

R|EVOLUTIONS:
Mapping Culture, Community, and Change
from Ben Jonson to Angela Carter

Edited by

Jennifer Craig and Warren Steele

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

For Haider and Lilianne

REVOLUTIONS: Mapping Culture, Community, and Change from Ben Jonson to Angela Carter,
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No real social change has ever come about without a revolution. People are either not familiar with their history, or they have not yet learned that revolution is but thought carried into action.

—Emma Goldman

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CHAPTER FIVE

SHINING ON THE NOTHING NEW:
RE-MAKING THE WORLD
IN MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI'S
ONLY REVOLUTIONS

SASCHA PÖHLMANN

A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

The concept of originality has not much of a reputation in literary studies since poststructuralism, but hardly anyone would deny even at first glance that Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* is a book like no other. Dust jacket, cover, and bookmarks are as much part of the work as the letters on the page. Typography and color are essential visual elements of the composition, and the text is set in two margins horizontally and then divided again vertically, with one of those vertical halves placed upside down. Indeed, the book needs to be turned every eight pages, if one chooses to read it that way; furthermore, the sound of the words is as important as their appearance. Yet, despite its newness, this work of literature is at the same time heavily embedded intertextually, and I will begin my reading within this apparent paradox.

Only Revolutions is a genuinely original treatment of repetition and recurrence, and it thus introduces new and important material to an ongoing debate in literary studies that grew especially strong in postmodernism, but began much earlier. After a brief plot summary and a short exploration of the most important formal characteristics, I will argue that the novel turns the reader into both an accomplice and antagonist of—literally—revolutionary progress and ontological play, while at the same time demanding a radical rethinking of the reading process itself.

Plot and Form

Strange as it may sound, a relatively simple way of grasping *Only Revolutions* is to compare the book to *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce. Certainly the most straightforward parallel is that the unconventional language can make one easily forget that both books actually tell a story. *Only Revolutions* narrates the circular road trip of Sam and Hailey, a boy and a girl who are "Allmighty sixteen and so freeeeee." ¹ Appearing on a mountain top, they meet and fall in love. They then traverse the United States together with occasional stops, eventually returning to the mountain in the end. During their journey they encounter the Creep, an antagonistic force that seeks to bind them and to whom they are simultaneously attracted and opposed. Towards the end of the book the narratives clearly split, indicating the moment when Sam and Hailey lose track of each other, and subsequently each one dies while ascending the mountain in the other's story. The respective survivor carries the other up to the summit and there faces the temptation to destroy the world. Each opts for its rejuvenation instead, however, restarting the cycle of life as the book ends—just as ALP does at the end of *Finnegans Wake*.

The circle provides a fundamental symbol around which the text is structured. The book has 360 pages of text, each with 360 words, with the exception of Hailey's later pages. Both Sam and Hailey's narratives come in chunks of eight pages, after which the reader turns the book 180 degrees and is either told the same event from the other's perspective, which happens in most cases, or reads on.

The title page states the text's edition is "Volume 0:360:∞," while the sideways eight of the infinity sign is contained in the ages of both Sam and Hailey, who are "always sixteen" (S/H 167). Each page has 36 lines, with the ratio of lines between upper and lower halves of the page diminishing as the book progresses from 22/14 to 14/22. Danielewski also employs a typographical device that complements the text's gradual erasure. The bold type in which are set the names of plants exclusively associated with Hailey and animals exclusively associated with Sam actually fades out. Moreover, from the middle of the book onwards, these living things are only mentioned in connection with verbs synonymous with dying.

¹ Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), S 1. All page references to Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* are given in the text as either H for Hailey's parts, S for Sam's, or S/H where page numbers coincide.

Only Revolutions also makes use of a complex color scheme. Sam's eyes are green with flecks of gold (S 7) while Hailey's are gold with flecks of green (H 7), and the letter "O" in each narrative is set in the eye color of the dominant character, with a few notable exceptions towards the end when their tales begin to intertwine. In these instances the complementary colors red and blue are also used, implying the American flag. Purple, a mix of red and blue, is the color of the Creep, who is the opposite of Sam and Hailey and yet somehow an integral part of what they are.

