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Breaking the News: Max Jacob's Le Cornet à dés (1917)

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Article abstract

The recurring pastiches of journalistic writing in Max Jacob's seminal collection are more complex than they initially appear—critical, not merely of this discourse's supposed objectivity, but of the assumption that the transmission of valid, valuable news is ever really sought in the first place. The indiscretions of sensationalist, and even fallacious news items appear far less surprising when we acknowledge, along with Jacob, that the esthetic pleasure orienting poetic expression – which is dependent, precisely, on a certain distortion of truthful communication – is what the public expects from its news sources as well, if unconsciously. By identifying the texts in this collection that reference topics and discursive tropes of Belle Époque journalism (and its often indistinguishable sibling, le roman feuilleton), we find that the poet simultaneously draws on the "attractive force" of such writing, drawing his reader into its intrigue, while continually disrupting any stable referential function, through linguistic play. While Jacob is hardly an engaged artist, by laying bare the ultimately unsatisfying quick fix of headline news, reconstituting the latter as an objet d'art, he reminds us of an important truth after all: the most rewarding esthetic experiences are at once more transparent – fiction acknowledged as such – and more resistant to understanding.

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Breaking the News: Max Jacob's *Le cornet à dés* (1917)

Scott Shinabargar

> Ce qu'on appelle une œuvre sincère est celle qui est douée d'assez de force pour donner de la réalité à l'illusion.
>
> Jacob (*AP* 22).

Like the Parnassians who preceded him, Max Jacob is rarely considered *engagé*. With his famous pronouncements on aesthetic value (most notably in his *Art poétique*, and his preface to the work in question here, *Le cornet à dés*), in which he prizes the autonomous, formal structure of the poem over any potential message it might be used to convey, it would seem he wanted to distance his work as much as possible from any of the ethical issues arising during the era in which he was writing. One of his many hyperbolic pronouncements in this regard in fact situates poetry beyond truth itself: "L'art est peut-être la cristallisation du vrai, mais la poésie comme la musique est au-dessus de l'art" (cited in Guiette 145). So that the chances his writing might afford us any significant perspective on the phenomenon of "fake news" would seem slim. This unlikelihood increases when considering the numerous statements in which he actually avows his predilection for duplicity: "Mais de la tête jusqu'au cœur / le poète est un imposteur" (cited in Lévy, "Jeu" 27); a tendency he once traced back to his childhood love of storytelling, and his siblings' unappreciative accusations of lying: "C'est alors que je sus que j'étais poète" (cited in Plantier, 25). And indeed, isn't *all* authentic poetry unable to inhabit the same realm of meaning as journalism, or any other (ostensibly) truth-based form of communication, given the very different set of rules (or rather *absence* of rules) it must adhere to? As Plantier writes, in his gloss of the preceding citation:

> Vérité ou mensonge ne peuvent s'appuyer que sur des références […]. Hors du cadre moral, hors du critère réaliste, hors d'un compte-rendu linéaire, dans lequel les faits s'enchaînent par contiguïté, chacun recevant sa place définitive et son contenu d'information, l'œuvre d'art construit une dynamique […] : « L'art est un mensonge, mais le bon artiste n'est pas un menteur » (*ibid*.).[1]

Anyone who intentionally calls the authenticity of *his own* writing into question, as Jacob once did with a poem recited at an early reading ("Traduit peut-être d'Henri Heine," Hubert 80), would hardly appear trustworthy, in any case, even when deigning to weigh in on issues of the day.

And yet, in surveying the many pastiches recurring throughout *Le cornet à dés*, one observes that a number of them involve clear references to contemporary journalism, often appearing to critique the latter's increasing ability to manipulate a gullible public. We find on closer examination, furthermore, that these texts are much more complex than they initially appear—less concerned with merely revealing the subjective biases that overdetermine readers' assessment of a supposedly objective discourse, than with putting into question the assumption that the transmission of valid, valuable news is truly ever sought in the first place. Poetry (particularly in the modern, cubist-inflected forms

1 Throughout the remainder of this study, all citations without specific reference information are from the same page number as the preceding citation.

emerging out of Jacob's milieu) actually proves to be an ideal medium for undertaking this task, since, unlike other more "serious" forms of discourse (philosophical, juridical), it not only refuses to presume it can provide access to the truth found lacking in other discourses, but its disruption of the latter is performed in the service of another prerogative, ultimately quite foreign to epistemological or ethical concerns: the aesthetic *pleasure* of the reader. The indiscretions of sensationalist, and even fallacious news items appear far less surprising when we acknowledge, along with Jacob, that such pleasure – which is perhaps *dependent*, precisely, on a certain distortion of truthful communication – is in fact what the public expects from its news sources as well, if unconsciously—a likelihood that becomes all too evident in the present era. By identifying the texts in this collection that reference topics and discursive tropes of Belle Époque journalism (and its often indistinguishable sibling, *le feuilleton*), we find that the poet simultaneously exploits the attractive force of such writing, drawing his reader into the intrigue, while continually disrupting any stable referential function through linguistic play. *Literally* breaking the news, it turns out, reminds us that the way we read determines the reality we live in, for better or worse.

