The Signiconic & Negation in *The Familiar*

From Shakespeare to Joyce to Woolf, interiority has long been in the making as a textual

tradition, but Mark Z. Danielewski breathes it new life in *One Rainy Day in May*, Volume 1 of

his series-in-progress *The Familiar*. He describes his nine narrators in a cycle of nine distinct

linguistic and syntactic styles, and his characteristic "signiconic" approach to typography and

page layout allows him to visually map out each character's thinking style and degree of self-

revelation in font and white space. However, hints from the characters as well as intermittent

interjections from semi-omniscient, metafictional Narrative Constructs ("Narcons") eventually

show that the "distinct" narratives and even the language itself are in fact unreliable, both

infinitely complex and full of holes. Only the Orb, Cas' futuristic recording device, allegedly

approaches a true "ontology of thought" (Danielewski 157, *Fontsov.com*), but in no ideal sense;

this is clear even just in Danielewski's portrayal of the Orb as a literal hole in the text. The novel,

then, is a paradox, concurrently announcing and negating its ability to remediate experience and

perhaps even its own existence as an apparatus.

Danielewski defines the "signiconic" as anything that combines textual sign and image to

"achieve a *third perception* no longer dependent on sign and image for remediating a world in

which the mind plays no part" (Raley; emphasis mine). Like subitization (as Anwar explains to

Xanther, subitizing means "to quantify without counting" (346)), the signiconic aims to make the

reader *know* without interpretive steps, to put him or her in a pre-textual "acoustic space," a term

Danielewski mentions in his novel *House of Leaves*. Marshall McLuhan describes this feeling in

The Medium is the Massage as living "boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the

mind, in the world of emotion, by primordial intuition, by terror" (McLuhan 48). Ideally, then,

sign and icon combine to hit the emotional frequency of the reader's mind just as a musical

instrument might hit the resonant frequency of a room (the walls would vibrate, creating a

louder/longer note). An obvious example in *The Familiar* is its raindrop pages. Xanther equates

her Question Songs and her feelings of unremitting panic with rain, and this is manifested in

literal streams of text down the page (e.g. 62–65). The reader is likely overwhelmed in turn,

mirroring Xanther's mental state.

It is important to note that the implementation of the signiconic in *The Familiar* functions

almost exclusively as a measure of thought and interiority, at least in Volume 1. Unlike *House of*

Leaves, where the characters' actions and positions in the maze of the house are mapped across

the text, *The Familiar* almost never becomes concerned with movement in its layout, even where

that connection could be elucidatory. The closest Danielewski gets to spatial mapping is in the

chapter "Litter" when Xanther is chasing the cat's call; the text spreads farther apart down the

page as she runs down a hill toward the sound (484). Aside from that, the purpose of

unconventional text layout seems to be to denote associated thought processes. The page jumbled

with the word "nearer" later in "Litter" is bracketed by references to Xanther's pounding heart,

embodying her panicky, fragmented thoughts (491–93). Moreover, when she finally finds the

storm drain and reaches into the grating for the cat, her complex series of movements in lying

down is described in a block of text (503), whereas the subsequent non-location-oriented phrases

are spread out, indicating her perception of its distance as she tries "to find it, / reach it, / and bring

it back" (504–5).