The Protagonists as Mythical Figures

It is tempting to read Sam and Hailey as symbols of America, especially since they refer to themselves with the word *US* in capital letters. Their travel story stands in the very American tradition of the road narrative, and it is set firmly in the U.S.A. However, *Only Revolutions* is not merely a national text but a global one. It is concerned with worlds, not nations, even though the American nation provides the particular background. Sam and Hailey's colors are the opposite of the American flag, complimentary colors that form its after-image.² This makes them rather un-American, and in fact their nationality is never stated in the text. This contradiction is only one of the many that Hailey and Sam embody. Their identities are fluid and unstable, as Hailey states with a nod to both Walt Whitman and Yogi Berra:

I'm too multiple to feel.
A fork ahead.
I take both. (H 9)

While they each have age, race, gender, sexuality, and so forth, these categories fail to describe them completely, and they ultimately escape the coordinates these frameworks provide. As they discover when they try to get married, they have no ID and thus no legitimate identity (S 256). They simply move too fast to be grasped, always "already gonegoing" (H 33).

Just as HCE in *Finnegans Wake* is both the proprietor of a Dublin pub and a mythical figure that stands for the masculine, the mountain, and the

² Rinehart, comment on "Color Speculations," in Mark Z. Danielewski, *MZD Forums: Only Revolutions*, comment posted September 30, 2006, 1:15 p.m., <http://www.houseofleaves.com/forum/showthread.php?t=4265&page=5&highlight=color+speculation> (accessed July 16, 2008).

father, so Sam and Hailey are teenagers driving through the U.S.A. and at the same time mythical characters. They are both gods and all too human, children of the revolution they themselves engendered as world-parents. They unite the playfulness of youth with the immense responsibility of immortality, as the mirrored form of the text helps to show. For example, early in Sam's tale,

Hailey does a handstand.
Spins. (S 115)

Late in Hailey's tale, and mirrored on the same page, Sam does

a headstand.
Stands on the wind. Holds the World up. (H 246)

The upside down perspective turns a young adult doing a handstand into Atlas holding the world, and Sam and Hailey oscillate between these two states.

Their narratives are further defined by the revolution of the book as it is turned every eight pages, a movement best imagined as a double helix spiraling forward to form a circle. Part of this structure is the "history gutter," a second vertical column of text that offers a highly selective linear history that moves from 1863 to 2063, with which the tales of Sam and Hailey intertwine. Hailey's history gutter is speeding up as her dates are set further and further apart, while conversely Sam's is contracting. Their narratives take place at both a very specific and a very general time. One of the text's many examples of this is when Sam mentions gas and trenches as the history gutter tells of World War I:

I'm in No Man's Land.
Turpinite.
Chloroacetone. (S 67)

Hailey and Sam's stories attain a mythical quality, for they are at once particular and universal. In so doing, *Only Revolutions* harks back to other myths and historical incidents informing the cultures of the Western world, most notably those of the world-tree Yggdrasil and the Norse god Odin. The pair of Sam and Hailey parallels other famous pairs. These pairs include Romeo and Juliet and Tristan and Isolde, and the history gutter even refers to "Clyde Barrow & Bonnie Parker" (S 127), "Eva & Adolf" (S 193), and Baader-Meinhof (H 122). Not all of these are as obviously—or negatively—connected to destruction as the latter four, but they are all

associated with the challenge or downfall of an order. Hailey and Sam embody revolutionary forces for better or worse; they unite creation and destruction.

Freedom and Perpetual Revolution

Yet these parallels also fail to describe Sam and Hailey completely. The two share a radical desire for freedom that opposes the formal rigidity of *Only Revolutions* as well as the comparisons it implies. The text is only one attempt to bind them among many, and only another that fails. They not only resist being confined to its form but also to its content, as their ambivalent comment "*I'm not content*" (S/H 178) implies. Sam and Hailey are always on the move and thus constantly have to liberate themselves from forces that try to pin them down. This struggle includes their fluid identity and selves. As Hailey states:

Here I go. Here goes. Not I.
Allways. (H 49)

They embody potential and are opposed to the actual: they personify choice itself, choices that could be made rather than one that has been made. Hailey calls herself "every trail's switch" (H 23) and describes her encounter with Sam, which is always a re-encounter, with these words:

Swinging wide for still
untried crossroads
with cairns left for encounters
never kept. But met here.
Regret begets every alternative. (H 21)

The fact that the whole text is written in the present tense emphasizes this potential: nothing is settled, nothing is determined, everything is possible, and yet everything is always happening in the present moment (not "always will happen again" or "has already happened"). Sam and Hailey realize this as they wonder at the transience of everything but themselves:

—*Why does everything go
that way except US?*
—*Because we're allways at once?*
—*Everything and everyone's?* (S/H 178)

This perpetual present of the narratives is underscored by the last words written upside down on the book's copyright page: "Expiration Date: Now." Peculiarly, the dedication reads "You were there," as if the reader were somehow outside the continuing present moment of the narrative, always a little deferred through the reading process, just a little late, but also always implicit in the text.