***

The era during which Jacob was composing these texts – more than a century ago, and long before the instantaneous transmission of information provided by the internet – was more similar to our own than we might think, in its saturation by the media. As Schwartz reminds us, this was a period when the newspaper, still in its infancy, was growing to gargantuan proportions, with the circulation of Parisian dailies growing by more than 200 percent between 1880 and the beginning of the war (27-28). And if there is a pervasive sense that journalistic integrity has degenerated rapidly in recent years, the press in this early period was far from devoted to informing the public about the significant – if not always exciting – political events bearing on their lives, already focused on ways of "re-presenting" the too familiar reality of its readers in a more interesting way:

> […] the paper's content, which offered a sensationalized reality and an emphasis on novelty, matched and re-presented the framing of everyday life that came to define boulevard culture. In the mass press, coverage of political life took a back seat to theater openings, horse races, fairground descriptions and initially to the *roman-feuilleton* and the *faits divers* and eventually to what was called *reportage* and such new press genres as the interview (*ibid*. 32).

It should be noted that this new mode of recording the details of daily events was not something foreign to Jacob, who, like a number of writers at the turn of the century, embraced the inflections of contemporary life, incorporating them into his otherwise abstract aesthetics—as his friend Guiette recalled: "Le soir, il allait par les rues du quartier, observant les passants, entendant des bribes de conversation. Il amassait tant d'images que sa vie entière ne suffisait pas à en épuiser la poésie" (68). But where Jacob would do this in such a way that one could not but feel one had entered into quite a different reality indeed, radically *dépaysé*,[2] the objective of the press was twofold: to present the world as significantly different, more interesting than what was normally perceived, while simultaneously reinforcing the reader's sense of identity, grounded in a stable, familiar place ("the readers' sense of participation and belonging to a broader urban collective […]" Schwartz 39). The inevitable problems arising from such

2 Interestingly enough, in this regard, when providing detailed notes for modifying Guiette's faithful accounts of events and statements from his life, Jacob exclaimed: "On ne te croira pas, [...] c'est trop vrai!" (21).

contradictory goals – given journalism's (ostensible) purpose, providing an objective transcription of present reality – were further exacerbated by a more formal, material division within the actual newspaper itself. Faced with the quickly consumable nature of this new medium, editors devised an ingenious strategy for drawing their readers back to the corner kiosk, in their efforts to guarantee revenue: the *feuilleton*. While the serial nature of this purely fictional genre proved the perfect accompaniment to accounts of events that would be forgotten the following day, the incorporation of these narratives into the dailies had the additional effect of rendering the content of the two texts – fact and fiction – indistinguishable in the minds of many readers, due to the settings and events they came to share—not to mention their physical proximity beneath the reader's gaze: "'the successful elements of the […] serial novel are those of the *fait divers* and other events taken from the real world.' Both the newspaper and the serial novel blurred the boundaries between reality and representation" (Schwartz 35); "This contamination of the top of the page by the bottom of the page demonstrates the existence of what Marc Angenot terms a 'romanesque général' (fictionalizing tendency) that permeates French society" (Thérenty, "Fooliton" 38). Finally, this effective manipulation of readers' perceptions was further ensured through the inclusion of brightly colored images depicting key events from news "stories" (often of a scandalous nature), magnetically drawing readers to the texts accompanying them; images that contributed to the distortion of fact already effected by the "canard," famously summarized by Nerval: "Le canard est une nouvelle quelquefois vraie, toujours exagérée, souvent fausse. Ce sont les détails d'un horrible assassinat, illustré parfois de gravures en bois d'un style naïf ; c'est un désastre, un phénomène, une aventure extraordinaire ; on paye cinq centimes et l'on est volé" (281).

Ultimately, however, the effect produced by the sensationalized topics of Belle Époque journalism was just as limited as the experience of quotidian reality these stories seemed to release the public from. For, as anyone who even glances at contemporary tabloids in the grocery store knows, the front page that suggests a radical disruption of existing norms – whether those of the natural world (aliens, bigfoot) or social (infidelity, substance abuse) – has itself come to constitute a type of norm; a trope that is infinitely repeatable in slightly different forms, while essentially remaining the same—and thus entirely predictable and familiar, whatever charade of novelty accompanies it. As Schwartz observes: "The *canard's* image was a summary one, attempting to capture the entire story or perhaps its critical moment in one image. A single image appeared over and over, suggesting both the standard repertoire of tales and a lack of demand for precision and detail," 36).[3] And it is precisely this predictability that the growing bourgeoisie of Belle Époque France must have come to seek, after all, in its daily paper: a supplement (pun unavoidable) to the conventional discourses in place, attuned to the rhythms and desires of modern existence. As Thérenty, who has published extensively on the topic, explains:

> Certes, en apparence, il [le journalisme] met en scène avec une grande violence l'élément de rupture : le tremblement de terre, le naufrage, la révolution, le déraillement du train qu'il place à la une avec des gros titres à partir des années 1880. Et ce spectaculaire, ce sensationnel, cet imprévisible donne du piquant à la platitude des expériences individuelles. Mais au-delà de cette scénographie de l'événement, la structure même du journal vise à rassurer. […] une fois la surprise passée, l'événement est peu à peu englouti dans les pages intérieures

3 This recycling of images was indeed already taking place in the canards of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Séguin's cataloguing of these publications has demonstrated (see in particular pp. 12-13).

> du journal, […] et l'événement est en quelque sorte « quotidianisé » par le journal ("Montres" 14-15).

It would seem to be this need for predictability that Jacob is calling attention to in his "Encore Fantomas," where a couple dining in a restaurant refuses to participate in the etiquette of that social sphere, spurning the chef's repeated requests for comments on the meal. Only after the fourth of these appeals do they finally concede: "« La sauce aux câpres est épatante, mais le canapé de la perdrix était un peu dur »" (99)—a pronouncement that functions like a magic key, unlocking the door of discourse more generally: "On arriva à parler sport, politique, religion. C'est ce que voulait le chef des cuisines." For all its absurdity, this anecdote points not only to Jacob's acute awareness of how such discourses function according to a set of unspoken rules, but to the way in which he will sabotage these discursive conventions through his singular poetics. Unlike the gesture of the couple in the poem just cited, such interruptions are not merely a momentary whim, however playful Jacob's writing might appear at first glance, but in fact a constitutive element of his poetry, at the source of each text.

