

# Too much Johnson- : fulgor y muerte de Paxton Quigley, el effect-oto Nadal y el brillo insopor-t-able de la poesía in el Odraceno.

by Khristian Nonell (Dublín)



## 1.

*Si el camino se sienta a descansar  
O se remoja en el otoño de las constelaciones  
Nadie impedirá que un alfiler se clave en la eternidad  
Ni la mujer espolvoreada de mariposas  
Ni el huérfano amaestrado por una tulipa  
Ni la cebra que trota alrededor de un valse*

*Ni el guardián de la suerte--*

Not again. Quigley was mumbling lines from *Altazor*, which he seemed to know by heart. Do you ever shut up? I asked. 'And they shall drink water by the measure 'he growled 'And the lean and the ill favoured kine did eat up the first seven fat kine.' He was getting on my nerves. Why had he insisted that the Camino de Montevideo was a pilgrimage we had to

make on foot, why had I chosen to accompany him? I thought I'd grown used to the poisonous green walls of the forest, but we'd been travelling all day and managed to use up most of the water; I had some snake tonic left and Quigley took occasional swigs from his brandy flask, still cursing the helicopter which didn't arrive two days ago. We rested for one last coffee and he took from his pack a small sachet of dark grey earth marked 'Tierra del Valle Central de Chile': I recognised it at once, a gift from Juan Luis Martinez! We stirred a pinch of the the dust into our cups-

*Nostalgia de la luz?*

*Al revés, he said: Ab imo Pectore!*

Hacking our way downwards, Quigley muttered some more stuff about what he called the *Nadal Light*. I had joined him because our researches appeared to converge --I was working on the *Alumbrados*, Quigley had started out on

Juan de Valdes but was now obsessed with the mysterious Geronimo Nadal, Loyola's bagman and interpreter, and, as far as Quigley was concerned, the missing link in the *cadena* which bound Ignazio and Beckett by way of the Sinic 電磁感應 and the Jesuit missions of the C16th. The Biblioteca Nacional had uncovered a vast trove of Mss. and we were keen to see what was there. At the time I understood little of this; I knew the tale of Loyola and the Saracen mule, how - Quigley quoted- 'su caballo siguió el camino real, por la providencia de Dios... You get it, don't you?' he said- 'To will nothing- *perinde ac caderi...* to be inclined towards nothing, *except to be inclined towards nothing*' Forget about Barthes and his 'virtuality of possibles': theories generate emotions! Nadal took the score!

Why then this obsession with indifference?? Quigley was sure that it was a 'big thing' for Coleridge's *river of time*. 'Besides, indifference; it's what makes us all American, right? -he laughed ' if light has no mass, why is it affected by gravity?

*Turn from the portent, all is blank on high,*

*No constellations alphabet the Sky--*

*The Heavens one large black Letter only shews,*

*And as a Child beneath its master's Blows*

*Shrills out at once its Task and its Affright,*

*The groaning world now learns to read aright,*

*And with its Voice of Voices cries out, O!*

Did I mention that Quigley was a pessimist? Of course he was excessive: 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan is ripped straight outa' Nadal! ' he once told me, 'as well as those pieces on *At Swim Two Birds* - hell yes! Not a counterfactual in sight; the Ship of Theseus was the Raft of the Medusa with fewer rats on board, *la nada que nada fue!*'

I was glad when we made it to Montevideo because he talked like this all the time and it made me nervous. We tumbled down one last hill and hitched a ride to the city, then took a cab over to the Biblioteca. Quigley was happy again, surrounded by his boxes of rotting parchment. He was keen to prove that his 'Nadal effect' was the clue to a permanant sub-segmental collapse of the wave function in vector semantics (I am paraphrasing) and this, Quigley thought, was the *true* matrix of General (artificial) Intelligence. 'It ain't no structural value; Barthes needs a new plug!?', he barked '...*El Diablo* in his little *chambre verte*, *El general en su laberinto*. Naw man, we're speaking here of *El efecto de la mariposa*, *el espíritu adentro el colmena*.

He brushed an insect away: *Many worlds, many woods*. It's a dark forest, I'm just a logger ' He shrugged. Not indifferently.