The most notable attempt to pin down Sam and Hailey is made by the Creep, a person they actually find attractive despite their antagonism. The Creep tries to bind Hailey with a "GREEK NÓOSE. Around her" (S 83), and the peculiar accent on *nóose* indicates what exactly it is that seeks to pin them down. In philosophy the Greek term νόος, or *nous*, refers to the mind or intellect. The Creep uses rationality to force Sam and Hailey to conform to a certain order, but they escape the clear-cut categories rational thought seeks to impose by being radically irreducible to any single definition. The Nóose cannot bind them because it "*is never big enough for two*" (H 275); it is unable to comprehend the paradoxes and contradictions contained within the impossible binary Sam and Hailey constitute. Hailey notes how they easily unite mutually exclusive ideas:

Because wherever toast drops we're both.
Jam Down. Jam up. (H 193)

Within a highly structured narrative, Hailey and Sam escape rational language and thought. Any attempt to make them conform to a single definition or interpretation must necessarily remain incomplete, just like the one proposed here. They move so fast in the ever-changing car models they drive during their road trip that nobody can hold on to them. They themselves are constantly becoming.

It is remarkable that the text becomes more easily read as the narratives progress. In the beginning, when each is alone shortly after their birth on the mountain, the text is highly associative, apparently focused much more on sound than on meaning and coherence. Especially with regard to the world-making aspects of the text, one could say that *Only Revolutions* is written in *multi-verse*, uniting possible universes. Both Sam and Hailey announce that

I can walk away
from anything (S/H 1)

Their narratives elude the reader's attempt to force them into a clearly understandable order. When they encounter each other, both begin to slow down. Hailey for example calls herself "Slower if now Samtied" (H 21).

As the five “acts” of *Only Revolutions* proceed, the language becomes more intelligible, as if Sam and Hailey grew from the linguistic stages of early childhood to adulthood, until the final act set on the mountain almost reads like prose.

Sam and Hailey are not exempt from the general movement towards death in the text. In terms of language, this means the style becomes less associative and more expressive, as if the imagination dies along with the world Hailey and Sam move through. While the reader has to work a lot harder in the beginning to imaginatively create the world he is presented with in countless disconnected fragments, he ends up with a world described quite clearly, a place in which potential is extinguished and only the actual remains. However, always dialectical, *Only Revolutions* presents a countermovement even here, splitting up the narrative of death in the end so that, like two Schrödinger’s cats, Sam and Hailey are actually both alive and dead at the same time, and two worlds coexist without one being the protoworld.

Speaking generally, the binary unity of Sam and Hailey represents a disruptive force that contests anything that claims hegemony, ranging from social prejudices to politics to the reader’s attempts at interpretation. In the end, they reject the constraints of structure itself by

Abandoning the borders of
even the Remotest Orders, no longer locatable (H 326)

Remarkably, their desire for freedom is not limited but enlarged by their connectivity, since they believe that “Liberty and love are one” (H 20) and “Love and liberty are one” (S 20). They are sustained by honey, a product of an animal and a plant; their nourishment can only come about through their connection, not their separation.

Both are very self-centered at the beginning, but they gradually value the other higher than their respective self. The peculiar device of the “leftwrist twist” attests to that, as each sets out with a “Leftwrist Bracelet—priceless” (S/H 52) while the other has either a twist of “shit” (H 52) or “scat” (S 52). The value of the narrator’s leftwrist twist decreases while that of the other increases every time they are mentioned.³ This occurs until finally Sam has a “Leftwrist Twist of Shit” (S 309) and Hailey a “Leftwrist Twist of Forever” (S 309) in his narrative, and in Hailey’s narrative she has the “Leftwrist Twist of Scat” (H 309) and Sam has the

³ Raminagobis, comment on “Leftwrist Twists,” in Danielewski, *MZD Forums*, comment posted April 9, 2006, 4:20 p.m., <http://www.houseofleaves.com/forum/showthread.php?t=4334&highlight=Leftwrist+twist> (accessed July 16, 2008).