This link to thought is not unique to Xanther, of course. Each character, herself included, creates a discrete impression of his/her own personality via typeface and page layout (843). For starters, Astair's and Anwar's parts have fonts and breaks in the text that are reminiscent of Xanther's (an interesting section of Astair's narration maps out her slow absorption of the phrase "Mom, it's a cat!?" by splitting it across four pages (674–682)). Özgür's narration is marked by the detective genre, both in the name of his font (**Baskerville**, arguably a Conan Doyle reference) and in his lack of disclosure of most personal details. This is mirrored in the text layout, as it literally cuts off a little over halfway down every page (161). Similarly, since Shnorhk helps to document his country's traumatic past, his font is called Promemoria, Italian for "reminder." His narration is also divided into rectangles on the top left and bottom right of each page that, like information on the Armenian genocide, would form a patchy but fuller picture if fused (226). The links in Isandòrno's and Luther's sections are more subtle. Isandòrno is probably the least fleshed-out character in Volume 1, thus his narration appears in small windows (291). Luther is less restricted but still not excessively self-revealing, which is clear in the wide margins and relatively uniform blocks of text (74); his self-assurance is reflected in the grandeur of his Imperial font and in the shorter sections that are centered for emphasis (e.g. 368). Jingjing's chapters have some similarities to Luther's in the text layout, although the wider line spacing indicates that his rough, concise use of Singlish leaves out detail on a more fundamental level (101). He also leaves blank space when he is afraid or does not understand; for example, when Zhong shows Jingjing and Tian Li his owl room in "palace above the day," Jingjing cannot explain why Tian Li says "*we*'ve been here before" (283; emphasis mine), and so there are massive stretches of white space before "shadow grows. other shadows flee...the great tian li can only mean one we" (285–86; evidently she was referring to her (invisible?) cat). The last

narrator, aside from the Narcons, is Cas, whose narrative is literally shaped by the Orb slicing

through its center, representative of its huge role in her life and of her inability to ever fully

understand it.

This lack of understanding signals the beginning of an ambiguous endpoint to

Danielewski's signiconic devices: he implies that language is both limitless and completely

faulty as a form of mediation. Like rain, language is made up of an infinite set of tiny pieces, and

as Xanther says, "rain is just water with holes in it…Adding up to one big hole" (67). In "zhong,"

Jingjing builds upon this idea: "words so tua kang. words need worlds in order to be worlds.

worlds though don't need words in order to be worlds" (105). Interestingly enough, "tua kang" is

a Hokkien Chinese phrase whose literal translation is "big hole"; according to the Coxford

Singlish Dictionary, it usually describes someone "telling an exaggerated story." He seems to

believe that the "story" is entirely separate from its teller's actual experience of the world. Other

characters in *The Familiar* state this message even more decisively; Özgür, for one, admits that

> **he began as a posture, the overcoat, the trilby…until eventually he no**
>
> **longer resembled a caricature of Marlowe, but if anything Marlowe**
>
> **looked like a caricature of him…Because Özgür isn't thinking about**
>
> **Marlowe or even Chandler but as Chandler might have wanted and**
>
> **Marlowe would have understood…** (174)

This distinction—thinking *as* and not *about*—is essential, because he acknowledges the fact that

his own voice is a construct, one that could easily change again if he wanted that. Similarly,

Anwar mentions that he dreams of "standard output[ting] his own thoughts" but that his mind

shuts down when he tries "in a manner that might never be traced and so then forever personal"

(89). Thus any output of Anwar's thoughts—his entire narration—is called into question, "as if those words were never his own" (712). Even Luther suggests that his own narration is faulty:

> Something sweet then starts to swirl around Luther's tongue…like his lips could suddenly part, start speaking the stupidest shit, words of fear and defeat, light as the way some bitches or jotos speak, like poetry, or worse, forcing Luther to turn and spit. (598)

Luther's fear of a different kind of language suggests that he is suppressing some truer, more internalized version of himself from ever reaching the reader.

The epitome of this message of incompletion comes to light in the Narcon chapter, where Narcon[9] reveals to the reader directly that, under a Signiconic "source superset," it has essentially written the book, collecting all relevant data and syntactical patterns for the novel's characters. It even goes so far as to describe each character in the voice of one of the other eight (566–71). Subsequently, it presents a substantial problem in saying that TF-Narcon[9] (TOTAL) is "too vast to represent," even just the total data for one character. This guarantees that an indefinite amount of information has been left out of the novel; ""most of the iconic goes unsigned," as another old Narcon saying goes" (572). The most dangerous suggestion made in the Narcon chapter, however, is that of Parameter 3, apparently "the biggest" of the Narcon rules: "Narcons Cannot Interact With Non-Narcons. And Vice-Versa. No Matter What" (574). Ironically, the entire Narcon chapter breaks this rule (and the fourth wall), so the book's very existence is called into question. This reversal is confirmed in "Litter" by Narcon[27], the highest-level Narcon of which the reader is aware: "[The cry of the cat was] Now the only thing Xanther could ever hear. Cutting through everything. As if all of this might not exist at all — **Nor ever could exist**" (466). While this could just be another one of Danielewski's metafictional jokes at work—in *House of*