Any distraction provided by the Jacobian text comes at a high price, [4] since the play it offers is founded on an essentially negative gesture—a "disappointment" at the level of meaning that ultimately leads, in the poet's own words, "to the void": "L'art de la déception. Lisez le *Cornet à Dés !* On commençait une histoire qu'on laissait inachevée, on menait le lecteur de glissements en glissements jusqu'au néant […]. […] [l'art] de l'abrutissement des autres, de la gratuité, de la légèreté, l'art de laisser l'intelligence en panne" (cited in Guiette 131). This seemingly malicious derailment of readers' expectations is not merely a gratuitous act on the part of the poet, however, despite initial appearances (an indictment often levelled at avant-garde work in general), but is in fact intended to enhance the aesthetic experience, even if this contradicts the reader's understanding of how such pleasure is produced. While powerful art has traditionally been measured by the essentially positive intensity of its effect, the latter is limited, ultimately, in satisfying the spectator's desire for meaning and continuity: "L'étonnement est un état stable. […] il faut « balloter » le spectateur, l'émotion esthétique c'est le doute. Le doute s'obtiendra par l'accouplement de ce qui est incompatible (et ceci sans amener l'étonnement stable) par l'accord des langages différents, par la complexité des caractères…" (Jacob, cited in Plantier 19). Anticipating the shake-ups of post-modern thought, Jacob recognizes that the disruption of existing conventions for signification is not simply a necessary gesture as epistemological assumptions about reality are challenged, but that such activity becomes critical to effective art as well, in liberating the spectator from the constraints limiting the potentiality of *aesthetic* experience—an experience that far surpasses the fleeting pleasure of the dailies.

"Roman feuilleton" is an exemplary text in this regard, providing a perfect point of entry into the analyses that follow. Immediately setting our expectations in the most unambiguous way possible through the title, with its implicit narrative conventions, the poet just as quickly disappoints his reader in the opening lines—in an equally heavy-handed manner: "Donc, une auto s'arrêta devant l'hôtel à Chartres. Savoir qui était dans cette auto, devant cet hôtel, si c'était Toto, si c'était Totel, voilà ce que vous voudriez savoir, mais vous ne le saurez jamais… jamais…" (93). In the space of a few lines we can identify those elements that will be central to Jacob's problematization – and manipulation, to new, aesthetic ends – of sensational discourse: emphasis on the reader's desire to *see* something new (the insistent prepositions, "devant" and "dans," essentially

4 "L'art est proprement une *distraction*" (Introduction to *Le cornet à dés,* 21).

shoving our face up to the image); a refusal to bring the promised image completely into focus, explicitly stated here in his direct address to the reader; and finally, play with the very material of language that further disrupts the referential function we inherently expect (particularly in a poem that has expressly self-identified as a prose text). By deriving names phonically from preceding signifiers in the passage ("auto" => "Toto"; "hotel" => "Totel"), and positing a choice between the two that is not in fact based on any distinction between actual individuals (or referents) but rather on the phonic difference between the signifiers themselves, Jacob does not merely thumb his nose at the reader's expectations, but calls attention to the reality that he *is* offering up for the reader's gaze—a reality constructed on the "surface" of language, to quote Lévy: "These texts focus the reader's attention on the surface. The poet uses them as masks behind which, once again, nothing is hidden" (*Play* 48-49). As suggested above, what initially appears a gratuitous act of negation is in fact a liberation of the reader, freeing him or her from the continual desire for the referential: "Very much like the magical illusion […] the poem serves to distract the reader, to draw his attention to its texture and thereby free him from his earthly bonds, letting him believe that what he sees or reads is genuinely fantastical" (*ibid*. 86). The mysterious identity of the "hero" of the above poem is indeed irrelevant throughout the majority of the text (which riffs on alternating references to visiting Parisians and the "hoteliers de Chartres," and the more serious scandal of inept shoe shining!), only reappearing in the final lines, where his motives are explained according to a logic that is only indeed coherent on the surface of language: "il venait chercher un médecin, parce qu'il n'y en a pas assez à Paris pour le nombre de maladies qu'il avait."

This concern with turn-of-the-century spectator culture is also evident in the brief "Patte ou pâte," in which a similar textual process is engaged. While journalistic discourse is not explicitly referenced here, as in other texts we will be observing, key elements of the sensationalist news story are clearly present. In addition to the cult-like celebrity of the central figure, Sarah Bernhardt, we find the ingredient necessary to any celebrity coverage: scandal. Not only in the unstated though well-known illegitimate birth and romantic dalliances of the great stage actress, but in the particular circumstances in which she has recently been seen, as reported to the poet: "Près de la cheminée, contre le mur, celui qui a un chapeau haut de forme […] me fait comprendre qu'on a vu Sarah Bernhardt se raser la figure. C'est invraisemblable !" (107). It is of course the "unbelievable" nature of this image that piques the reader's desire to believe, and thus continue reading. Unlike the freak shows that fed into the growing genre of sensationalist journalism, however, with such themes as the bearded lady, the dailies that lured potential readers with their exaggerated cover images did not have to produce what they promised in a believable manner, to the naked eye. More importantly, whatever written text followed these images could never surpass the latter in sheer effect, an inevitable dénouement in the recounting of whatever actual events were referenced by the images in question—such as the bed full of vipers and the fight with a giant, in images 1 and 2, below.[5] Jacob's poem bypasses this issue entirely, scandalizing the discourse of scandal itself. Its initial fantastical claim, approximating that of a tabloid cover, is quickly explained away by the author; but where we are thus led to expect a more "believable" event, this explanation plunges us even further into the incomprehensible, as the poet's celebrated punning eliminates any possible relation to causality and the real: "quelque