“Leftwrist Twist of Forever” (S 309). These pages mirror each other exactly, 52 sharing a page with 309. The most plausible explanation for these bracelets is that they are watches worn on the left wrist,⁴ representing not only time but the time both Sam and Hailey have left. Awareness of the transient nature of their existence only makes them cherish the other more, and the freedom each desires is in fact mostly desired for both of them together. They are in time while being out of time so that, despite the perpetual present, they witness decay and are subjected to transience and loss.

History: Personal and Global

Sam and Hailey’s relation to time is a complex one, and it deserves a closer look with regard to history. It would be too simple to claim that history repeats itself in *Only Revolutions*. Instead, history repeats itself not just with a (leftwrist) twist, but with many of them. The connections within the text are rhizomatic, not root-like. Words are often mirrored across pages in all directions: from left to right across Sam and Hailey’s parallel narratives, from up to down across hundreds of pages and ensuing stories, and from the history gutter to the “main” narrative. While the history gutter is separate from the main text, it can be read as also being closely interlinked with it. Many relations are conceivable here: the tales of Sam and Hailey may run parallel to the official history in the margin, or they may drive them as a kind of revolutionary dialectics at work “beneath” the recorded events. These events may actually drive Sam and Hailey on, or they are the more general causes or effects of the particular and personal events that happen to Hailey and Sam. While none of these should be dismissed as false, I argue that the stories of Sam and Hailey provide an understanding of history that counters that of rational historiography and opposes the latter’s linear model with a circular one resembling that of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence. Nietzsche’s idea is often misunderstood as denoting an actual temporal repetition, where in fact it provides more of an aesthetics and ethics of life. The imperative thus is to live in such a way that one could wish for everything to happen precisely the same way again and again, as is implied in paragraph 341 of *The Gay Science*:

⁴ modiFied, comment on “Leftwrist Twists,” in Danielewski, *MZD Forums*, comment posted April 3, 2006, 7:15 a.m., <http://www.houseofleaves.com/forum/showthread.php?t=4334&highlight=Leftwrist+twist> (accessed July 16, 2008).

The heaviest weight.—What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, “Do you want this again and innumerable times again?” would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for *nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?⁵

Sam and Hailey literally live in and for the present moment, and therefore, in Nietzschean terms, they affirm life in the strongest possible way. Even though the historical events listed in the history gutter affect them and are visible as traces in their narratives, Sam and Hailey ultimately exist independently, otherwise the last part of Hailey’s history gutter could not remain (yet) unwritten. The double helix of their narratives, separate but closely connected, goes on despite the many destructive events recorded in the history gutter. In the end, the DNA of their eternal tale attests to the fact that life will go on.

It is important that we not treat the history gutter as an unmediated list of events. It is not about events but facts that are changed from one into the other by a narrative voice. This voice is traceable in tiny details, most notably in the use of the verb *to go* as a synonym for *to die*. The substitution indicates a significant lapse in the pretense of a historiographer who wishes to produce the illusion of objectivity, to make himself appear absent. The masculine pronoun is appropriate here since “his-story” is attributed to the Creep: after all, the dates above the history gutter are set in his color. Ultimately, just as he fails to bind Hailey and Sam with the rationality of the Nóose, he also fails to bind them to a linear historical narrative that privileges seriality over circularity, constructing concatenations of cause and effect that form the chains around those

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 194-5. First published 1882.

seeking to be free.⁶ If the Creep and his history create “feer” that opposes its anagram “free,” then Sam and Hailey succeed to liberate themselves from it. As a variant of this recurring motif testifies: “Everyone feers the dream but [s]he frees it” (S/H 307). Sam and Hailey do not need to awake from the nightmare of history. They dream a new dream that dissects and effectively marginalizes the historical narrative that would usually marginalize narratives like theirs and not include them in the official record of the past.