Leaves, for example, Navidson inexplicably owns a copy of the book *House of Leaves* that he sets on fire—it also seems too intentional *not* to signify a grander problem; maybe it will clear up later on in the series, but for Volume 1 it amounts to a negation of the entire novel.

In his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein notoriously states, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 5.6). This supports the idea of language as an *apparatus*; as defined by Giorgio Agamben, apparatuses "capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (Agamben 14). For Wittgenstein and Agamben, language controls us as much as do our bodies—perhaps more, because while we can imagine escaping our bodies in dreams, "we cannot think what we cannot think" (Wittgenstein 5.61). Danielewski's solution to language as an apparatus is the signiconic, an attempt at a "third perception" that tends to contradict itself, and the Orb takes this idea to the extreme. It is, after all, "where the ontology of thought lives" (157). Theoretically, it is an object through which one can observe anyone, anywhere, at any time leading up to the present (and maybe even into the future). In spite of all that, however, it still has severe limitations. Each of the clips that Cas finds is in fact a recording of a given moment, but they are all necessarily removed, like government surveillance; the Orb cannot codify and replay memories from the perspective of the person having them. As Bobby points out, it provides a "quasi-confirmation" of events, but nonetheless, "**The lives of others are the windows beyond the keep of oneself**" (654). This fault in the Orb's ability to mediate true experience is represented textually in "Tiny Storms"; it is a convex sphere made of words, a bubble whose insides the reader can never see, a big hole that actually *is* a hole in certain parts of Cas' narration (e.g. 634–35). This could represent Uexküll's "*soap bubble*" from the epigraph of the chapter "Dr. Potts"—the "*self-*

world of the animal" (178)—but it would also have to represent that bubble's negation, just as

The Familiar seems to negate itself as a true medium between the worlds of story and reader.

Despite this negation, however, *The Familiar* insists on its own textuality; text predominates, and

although Anwar describes reading as "a risky business," as Kle says, "maybe some risks are worth the

taking" (257). So maybe Danielewski intended for this negation to enable his readers to transcend

the boundaries of apparatus. Awareness of the incompletion of the text is fundamental to

understanding the nature of interiority in the novel, and few novels achieve such a symbolic

representation of this shortcoming of language. In reading, readers do not have to *be* captured or

controlled by the novel's nine narratives; they are allotted the chance, at least, to view them as

faulty and to orient themselves, however they choose to do so. In this way it can be said that the

novel's clever "tua kang" is its greatest virtue.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2009.

    1-24. Print.

"The Coxford Singlish Dictionary." *TalkingCock: Singapore's Premier Satirical Humour*

    Website. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Feb. 2015.

Danielewski, Mark Z. *The Familiar Volume 1: One Rainy Day in May*. New York: Pantheon,

    2015. Print.

Fontsov.com. Fontsov.com, 2015. Web. 2015. All fonts are from this source.

McLuhan, Marshall, Quentin Fiore, and Jerome Agel. *The Medium Is the Massage*. Berkeley:

    Gingko, 1967. Print.

Raley, Rita. "Update on Reading for next Week." Message to the class. 23 Jan. 2015. E-mail.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Bertrand Russell, F. P. Ramsey and Charles Ogden, Brian McGuinness,

    and David Pears. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 1922. Umass Amherst, 5 Jan. 2015.

    Web.