5 "La couverture montrerait une scène cachée, une scène impossible, une 'scène primitive,' qui n'apparaît jamais, et pour cause, dans le roman. Le lecteur court donc après cette image, série après série, et l'intérêt romanesque se fonderait en grande partie sur ce suspense narratif" (Thérenty, "Grivel" par. 6)

marin de Belle-Isle l'aura surprise pendant que, se croyant dans les solitudes, elle effaçait des rides avec quelque patte ou pâte." Such an effect is only positive for the reader, truly *épaté* by such a conclusion, to the degree that he or she is willing to accept the poet's invitation to play, beyond the expected conventions of discourse. Otherwise, abruptly transplanted into the texture of language, refused the sense of solidarity that journalism ultimately provides, as suggested by Schwartz, it is the reader who is left in a state of "solitude."

1. "Une arrestation difficile"

2. "Blancs et jaunes"

Without appearing to engage such discursive conventions in any programmatic way – whether to propose some alternative, or to merely transgress (like Surrealism and Dada, respectively) – there is clearly a link between the manipulation of these conventions and production of the aesthetic object throughout *Le cornet à dés*. In order to better elucidate what, if any function Jacob might have intended his writing to fulfill in this regard, before turning to those poems that more explicitly involve journalism's presentation of contemporary events, it may be useful to look more closely at this process in isolation, where it is applied to basic values. The brief "Sans titre" is a perfect example in this regard, in its treatment of values from multiple spheres: monetary, aesthetic, and moral. One of numerous pieces in the collection that are centered on some form of slight or crime, it opens on the image of a glass jewelry box and the discovery of a recent theft. But the reader's expectations for this familiar trope – both literary and journalistic – are immediately challenged, as the narrator explains the true mystery in this event: "Les bijoux qu'il contenait avaient été volés, *puis rendus*, mais par qui?" (100, emphasis mine). This event becomes more understandable, if in an equally unexpected way, when with the author's explanation: "Je pense que voilà une injure du voleur! Il nous rend nos bijoux parce qu'ils ne valent rien. J'en aurais fait tout autant." If it is of course unlikely a thief would actually risk returning anything in such a manner (and how would the owner know, apparently only discovering the theft now, when the jewels are present?), such an anecdote suggests that Jacob is pinpointing specific expectations of the reader in his acts

of sabotage: what we are led to unconsciously invest with value by the various narratives presented us is often not so valuable after all, when viewed in the full light of day. And while the speaker has provided this insight into the exceptional "honesty" of the act in question, his mother's implication that he does not share this trait leaves the reader even more uncertain as to what he or she should believe in: "Ce voleur est un honnête homme, dit ma mère, tandis que toi..." Refusing to suggest that he himself participates in this more admirable form of truthfulness, the poet nonetheless makes one thing clear in this and similar texts: each disruption of values – or of basic logic itself – makes possible the formation of a new, carefully formed structure which obeys its own logic, and which demands our complete adherence, if we are to ever locate the "jewels" Jacob has proposed as the sole of object of any worth, beyond what we *know*.

We find another example of this process in "Encore les indigents non ambulants," where similar spheres intersect in unexpected ways. The opening presents a scene that could have been lifted from a *feuilleton*, welcoming the reader with its clear narrative and concrete referentiality—down to the "metallic colors" of the coins dropped into the woman's alms cup: "Le perron de la mairie était plein de pauvres. Une dame secouait son aumônière devant les redingotes qui sortaient : « Donnez, messieurs, c'est pour les pauvres » et les mains laissaient tomber des pièces de toutes les couleurs métalliques" (94). A sudden event, also familiar to any reader of the Parisian dailies, with their lurid covers (see the scenes of street violence in images 3-6, below), then disrupts the ordinary flow of urban daily life, as the mother remarks her son passing with an inappropriate companion and lunges toward the woman, falling in the ensuing scuffle: "la dame charitable tomba sur les mains et l'aumônière fut renversée. Quel carnage ! les pauvres se ruent à la chasse de la monnaie." This scene diverges significantly from those depicted in the papers, not in the event itself, and the images produced in the reader's imagination, but in the reasoning behind them; a logic that arises from the merging of entirely different

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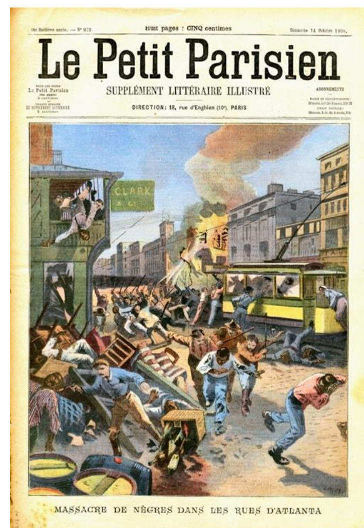
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MASSACRE DE NÈGRES DANS LES RUES D'ATLANTA

3. "Assassinat d'un gardien de la paix" **4**. "Massacre de nègres dans les rues d'Atlanta"

value systems. The mother's indignation is not due to any moral turpitude we might imagine, or difference in social class, but to the fact that this woman has not been "given" to her son by *her* ("[…] une femme que sa mère ne lui avait pas donnée"), in the same way that the collected money will be – or rather, *should have been* – redistributed. Both the artifice and coherence of this textually imposed system for the definition and exchange of value is highlighted in the closing lines, where the poor who scramble to gather the spilt coins are equally scandalous in taking what was theirs, ultimately, but before it has been given to them: "Au voleur! criait la dame charitable, monsieur le commissaire, ils veulent avoir l'argent déjà." It would seem, indeed, that Jacob's rigorous insistence on structure in the deployment of his absurd logic can be viewed across the collection (*Le cornet*) itself, as these "thieves" who take what is theirs correspond to, an inversion of, the "honest" jewel thief who returns what he has taken. Such examples reinforce our observations above, showing that the Jacobian poem recurringly derives its own value from the dismembered body of values inherited from society and culture—a sort of linguistic Frankenstein, if more elegant and witty than that monstrous creation.