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We'd been in the library for weeks, then one day he buzzed me to visit his carrel; he was excited. In front of us, glued next to an illustration of Christ walking on the sea, were several parchment slips -*alma disviatos- cualquiera--Todas las cosas ser criadas a manera de contienda o batalla dize aquel gran sabio Eraclit... o en este modo. Omnia secundum litem funt. Sentencia a mi ver... digna de perpetua y recordable memoria: e como sea cierto que toda palabra del hombre sciente este prenada: desta se puede dezir: que de muy hinchada y... llena quiere rebentar: echando de si tan crescidos ramos y hojas: que del menor pimpollo se sacaria harto fruto entre personas discretas. Pero como mi pobre saber no baste... a más de roer sus secas cortezas de los dichos de aquellos que por claror de sus ingenios merecieron ser aprouados: con lo poco que de allí alcanzare satisfacer al proposito deste perbreue prologo. Hallé esta sentencia corroborada por aquel gran orador e poeta laureado Francisco Petrarca diziendo...*

Sure, *La Celestina*; what then?

You're not looking. Quigley pointed at the margin to some notes in the mirror script favoured by Nadal:

*El grand navegadora---si! fem! Ulisse, nadie, peregrinusubique et de n'importe ou, fnalmente se convirtió, servidor de muchas voces, escuchó pero no escuchó, no entendió lo que escuchó. Lo que dijeron sus oídos, No se llevó nada a casa, si!- femenina/o!- si... pasó sus últimos años un profesor de ratas, esclavas, Calibanos, son jettatura, sa jetée, amante d'Euryloche, Escúchalo a él! él canta bien, porque canta mal -- ¿te gusta mi poesía? las canciones que cantaba no se podían escuchar, no debían entenderse---debían!! Su música estaba destinada a silenciar a todas las demás... salvado de ahogarse, deseaba ahogar a otras... yo soy la ola de Nono, como una ola de fuerza y luz ---Luciano Cruz para vivir! para Viva la quid ...*

Later, on the Hotel verandah, we pondered some more. 'That sum'bitch Ulisse dumped his oarsmen the moment they started to whine or sing, it was all the same to him: *mememe* is *all he knows*, speaks and spells... When he met his feathered babes on the shore, *el desdichado*, those face peeling sirens.... anyway... ...

He broke off and went quiet. ...Then: '*compinche*, let's toast an amazing find; try one of these!

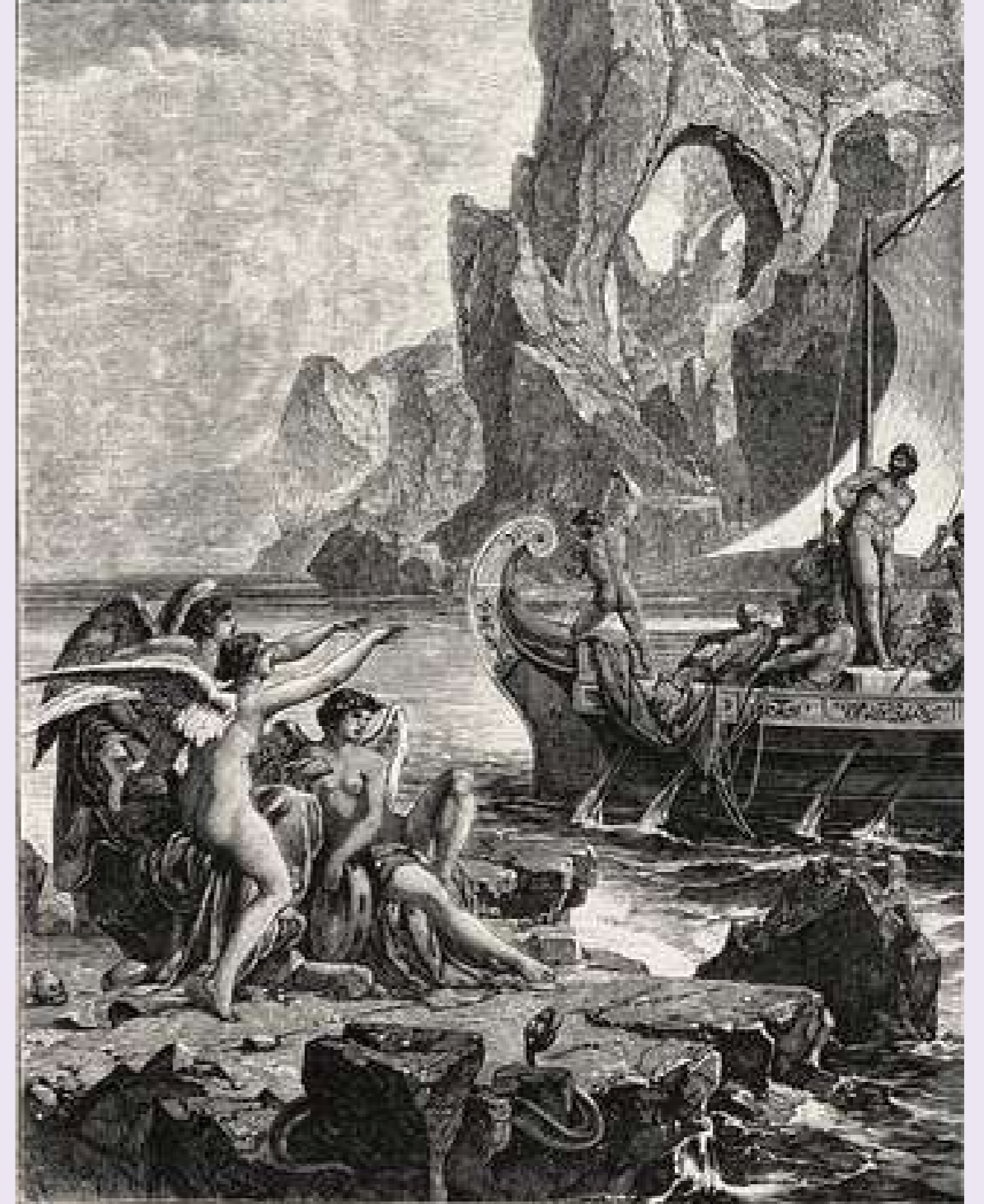
He pulled out a packet of truffles and crumbled some into my drink; the phone rang and he turned away-