This historical rewriting also helps explain why *Only Revolutions* is only in small part an American narrative. Even though much of what is recorded in the history gutter seems to be centered on American history, and even though Sam and Hailey’s history gutters connect at the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the events in the gutters are actually global ones. Indeed, Kennedy’s assassination itself is the perfect example of an event that is not only part of American history but outside national histories, and many other events from outside the US add to the globality of the history gutter. As Sam remarks, “there are no countries. Except me. And there is only one boundary. Me” (S 3). In their rage over the other’s death, both announce that “every nation will burn” (S/H 348), and their universal capability of shattering the whole world takes precedence over their American particularity.

Making and Destroying the World

Sam and Hailey together embody both life force and death drive, the need to destroy in order to create and vice versa. The ontology of *Only Revolutions* constantly turns upon itself like a Möbius strip, three-dimensional yet with just one edge and one side. Sam and Hailey are thrown into the world and know that their textual appearance also begins “the World” (H 1), that capitalized textual world of the book and the planet on which their America exists.

Hailey states in the beginning:

⁶ Another set of rules that fails to bind Sam and Hailey’s narratives is a literary one: the word “A Novel” that describes *Only Revolutions* on its cover is also set in the purple of the Creep, representing yet another label, another convention Sam and Hailey escape from. *Only Revolutions* is a novel, and it certainly is new. However, it is also a poem (in meter and rhyme), a song (letters are set off typographically to indicate musical notes), a movie (circles in the upper right corner indicate spool changes between the five acts), a play (even with a conventional Aristotelian five-act structure), and so on, and it is certainly old in conforming to the conventions that help identify it as all these things.

O Lucky World.

My present (H 51)

and that present is not only the "gift" (S 51) Sam refers to in his parallel comment, but also the present tense, the now of its existence (and also the poison of Sam's term, which is "Gift" in German). As they grow increasingly closer shortly before their final split and subsequent death, they rephrase the statement, echoing each other on the mirrored page: "Our present. Lucky World" (S 310) and "Our Gift. Lucky World" (H 310), and thereby agreeing on their common productive force. They are both "*apart of this . . . -Whirls of ours*" (H 179), a part of the world and distant from the world, worlds that are their whirls, their revolutions. They are at once part of the story and the originators of that story, narrating themselves and their world into existence like one of Samuel Beckett's voices, creating through imagining.

The book is called *Only Revolutions: The Democracy of Two, Set Out & Chronologically Arranged* on the title page, and on further pages it is also referred to as "Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* by Hailey" or "by Sam" respectively. Danielewski is less author than arranger here, with the stories told by the protagonists themselves. This indicates a complexity of ontological levels that, as I will explain later, also involves the reader who not only reads the stories but also drives them forward, despite always being excluded from them.

Hailey says that she is:

The World which
The Mountain descends from
and I laugh because it tickles. (H 4)

Sam in turn says he is:

The Mountain which
The World climbs down from and
I laugh because it tickles. (S 4)

Both are World and Mountain originating each other with none preceding the other, like a serpent coughing up its own tail. Sam and Hailey are not merely dialectic principles at work in history; they are dialectic itself. They are *différance*, always already there in traces, always differing and deferring, never present:

I'm the all. The all available.

Ever now. Ever here.

Allways unavailable. (S 27)

I'm all. The all safe.

Ever once. Ever there.

Allways unsafe. (H 27)

As they are "allways going. Allready gone" (S 95), they are the irreducible trace: "Because we're what everyone waits for even when the waiting's over" (H 255).

Each is prevented from destroying that World immediately by curiosity (H 4) and fascination (S 4). When they meet each other, they add yet another world to the one they already found: "I'm his World" (H 7) / "I'm her World" (S 7). Together they form the ever-changing textual World that comes into existence dialectically as it is being read, oscillating between two states of existence. The opening chapter represents the continuation of the renewal begun in the final chapters, as "allways all around me the World rebegins" (H 34), and with it comes the process of dying and decay that necessitates replenishment at the end. Thoughts of destruction and creation are mirrored directly. In the beginning, Sam and Hailey both wonder whether it is "ever too late to destroy the World?" (S/H 46). On the same page, mirrored, they also state that "It's never too late to keep a World" (S/H 315). As their difference becomes coexistence (not sameness), and as the barrenness of death replaces the fertility of life, they turn their minds from destruction to creation, ceaselessly forming a countermovement to balance the dominant force. Their worlds intersect more and more, and as animals and plants begin to fade out and die from the middle chapter on, the strict color division is broken. Green and gold O's appear together for the first time, notably in the word *too* (S/H 177). Late in the narrative, the strict division between animals on Sam's side and plants on Hailey's side breaks up as well. The last fading living thing mentioned in Sam's narrative is grass (S 350) and in Hailey's, an ass (H 350). As the moment approaches, each realizes that destroying the world would mean the complete destruction of the other, and they refrain from what they originally planned to do in their rage at the other's death. Instead, they opt for a new beginning:

For her
 the World turns and to blow it away
 would forfeit all the World already Loves of her.
 What bending she allways resolves.
 What evolving she allways ends.
 How here without, she still somehow,
 over with, comforts now what I'd obliterate.
 And she's just chillin on the snow.
 She exists for more. More exists for her.
 And I cannot destroy more.
 For I cannot destroy her. Ever. (S 355)

Sam decides to leave this World with Hailey:

There is no more way for US.
 Here's where we no longer occur.
 We are the unfixed, the ever mixed up.

 Me with her. Beyond all starts. Beyond return.

 But I'm no future. I'm no past.
 Only ever contemporary of this path.
 I'll sacrifice everything
 for all her seasons give from losing. (S 356-8)

In Sam's narrative, all the plants mentioned in Hailey's first chapter reappear in bold type (S 357), while all the animals in Sam's first chapter appear in Hailey's narrative (H 357). As they prepare to leave the text of this World, Sam and Hailey promise to punish those who harm the "play" of the replenished world and to love those who cherish it (S/H 358), with whom they might even play along (S/H 358). The final passage is a celebration of renewal at the cost of destruction, a renunciation of revenge in favor of life itself. In Hailey's words:

By you, ever sixteen, this World's reserved.
 By you, this World has everything left to lose.
 And I, your sentry of ice, shall allways protect
 what your Joy so terrifyingly elects.
 I'll destroy no World
 so long it keeps turning with scurry & blush,
 fledgling & charms beading with dew,
 and allways our rush renewed.
 Everyone betrays the Dream
 but who cares for it? O Sam no,
 I could never walk away from you. (H 360)

Sam's passage runs largely parallel to Hailey's. Both affirm the turning, playful World that ends with the last pages of *Only Revolutions* when the text literally reaches its "Expiration Date: Now." It expires only to re-begin immediately with one revived narrator's invocation of the other's name and the statement: "I can walk away from anything" (S/H 1), even death. The reader then knows that these words are almost true, remembering the final line of the page mirrored opposite to the first one. Indeed, our first recognition of the second reading is that this World that begins again is the same one, only different. At this instant, *Only Revolutions* seems to comment on its own originality. William Spanos's explanation of the postmodern hermeneutic perspective applies to Danielewski's novel:

The act of repetition discovers the difference of the same. And it is this difference, which always already defers presence, that makes the text make a difference, makes the text of the past always already new in the present.⁷

Thus, repetition in *Only Revolutions* always happens with a twist due to the perpetual recurrence of countless modified motifs. Commenting on itself and playing on its ever-elusive meanings, the text repeats "only revolutions" in the anagrams "To love only ruins" (H 14) and "On to lovely ruins" (S 14).⁸

The Reader as Accomplice and Antagonist

The connection of the final chapter with the first on the same page is the most obvious instance of the reader's complicity in the textual formation and destruction of the world in *Only Revolutions*. It is the reader's revolutions of the book that drive the narrative forward and that cause it eventually to re-begin. This circularity presents *Only Revolutions* as a different text when read for the second time, implying that the first reading was already a repetition of something the reader did not quite know yet. "You were there," but you did not know it at the time. The book attains its paradoxical state of perpetual originality and circularity only in that repetitive reading process, and the reader's imagination is what sets

⁷ William Spanos, *Repetitions: The Postmodern Occasion in Literature and Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 226-7.