5. "Agression contre M. Fallières – Le garçon de café Mattis se jette sur le Président"

6. "L'Arrestation de Ravachol"

The question nonetheless remains: are such texts intended entirely as carefully crafted expressions of wit, that simply happen to be composed through the deconstruction of conventions exploited by journalism and the popular literature embedded within it, or is Jacob pushing the reader to reflect further on these conventions; perhaps, even, to actively engage with and change them, rendering our use of language less superficial?

One of the poet's most explicit pastiches of the daily news article, "M. le Président de la République visite l'exposition d'horticulture," suggests that he is in fact problematizing such writing on some level, if only to call attention to the actual banality of what are often presented as significant events. The title immediately evokes that of any

number of stories familiar to Jacob's readers, in which the recent public appearance of a dignitary is recounted; an "appearance" that is indeed merely that, in many instances: a staged ceremonial event, intended to elicit political partisanship or national sentiment in the public, widely broadcast by the newspaper article that profits from this event, literally, with its overdetermined cover image (see depictions of such events in images 7-10, below). As noted earlier, the actual content of such events rarely fulfills the initial promise of the image (note the proffering of "bread and salt" in image 10!), constituting news that, if not false, is certainly of dubious value, and thus "fake" in another sense. Highlighting this empty form of expression is not an end in itself for Jacob, however, as we have seen, but in fact becomes the source of a more creative, more entertaining use of language. Not only do the plants themselves, otherwise a mere backdrop for the prestigious subject, displace the latter in the opening lines, with their stature and poised grace ("De hauts palmiers si gracieux qu'on se croirait en Algérie, tant par leur attitude que par leur altitude !" 89), but the text quickly morphs into a very different type of "story," as figures and events from "Le Petit Poucet" are introduced ("C'est une tête énorme là-dessous comme d'un conte du Petit Poucet l'Ogre!"), all of these unlikely narrative strands neatly interwoven in the final lines: "Le décor change : ce sont les dahlias qui sont géants : rouges, blancs, disposés comme pour une chromolithographie et Monsieur le Président, le petit Poucet maintenant est bien riche pour soulager des parents bûcherons de palmiers." Through this continually changing "décor" that once again displaces the president, the brightly colored flowers effectively posing for *his* photo op, the poet maintains the ultimately superficial visual focus of the genre he has otherwise eliminated from his text, while transporting his reader to a place that is truly worthy of poem's title/headline, infusing an unremarkable event with fantasy.

In another poem that clearly references contemporary news, "Fâcheuse nouvelle," the poet would appear to address journalism's ideological undertones. A subject that is in fact relevant at the present moment, with events arising out of racial tensions in the U.S., the scandal in question involves the destruction of a statue associated with the sacred heritage of *le patrimoine*: "Alors, c'est vrai ? on démolit les statues de la place de la Nation !" (96). The scripted emotional response implied in this exclamation, following the "fâcheuse" of the title, is promptly transposed to the statue itself, as if to highlight the absurdity of empathizing with a physical symbol – particularly one representing a political entity as a stable, noble being – while simultaneously *using* this material divested of meaning to the poet's own aesthetic ends, in the manner observed in the preceding analyses: "L'Ève en plâtre qui se plaignait derrière le char est venue gémir avec ses cheveux en plâtre." Jacob is surely playing on the very *un*stable nature of this site throughout history, in its transition from *Place du Trône* to *Place du Trône Renversée* (with its guillotine). And one must wonder, given his acknowledgement of a certain "prophetic" knowledge of the impending world war, in the "Avis" attached to the *Cornet,* if he is suggesting that the growing nationalism of France was already undermining and could eventually sacrifice, in a very literal way, "La Triomphe de la République."[6] And yet, such a reading is itself destabilized in the succeeding lines of this very short text, as the poet simultaneously implicates and exonerates *himself*, as the reporter of this information, while abruptly referencing a more subtly disturbing event: "De quoi m'accuse-t-on ? si j'ai traîné mon bébé de neveu sur le tapis, c'était pour l'amuser, et il

6 The name of the actual statue in *La Place de la Nation*. The poet writes in the "Avis": "Les poèmes qui font allusion à la guerre ont été écrits vers 1909 et peuvent être dits prophétiques. Ils n'ont pas l'accent que nos douleurs et la décence exigent des poèmes de la guerre : […]. J'ai prévu des faits ; je n'ai pas pressenti l'horreur" (26).

n’y avait que du rire derrière ses larmes.” If a certain coherence is maintained in the structure of the text on a purely formal level (the supine state and tears of the statues reappearing in the child), it would seem that any dismantling of reified ideological symbolism enacted in the poem has itself been dismantled by its close. Is Jacob then

7. “L’impératrice du Japon visitant les blessés français”

8. “Le Tsar aux grandes manœuvres de Russie”

9. “Le Général Florentin, Grand Chancelier de la Légion d’honneur, remet la croix à Mme Carlier”

10. “Le Maire offrant le pain et le sel au Président de la République”

merely the artistic equivalent of certain individuals who participate in protest events, only to revel in the affective experience of rebellion and the acts of destruction it legitimizes?