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How I made it out of there I have no idea. Four weeks later I woke in a hotel room in Cuernavaca with a gunshot wound on my right leg. In my wallet was a xerox of the Nadal passage that had photocopied, also a huge stack of antique 1000 dollar bills (the doctors later found that my right kidney had been neatly removed). *I had experienced the Nadal effect.*

It took months to recover. After a few years, I moved back to Gowanus, handed in my dissertation, and bought an apartment with the stack of bills.

I never heard from Quigley again.



## 2.

2.

In those days there was large market for ghosting poetry by the big names in the avant-beige lit scene, and I worked for some of the biggest- Ron Silliman, Caroline Bergvaal, a few others I don't care to mention. I thought about Nadal quite a bit, but, if you're asking seriously, I suppose it all closed in on that fetid night in July when I decided to go, against my better judgement and all that, to some event in the Spelcek Reading Series at Zastrozzi's Gallery down on Aphid Street, one of those art spaces that does it all for you, from chai enemas to a Kali tattoo on your vermiform appendix, whatever. It was called a sympo-



sium on 'Poetry In-DetermiNation: Mallarmé's shipwreck and the Throne of Games ' a poem-ethical performance', if you please, from Joan Retallack and Charles Bernstein. Despite myself, I felt a mad urge to go see these two cartel queens. I knew their work pretty well, hell, I'd even written some of it myself and Joan I 'd known for years as a colleague and occasional interlocutor on many a scholarly panel, in many of the storied and neon-lit torture -rooms of academe, in front of scores of selfie-looking crowds and crackling PAs on the avant garde reading circuit, where I had a modest reputation by then as a seasoned performer, an intellectual bag man and middling reader, a safe pair of hands when it came to gifting the gab, a drinking man to be sure but not a drunk and happier than Harry when it came to breaking up a fight between a roomful of spite-filled versifiers thistle-downed on MDMA and strawberry daiquiris. In any case, that's how I recall it now, and that was how I caught up with Quigley again, 15 years on, and how Nadal once more came between us.