⁸ modiFled, comment on "Allso many 'all' words," in Danielewski, *MZD Forums*, thread comment posted March 29, 2006, 12:23 a.m., <http://www.houseofleaves.com/forum/showthread.php?t=4321> (accessed July 16, 2008).

the system in motion. This can be understood as one possible actualization of the abstract theory Gilles Deleuze offers in *Difference and Repetition*:

The role of the imagination, or the mind which contemplates in its multiple and fragmented states, is to draw something new from repetition, to draw difference from it. For that matter, repetition is itself in essence imaginary, since the imagination alone here forms the "moment" of the *vis repetitiva* from the point of view of constitution: it makes that which it contracts appear as elements or cases of repetition. Imaginary repetition is not a false repetition which stands in for the absent true repetition: true repetition takes place in imagination. Between a repetition which never ceases to unravel itself and a repetition which is deployed and conserved for us in the space of representation there was difference, the for-itself of repetition, the imaginary. Difference inhabits repetition.⁹

Turning the book is the physical manifestation of the reader's imaginative work to negotiate difference and repetition. This active role is more than a mere variant of the "normal" reading process of turning pages while scanning lines from left to right, and *Only Revolutions* shows how this way of reading is only a convention that has been constructed and accepted as normal. Sam and Hailey challenge a multitude of different hegemonies, and "normal reading" is a prominent one among the many. The radical multiplicity (not just duality) of the text demands that readers reconsider the activity of reading as a highly internalized process that is taught and learned, and thus never natural. *Only Revolutions* breaks the habit of Western readers of reading from left to right by not only establishing connections from top to bottom that demand a revolution of the book itself, but also by making complex use of two margins. For example, it is entirely up to the reader how to connect the history gutter with the narratives of Sam and Hailey, or even to consider them connected at all. In any case, the standard left-to-right method of reading only works to a certain extent since the history gutter is always presented on the inside margin of the page, which means that a line-by-line reading of the left page would set narrative before history, while the same reading of the right page would set history before narrative. The blank space separating the narratives from the history gutter poses a problem for the conventional creation of meaning, and it must be navigated and incorporated by the reader into the text he decides to create. The blank could theoretically be filled with countless lines linking words that somehow correspond, but it could also be left unmarked to emphasize Sam and Hailey's detachment

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 76.

from that version of history. The problem becomes more complex when one realizes that Hailey's history gutter is left blank—but not empty—as soon as its timeline moves beyond the publication date of the book. This represents one of many instances when the text points outside itself, thereby incorporating the reader into its process of world-making.

This synchronism combined with the fact that the two margins are upside down from each other on the same page makes every page an instant of multiple presents. No reader can grasp this plethora of multiplicities in one moment, especially since elements of the page are contradictory or even mutually exclusive from one another. *Only Revolutions* is therefore unreadable. It demonstrates on every page the reader's inability to grasp what is on the page by exposing his confinement to seriality when confronted with a text that is utterly parallel.

While Hailey and Sam end up "out of time. We are at once" (H 320), the reader is bound to time, and cannot follow them into perfect synchronism. Once more, *Only Revolutions* is not original in the practice of what Joseph Frank calls in his "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" the spatializing of a temporal form. Rather, it shares with the Modernist texts discussed by Frank the demand of being apprehended "spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence."¹⁰ Like a Modernist poem, this novel undermines

the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time.¹¹

This "space-logic" is not only a trait of Modernist literature,¹² but continues to develop and change in Postmodernism.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* still retains seriality of reading even in its "telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore,"¹³ yet other authors actually use a parallel form of synchronism in the typography of their texts. Peter Handke's play *Kaspar* can be performed and seen and heard in its concurrence of protagonist, voices, and action, but this simultaneity can only be simulated in the text,

¹⁰ Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Vintage, 1991), title page. First published 1969.

and it cannot be experienced by reading that text.¹⁴ John Barth's *The Floating Opera* makes use of this impossibility in a chapter entitled "Calliope music," which "requires two separate introductions delivered simultaneously."¹⁵ Its two margins are readable only as long as they remain identical, and as soon as they start to differ, the reading process is split and disrupted. In *Finnegans Wake*, the main text of the homework chapter is surrounded by comments in two margins as well as by footnotes.¹⁶ This challenges the very idea of a "main text," while also drawing attention to the cognitive impossibility of perceiving a text whose apparent incomprehensibility before only seemed to stem from its semantic, rather than its graphic, multivalence. The same is true of Arno Schmidt's *Zettels Traum*, which makes even more use of this visual challenge to the Western practice of reading. For example, Schmidt includes handwritten marginalia, corrections, and deletions in its typographical structure of three columns of varying sizes and positions.¹⁷