While exemption from any ethical imperative has become something of an unquestionable right for artistic expression in French culture, it is difficult not to question the moral position of those who insist on this privilege, "playing" during particularly tragic periods in the history of humanity; particularly if artists are gifted with insight and communicative powers not available to the masses, who are themselves played by the makers of that history. One must indeed wonder if Jacob, a highly intelligent and lucid consumer of popular culture,[7] in fact believed that his inability to have foreseen the "horrors" of the Great War (in the "Avis," cited in note 6) really excused the *légèreté* of poems that anticipated that conflict—particularly when his own versions of journalistic reporting point to the awareness, and indeed manipulation of international tensions that led to it. Sensationalist journalism, which is itself a sort of game – a *divertissement* for the reader – becomes problematic, as we have seen all too recently in the Trump era, when the consequences of false truth claims actually play out in the determination of public policy; sometimes even in the loss of life, on a huge scale. If Jacob could not of course have known about the Tonkin incident, and would not perhaps have been thinking, beyond the European theater, of the recent Spanish-American War, it is difficult to imagine that the role of the press in igniting the Franco-Prussian War was not far from his mind when encountering headlines that pointed to yet another impending war with Germany.[8] Not only was the first world war justified through a highly publicized, "scandalous" event (in the assassination of Franz Ferdinand), but more importantly, the conflagration produced by this spark was prepared to a significant degree by the press in the years preceding that event—the period, precisely, during which Jacob was composing the majority of poems comprising *Le cornet*. As Mollier has pointed out, in the face of regionalist movements' nationalist tendencies, further inculcated through school curriculum, "the media responded with its share of fantasies based on the shameless exploitation or – when there was nothing to hand – invention of criminal acts. Over this solid substrate, it was easy for mass culture to add its detectives and criminals, […] consolidating the most traditional archetypes of Good versus Evil, Virtue against Vice and Innocent versus Guilty" ("Silent," 12); representations that were in turn only too easily co-opted by those in power: "L'obligation pour les leaders d'extrême droite de traiter l'actualité comme un mélodrame en débusquant des traîtres de comédie, des bandits de grand chemin ou des espions qui annoncent les Fanômas et les Chéri-Bibi" (Mollier, "Littérature" 89).

Two poems directly address the role of the press in engendering such tensions, in fact, suggesting that Jacob is critiquing both the journals and the unreflective public who read them: "Mémoires de l'espion," and "A la recherche du traître." Dickow has already produced an excellent analysis of this sequence, calling attention to the phenomenon of "l'espionnite" preceding the war – mass paranoia in French society regarding an "interior enemy" ("Obus" 30) – demonstrating how the poet uses his unique poetics of destabilization to call attention to the way concepts such as ally and enemy, homeland and foreign, are manipulated to foster fear: "les circonstances en cause ne relèvent pas de

7 See Dickow's "Max Jacob et la culture populaire."

8 When an American destroyer provoked North Vietnamese vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, leading to escalation of the conflict in that country, the press was used to broadcast the government's explanation of events. Similarly, the Spanish-American War began in 1898 with the help of heavy press coverage (instigated by publishing monopolizer William Randolph Hearst, famously rendered in *Citizen Kane*), falsely blaming the Spanish for an explosion on an American ship. Finally, Bismark savvily presented his meeting with a French diplomat as a volatile one in a press release, pushing France to declare war with Prussia in 1870.

l'événement ni du fait, mais du discours topique véhiculé par la presse, voire du fantasme collectif" (*ibid*. 27); "le poète se montre ici étonnamment lucide et soucieux du vrai. […] il suggère la relativité et la fragilité de l'identité nationale (geste étonnant en 1917) en soulignant la complexité du reel, irréductible au simplicisme de la propagande" (*ibid*. 33). While his reading confirms that Jacob is in fact engaging with journalistic discourse in a critical way here, not merely using the latter as a platform for his own production of text, as our own observations have suggested may be the case, a closer look at the two poems suggests that the poet is actually staging a sort of victory for poetry in this confrontation.