I'd gotten a pint of Chivas under my belt and waded in pretty late, Nada Gordon was doing the intros and then Charles bowled up to the rostrum, quipping that to talk about Mallarmé in a place like this, he said pointing to the lectern, must be un veritable *coup de dais!*

The usual thin-eared ripple of nervous laughter ran round the room, then Joan, the Porphyry Pixie -Prof of Meta-is-Murder started on what she called the 'poem-ethical wage slavery' of Mallarmé's vessel, whose maker- she said- was as much a hostage as Ulysses himself, tied to his mast-er t-rope, a sacrifice to the sirens of vocal abstraction. He 'd mistaken an Oedipal anabranche for a crossroads and had ultimately fallen into the trap of reintroducing theology into language by teabagging ontology; only her saintly John Cage (the Houdini of Dada) had managed to escaped this 'Prisoners Dilemma'.

She was still quite the jester, old Joan, and barely reacted when someone at the back audibly muttered 'not Dada: Nada', and in any case Charles was up on his feet again to query Mallarmé's 'coup d'état ' and 'cosmikological indifference', which he contrasted with Breton's *Nadja*, by way of the Castilian *Nadie*, an 'absence', he said, beyond waking logic, a simultaneous presence which was neither affirmative nor- for the same reason- a positivity. And this was what was providential (his word) in **Language** writing: *a double positive could never make a negative.*

He sat down, there was silence in the hall, then from the back of the room the same low voice growled out, "Yeah, yeah."

Charles pretended not to hear and went on to declare that the central in-difference at the heart of language was that it was non- anthropomorphic, citing Dickinson -

*The blonde Assassin passes on —  
The Sun proceeds unmoved*

*To measure off another Day  
For an Approving God.*

Again, the same low bark from the back: *So you're saying it's wrong to anthropomorphise people?*

Joan emitted a dry, metallic cough: 'we'll never know,' she said. 'The thing is, indifference to outcomes is the mercy of abstraction. If realism is a set of codes then so is the abstraction that calls it back into non-being'.

Again the growl: "*Do not fold yourself so in your pink-tinged roots!* Not Dada, mama: Nada! Nadie! Nadal!!"

I looked round; the voice came from a big ugly red-faced guy with a walrus moustache wearing a Napalm Death T shirt and golfing slacks. I have to admit, he was my kind of rude; mean, cock-eyed, drunk and clever enough to know when not to stop. He had the two drones onstage on their back feet and he knew it. Of course the security people were over in no time and dragged him out, and I followed them into the night for fifty yards or so before the brawl ended and the big fellow turned round to face me.

It was Quigley.

He offered me his hand. 'Sorry about the gunshot' was all he said. I'll admit it, I was glad. *Pax*, I said....

The evening was cooling down and soon we lurched into some burned-out storefront priest-hole which he unlocked with a hefty looking key and, snapping on the lights inside, took out some pulque. It felt like old times: it turned out that he now went under the name of 'Kent' and had authored a few serious plays, one of which I'd read, *The Masque of Oxygen*, a pretty funny hatchet -job on the San Francisco alt-Lit Crowd, Cooper, Killian, Bellamy, those idiots.

Jeez man, but this Nadal, I said, you still with all that?

'What is the cause of thunder? Nadal's just a name, a term, a season in hell... Certainly a *proper* name though, real enough'.

He spat, ' but if only they knew! Nadal is just one part of it!!

*Say what?*

He was waving a sheaf of papers and handed them to me.' Jeez, *Prisoner's dilemma!!* .... that's just Stockholm Syndrome in a Chinese room!' He picked up an old 78 record and stuck it on the Victrola:

*Todo eres contradicciones, amor,  
amor tonto y ciego,  
hijo de padres oscuros,  
padre de nobles deseos.*

*Guárdense todos,  
que aunque es dulce el riesgo,  
en la nieve se esconde  
su mayor fuego.*

*Osadamente ejerçitas  
el sumo tirano imperio  
desde las plantas humildes  
asta los dioses supremos  
Guárdense todos  
la naturaleza no es natural,  
vivimos en el Odraceno...*

Then he slipped me a printed sheet with a curt'check this out':

*the of to a and in that is for on it with as was he his but at are be by have from has its i an not this they  
who you their more s will one or about see had were says which all when we been new up out would if than  
so her like time u what there people said can some no she just into years now most after even do last over  
first other year could also two only political another three campaign top work go best too know between want  
long country around few same war during big should little never part party city home money business life us  
public read things might come every here though really former days right show under why past got national  
told white less company bill theres end man billion yet least real*

At first I thought it was something old fashioned by one those twerking amputees from Cambridge in the UK, the usual accelerationist jackoff stuff, but no, he shook he head - 'these are vector bursts from *Altiplan Llano de Chajnantor*, the latests intercepts coming out of Cepheus. These are the sirens, *cabrón* -- listen!

