlike both Markson's Kate and Gerdes's duo, poker-boy's stories culminate with the Bergsonian *élan vital* propelling the young protagonist toward becoming a man, with all the hopes for the future that implies.

— The End —

About the Author



James Hugunin is a Professor Emeritus at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he taught art history, theory, and criticism. He is the founder of two art journals, *The Dumb Ox* (1976- 80) and *U-Turn.* (1982 - present). He is the author of numerous reviews and has written five experimental novels, the first of which critic/writer Derek Pell said was "the best experimental novel of 2012." In 1983 he was awarded the first Reva and David Logan Award for Distinguished New Writing in Photography from the N.E.A. and the Photographic Resource Center, Boston, MA. In 2016 he was elected a member of Chicago's Society of Midland Authors.