As Dickow points out, the first of these texts highlights the danger of trusting any partisan discourse that raises suspicion among the public. As in "Fâcheuse nouvelle," we are presented with a speaker who condemns the wrongdoing of others (*claiming an hôtelier has falsely accused him of stealing a rifle*) only to raise doubts about his own innocence—through the title itself ("Mémoires de l'espion"), as well the ambiguous closing line: "Ai-je jamais volé de fusil ?" (32). Several details in the way the text is elaborated, however, suggest that even more is going on here, calling into question the value of journalistic writing more generally. First, the speaker's own expressions of indignation actually demonstrate the scandal-mongering discourse of the press, calling attention not only to the latter's exaggerated tone, through his repeated exclamations, but to the ultimately puerile *he said/she said* structure such writing so often employs: "Écrire au *Figaro* que j'ai volé un fusil, oh ! le misérable ! c'est lui, le patron de l'hôtel ! mon frère a oublié son fusil à l'hôtel à Paris ; le patron l'a pris et il écrit au *Figaro* que c'est moi" (32). By earnestly engaging with such accusations, these lines suggest, one inevitably accepts the manipulative terms and tone of the original author. But even more interesting, is the way in which the speaker extricates himself from this deadlock, not simply rejecting the accusatory discourse altogether (as one could in fact interpret the doubt-raising question that closes the poem), but by subverting it in such a way that, actually embracing the role of the scandalized victim, the poet produces a superior, *poetic* discourse. First, the idea that one could respond to such writing though officially sanctioned channels is quickly overturned by the absurd, "easy" solution of writing to someone at the "theater"—the usefulness of this choice immediately doubted by the speaker himself: "Ça n'est pas difficile de rectifier: on adresse une lettre au « Monsieur de l'orchestre », « Courrier des Théâtres ». Est-ce bien utile ?" And yet, is this choice in fact so arbitrary, if journalists often play as loosely with the facts as the artist does, whatever their claims to transparency, "orchestrating" the events they choose to reference for the greatest effect produced? The speaker then takes over the script provided by the ostensible news article, maintaining its décor just long enough to reject it, on his own terms (his persecution by the cleaning staff replacing that done by the editors at *Le Figaro*): "Je quitterai l'hôtel : le lit n'est jamais fait ; il vient des vieilles dans ma chambre pour se moquer de ma misère ; les jeunes bonnes ne savent que montrer leurs épaules. Ai-je jamais volé de fusil ?" Against the backdrop of what the (stupidly) absurd news story has become here – a (cleverly) absurd poem – the final question is not simply a rhetorical gesture, suggesting one is a fool to have ever entertained the premise of such a story, but a victory of the poetic over more popular discourses—beneath "Ai-je jamais volé de fusil ?": *On s'en fiche. Je viens de quitter* ma *chambre d'hôtel—ce poème.*

In the piece that immediately follows it, "A la recherche du traître," the poet continues to play with the public's anxiety/fascination regarding espionage in an even more direct manner. As Dickow has shown, Jacob upsets the reader's expectations once again—this time, highlighting the unreflective, emotive associations of terms designating nationality. The speaker relates that his friend has become a prisoner of the enemy in the opening lines, only to imply further on that this friend is in fact German himself, and

imprisoned for betraying his own people: "mon ami Paul est prisonnier des Allemands. […] c'est Paul qui est prisonnier des Allemands *pour avoir trahi son colonel*" (33, emphasis mine). Furthermore, through a less obvious detail – a play on "Cyprien," Jacob's baptized name[9] – the poet closes the text by implicating *himself* in the unseen network of agents undermining security, as he did in the preceding poem: "Qui est Mlle Cypriani ? Encore une espionne." While Dickow calls attention to the practical function of Jacob's writing here, which indeed seems intended to call attention to contemporary groupthink, showing how representations of national difference evoke reactions in the most astute reader, I would again suggest that the poet is simultaneously putting forth his own mode of poetic writing as an alternative, more authentic discourse. Where the Belle Époque dailies reconfirmed readers' sense of place – a security that, soon enough, would not resist the invasion by an enemy more direct and ruthless than the spies depicted in the press – Jacob offers the same readers an entirely different textual space to inhabit; a consistently constructed world that, if less reassuring, with its fantastical, destabilizing elements, is ultimately less "fake." Like the feuilleton, which assured continuity through its narrative structure, and the purchase of otherwise transient, quickly irrelevant dailies ("yesterday's papers"), the textual hotel created in the preceding text continues into this poem, as announced by the poet—"still" here, before the reader's eyes, despite the poet's supposed departure: "Encore l'hôtel !" And as in texts analyzed earlier, the initial premise of the poem, with its highly relevant theme, is quickly *ir*relevant in the *textual* reality that develops. The location in question is defined less by the intrigue that transpires there, than by the linguistic structure the poet methodically constructs out of details that otherwise do nothing to advance – or that indeed confound – conventional narrative. The disjointed and confusing fragments of the espionage theme improbably cohere through the uniformity of the mortar surrounding them—a repeated series of numbers: "c'est un hôtel meublé, rue Saint-Sulpice, mais je ne sais pas le numéro de la chambre ! […] ce doit être 21 ou 26 ou 28 et moi de songer à la signification cabalistique de ces chiffres. […] le 21, le 26, le 28 sont des chiffres peints en blanc sur fond noir avec trois clefs." These numbers do not of course "signify" anything, but call attention, through their precision and repetition, to the poet's ability to compose and modulate an otherwise non-sensical assemblage of words into a symmetrical formal creation—the true "key" to understanding such a text. In Jacob's perspective, recognizing that language always carries the potential for betrayal of truth should not simply make one wary of media that peddle such betrayals, but should in fact help us to better appreciate poetry's ability to exploit this quality to positive ends, participating in a more authentic, timeless truth—that of great art.

One final poem from the collection demands our attention before concluding, if only because of its title, given the topic of the present article, and the title of the special issue it is appearing in: "Fausses nouvelles ! Fosses nouvelles !" More importantly, this particular pastiche of journalistic discourse involves a level of coherence and sustained narrative that is not present in similar poems analyzed thus far, explicitly pointing to the media's proclivity for transforming the grimmest of events into entertainment. In the course of the text, the performance of an opera in fact mutates into a full-scale military conflict—a "spectacle" that closes with young men leaving their families to fight in an escalating war. This conflict erupts quite quickly, in the opening lines; indeed, like the war Jacob acknowledges "prophesying," in his "Avis":

9 Noted by Pilling in his translation, *The Dice Cup*, p. 70, note 18.

> À une représentation de *Pour la Couronne*, à l'Opéra, quand Desdémone chante « Mon père est à Goritz et mon cœur à Paris », on a entendu un coup de feu dans une loge de cinquième galerie, puis un second aux fauteuils et instantanément des échelles de cordes se sont déroulées ; un homme a voulu descendre des combles : une balle l'a arrêté à la hauteur du balcon (30).