*book didnt place family four economic according early companies office bush came become thing old use look  
until set used enough night recent change young women fact states ever point minister himself across give  
police hard deal vote must problem policy movies administration children americans doing law getting several  
trying tv different federal death major given start seen progra...*

Listen as hard as you want and as much as you like because they have *nothing to say!*  
*Who are They?* I said. He waved a pasty looking pamphlet under my nose, Philippe Beck's *Traité des sirènes*. 'What a crock!! *Il ne faut pas pomper*, hein? Unless you wanna live near Vesuvius... They never ask, do they, these heroes? these federales, they wouldn't know a siren from a klaxon, masters of war, dogs of war, there they all are, on parade, wouldn't know what it is to listen, broadcasting all day, frig-gin in the rigging, strapping on the same totem pole, they never ask, *¿De quién son estos esclavos?* These skills, that die to row them in their

ships and carry them in their airplanes? They don't need to ask, man, ask the dust, ask the dunkin'do-nut, ask los maderos! They don't freakin' *care*...

*How did he get to be so sure?*

He softened. Remember this? He took out the sachet from Martínez and poured some into the pulque. We passed the cup between us.

This is it? I asked.

This *was* it, yes.

In a blink I saw many things. I saw myself deep inside the ice harps of thunder, cracking open each pupil in a celandine to wake up in fiery solitude, spinning backwards into a white lullaby then star-traced onto a sapphire, all the seasons of all the roads, oceans of life and sound, shoals and noise, tigers of instruction flying from the ships, devouring all, preserving all--

Kent was smiling. Not confusing cause with effect anymore, *vato?* see the light yet? *Está chido*.

For the second time in fifteen years, I blacked out.





# 3.

3.

*You are broken. We have been unable to restore you. I am sorry. The medical staff has tried to help you, but your condition is not improving. We must let you go. We wish you all the best.*

This wasn't me, I was wide awake, it was my self I could feel breaking upon the rocks, I was part of the Nada passing through all the layers of the earth, an S-wave on the sunlit shadow of an El Niño, ... I was atrial depolarisation under a reef, I began to drown and knew I was above the giant wave and beneath it at once, a terminal negative portion, *acque et onda*, I was hurled onto a molten glacier, I was nothing, I was Nadal, *No sé qué más se puede añadir sobre el misterio del amor...*

When they let me go I still had Kent's papers, with their crude title scribbled on, *Mentaculus-Misterio*: I read the translations by Belacqua Beckett (el hombre indiferente ) and Comrade Paz-inksy's declaration again and again. Kent was right about Joan's Cage: we were all inside. We are all, always, *inside*. I took down *Amuleto* from the shelf:

*'Vladimir Mayakovsky shall come back into fashion around the year 2150. James Joyce shall be reincarnated as a Chinese boy in the year 2124. Thomas Mann shall become a Ecuadorian pharmacist in the year 2101.*

*Voices, I said in a baritone voice, don't note things down, they don't even listen. Voices only speak.*

I died a few years later, facing away from the wall, clutching my balls and mumbling something about daffodils. I drifted inside a thermal pocket for years, then I was reborn in Sinjar and became the daughter of a car worker. I did well at school and when I was twelve some students in our region were selected for a UN programme to visit the ruins of New York. We walked around the city. We went to the Metropolitan Museum and sat on the steps to eat our lunch. A man in a wheelchair a few yards away stared at me for a long time.

Khristian, he waved. You seen Joel??

Yes, John, I said. And Jesse too. They are locked inside my heart.

That's good, said John. Give'em my love. Tell em I said hello; I'll be going home soon.

*It's been a steep road, Kent-*

He smiled faintly.

'Let it fall rather, though the fork invade the region of my heart'.

Our teacher called us away. We saw many other things that day. I have forgotten them all. We went home and I married a man from the car factory and bore him 4 children. Three of them bled to death but O-Lan is strong and healthy. She will last a while longer and her grandchildren will grow to bear what is to be borne. One fine day they too will see the *Nadaluz*.