Only Revolutions contributes to this tradition. It challenges the concept of "normal" reading and forces the reader to acknowledge his inability to move from a series to its parallels—or his ability to grasp true synchronism only as metaphor. At the same time, the book empowers the reader to narrate his own story within that rhizomatic network. It asks him to sort and connect the simultaneous occurrences in that singular and eternal present moment into an arbitrary but meaningful coherence that exists solely because the reader perceives it as such. The radical simultaneity of everything in *Only Revolutions* begins even before the text is read, as the covers of the hardback edition show an image that virtually summarizes the stories between them. This visual image is read differently than the text, and it conveys the complex perpetual present of the narrative more effectively because it is not bound by the circular/linear conventions of perception and reading.

Since the present and presence of the text must elude the reader, the dedication rightly tells him that "You were there." He is always "already gonegoing," but he has also always been there already. The reader becomes the absence to haunt the book and, paradoxically, the agent that drives it forwards in a vain quest to keep up with the speed of the text. Sam and Hailey epitomize acceleration and speed, as opposed to the

¹⁴ Peter Handke, *Kaspar* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967).

¹⁵ John Barth, *The Floating Opera* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 172. First published 1956.

¹⁶ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), II.2, 260-308. First published 1939.

¹⁷ Arno Schmidt, *Zettels Traum* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1970).

creeping slowness of their enemy who is always trying to tie them down. For example, Hailey is at one point "Accelerating more until I'm hardly touching the tar" (H 49), while Sam states he is "also evading the rest" (S 66). Their constant movement is also the movement of meanings, and their elusiveness is that of signifiers in free play. The reader pushes Sam and Hailey on in their accumulation of meanings, as if turning the book winds the narratives like clockwork that runs out as soon as the book is put down. The act of turning of the book could be described as the creation of a literal hermeneutic circle. At the same time, the reader is the force that imposes its own speed on Sam and Hailey, and there is the possibility that the Creep is actually the reader. As Hailey states:

We're unaccompanied
even if somebody already moves alongside US.
Still. Stalking (H 273),

there are only two beings that still follow their textual course, and they are the Creep and the reader. Early on, both Hailey and Sam understand and fear

the peril pursuing US,
fast against our trip, a reversing
at hand gathering to control, hold
and disband US. (H 139)

The force "at hand" arresting them in their play may well be the hand of reader as it manipulates the book so as to derive a fixed meaning from the text. Later on, as Sam and Hailey escape "the eager touch of Cultures dying to achieve Our Open Anticipation of Life's Rush" (H 282), they pity what they leave behind because "our refusal leaves Them to the catastrophe of their convictions, now tragically consistent & unified" (S 282). No matter how much he may try to attain it, the reader is necessarily spared the tragedy of a unified set of convictions about *Only Revolutions*. His creeping, linear reading can never organize the multiplicity of text, image, and sound into a single meaning.

The reader therefore assumes a dialectical role himself, opposing the free play of Sam and Hailey, but also driving them forward and even together. The bookmarks move closer to each other as the reader moves toward the middle page where everything but the history gutters are mirrored perfectly. Sam and Hailey are closer than ever in that chapter, which consists almost entirely of dialogue, yet while their narratives meet and separate again, the bookmarks never share a page, leaving their union

impermanant and incomplete. They both seem to be aware of this when they comment:

*—Somehow now, here, we're one, while allready
somewhere nearer we go on apart. (H/S 182)*

Sam and Hailey remain dialectics in play, but without synthesis. They are always "The Democracy of Two,"¹⁸ not the dictatorship of one. Their play of meanings both excludes the reader and also simply arises in the reading process. Thus, as the reader's conventions and norms are challenged, the reader not only reads about revolution and the changing of the world, but becomes a revolutionary agent who is actually creating, moving, and destroying a world of which he is and is not part. Through this play of distance and involvement, along with the recognition of certain historical events in the history gutter, *Only Revolutions* succeeds in meddling with the ontological boundaries of a fictional world and the reader's role in it. This revolutionary text is indeed presenting nothing new, but the presentation of that "nothing new" could not shine more brightly.

PART II

EVOLUTIONARY COMMUNITIES: IDENTITY, CONFLICT, AND CONTROL

¹⁸ Danielewski, *Only Revolutions*, title page.

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