While this transition from high art to brutal reality initially seems devoid of any discernable causality, there are several key elements that the casual reader of this poeticized news story would likely pass over in his or her desire to read and visualize the sensational account of events that follows; details that at once participate in the theme of military conflict, with its origins in national ideology, while sabotaging the very discourse in which they appear. *Pour la Couronne*, a largely forgotten work that deals with, of all things, power struggles in the Balkans (!), does not of course involve the tragedy of Desdemona, however much her plaintive voice here evokes certain cultural/racial tensions. And the complexity of simultaneous connection and disjunction in these initial lines is further heightened through geographical details that transpose the heroine's plight to a site of tension that would be relevant indeed to the Belle Époque opera goer, putting her on the frontier essentially, between France and Germany (Goritz/Paris). In contrast to this brief, condensed passage of complicated references, the succeeding text flows evenly along, recounting the ensuing battle as the most ordinary of events. The distinctive play of the Jacobian text, while present here ("Il y a eu des sièges de loges, le siège de la scène, le siège d'un strapontin [...]")[10] is progressively displaced by the pseudo-factual reporting of the journalist ("et cette bataille a duré dix-huit jours"). The author's intent here, it would seem, is less to disrupt the conventional reading process, as observed in other texts, than to reproduce a certain type of discourse in a coherent form, calling attention to the duplicity that is *already* inherent to it. What topic captures readers' attention more, after all, than the "theater" of war—the most "horrible" and least worthy object of spectatorship, when seen in all of the detail accompanying it in reality: "les journalistes sont venus pour un si horrible spectacle"? The roles that governments directing such conflicts assign their citizens, dutifully reinforced by the press (the patriotic sacrifice of male youth, maternal empathy with suffering), stand out in relief when placed against the backdrop of an actual theater: "l'un [des journalistes] étant souffrant, y a envoyé madame sa mère et [...] celle-ci a été beaucoup intéressée par le sang-froid d'un jeune gentilhomme français qui a tenu dix-huit jours dans une avant-scène sans rien prendre qu'un peu de bouillon."[11] Finally, whatever levity has been maintained throughout the elaboration of this fantastical scenario is less discernable by the close of the text, as young soldiers who are suddenly more real than their counterparts at the opera, in the simple scene accorded them, far from the theater, are drawn into a conflict that would appear to be much more than a farce: "trois frères en uniformes tout neufs [...] se sont embrassés les yeux secs, tandis que leurs familles cherchaient des tricots dans les armoires des mansardes."

It is difficult not to see in this text a pointed indictment of journalistic writing, and the latter's supporting role in the mobilization of nations for war; particularly when this final vignette is fully situated in relation to the central scene of the text. For what at first

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10 Riffing that recalls the banter of another fringe surrealist, Groucho Marx. Interestingly enough, the Marx Brothers would also introduce physical chaos into this secure bastion of high society, in their famous film *A Night at the Opera*.

11 For a contemporary illustration of this theatrical manipulation of public sentiment, we have only to recall what has become perhaps the most recurring "scene" in speeches by recent American presidents and nominees: the acknowledgement of a wounded soldier, surrounded by family, who are present in the auditorium.

appears to be yet another example of the absurd logic binding events in the Jacobian universe proves more significant—in the factual, *non*-poetic sense of this term. Not only does the juxtaposition of the wealthy, urban capital and the rural "provincial" setting of the closing designate an inequitable class structure inherent to modern warfare – those who create and profit from wars, and those who fight and lose life in them – but the specific language linking the two worlds here suggests a more subtle, insidious factor in this tragedy: "Cet *épisode* de la guerre des Balcons a beaucoup fait pour les engagements volontaires *en province*" (emphasis mine). If, perhaps, with an implicit mockery of provincial gullibility, such language points to the manner in which the entertainmentalization of war leads the public to participate in its "performance"—a reality that is inevitably less glorious, and more brutal, than any representation of it.[12] The meticulously covered "episode" in clashes between nations (a term that evokes the serial structure of the feuilleton, with its capacity to incite desire for more) involves a degree of moral culpability that far surpasses that of the average tabloid cover.[13]

To conclude, returning to questions posed earlier: how can we then situate Jacob's work – which clearly does engage critically with problematic aspects of the evolving genre of journalism, whatever the poet's resistance to conventional *engagement* – in relation to "fake news?" What role might it play, if any, in diffusing the media's power over a public that is more attuned than ever to the *spectacular*? It certainly isn't likely we will witness a sudden surge in the readership of avant-garde poetry. And it would seem even more unlikely that such work would ever have an impact comparable to that of contemporary artists who increasingly address social issues in a very direct, relatable way for the younger generation. And yet, mightn't such immediately accessible forms of expression – in *all* media – end up producing an impetus in the reading and viewing public to seek out forms that challenge, forcing one to be more actively engaged—if not necessarily in the streets, in front of the pages and screens that both *inform* and *entertain* us? The meticulously constructed nonsense of Max Jacob not only reminds us of the risks we run in letting any one form of discourse fulfill both of these functions, pleasing us with novelty that is not in fact so new – much less, significant – but it teaches us, ideally, what we are missing out on in our continual access to facility: "true" expression. The poetry – or painting, or music... or journalism, for that matter – that pleases in not showing us what we thought we wanted to see.

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12 A perfect example of spectatorship in this regard, groups of American citizens famously installed themselves within view of the first Civil War battles in order to watch—and picnic!

13 The narraton of spectacular events in the *Petit Parisien* in particular, Mollier observes: "prépare […] les esprits à accepter pour argent comptant le bourrage de crâne de la Première Guerre mondiale" ("Naissance" 20).

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