James Thurber has always been a hard man to pin down. At the time of Thurber's death in 1961, E. B. White wrote in the New York Times that "there were at least two, probably six Thurb... His thoughts have always been a tangle of baseball scores, Civil War tactical problems, Henry James, personal maladjustments, terrier puppies, literary rip tides, ancient myths, and modern apprehensions ... Through this jungle stalk the unpredictable ghosts of his relatives in Columbus, Ohio."

It is a bit surprising that White did not take note of another side of Thurber. As the quotation from "Here Come The Tigers" suggests, he had a keen appreciation of words -- not only of their meanings, but also their sounds and visual patterns. Few other authors have elevated word games to a high literary art -- Lewis Carroll, James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov come to mind, but who else exhibits such verbal virtuosity and linguistic legerdemain?

Thurber's attitude toward word play is perhaps most explicitly voiced in "The Tyranny of Trivia" printed in Lanterns and Lances (1961), hereafter abbreviated LL. Bemused by the assertion of a literary critic that his work, lying sprawled and unburied on the plain, had been ravaged by trivia, Thurber vigorously defended his explorations of the properties of words:

"(My trivia) consist mainly of a preoccupation, compulsive perhaps, but not obsessive, with words and the alphabet ... Their purpose is the side-tracking of worrisome trains of thought ... The late Bert Leston Taylor used to find comfort in contemplating Canopus (but) my own system of mental sedation is more mundane."

He then proceeds to illustrate the technique by citing what happens when he starts reciting poetry to himself. Coleridge's Kubla Khan has been around for nearly two centuries, but who before Thurber ever noticed that it contained six consecutive words with the letter R followed by seven consecutive words without R?

"... where Alph the sacred river ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea... "
Most of Thurber's word play occurs in his later works, notably Lanterns and Lances, the last collection of stories published before his death. It seems quite likely that his preoccupation with words was connected with his increasing blindness. Morsberger quotes a friend of Thurber's: "Thurber sits alone in the dark chewing on words and letters". Kenneth Tynan said on the BBC that Thurber lived in "an interior universe, entirely inhabited by words, which he could play with, dismember, animate, dissect, reassemble in strange and odd combinations .. His mind was a seething kind of kaleidoscope of word forms, word shapes, abused words, misused words, neologisms, old coinages re-shaped."

Not only blindness but the enforced idleness of a hospital bed must have turned Thurber increasingly toward word games. In "The Tyranny of Trivia", we find him sharing his linguistic discoveries with doctors and nurses (representing Everyman, who has no time to fritter away on the trivia of spelling and pronunciation). He recalled telling one apprehensive nurse around midnight that A, B, D, O, P, Q and R are the only capital letters of the alphabet that are wholly or partially enclosed -- a splendidly useless fact. (Had Thurber been a mathematician, he would have said that these are the only letters having the connectivity of a torus, but this would probably have left the nurse even more apprehensive than before.) Another night he asked the nurse if she could think of a seven-letter word with three U’s. When she sighed and said, "It’s probably unusual," Thurber enigmatically responded that it was and it wasn’t. When the doctor came in later, Thurber challenged him to find another six-letter word using the letters in suture. (The doctor never got it, but I assume that Word Ways readers will have no trouble with this one.) Still later, Thurber deviled his doctor with the old problem of finding all five vowels appearing in proper order (abstemious, facetious).

A somewhat earlier example of Thurber's word play is contained in "Here Come The Tigers" appearing in The Beast In Me And Other Animals (1948). In this story, two drunken acquaintances burst in on Thurber at midnight with the glorious news that they have discovered a new literary dimension -- the mood and tone-color of a word are echoed in its component parts (for example woman: moan now won, wan man). Thurber, like the reader, is unconvinced that his friends have invented a viable literary genre; "mice in chimes" may call Hickory-Dickory-Dock to mind, but it sounds a little thin beside "hare twisting in the frozen grass and the mastiff bitch in the moonshine cold". Still, they persist, pointing out the large number of words that contain animals:

- flower (wolf)
- danger (gander)
- jungle (gnu)
- answer (swan)
- spring (pig)
- summer (emu)
- autumn (ant)
- winter (wren)
- toward (toad)
- shore (horse)
- orchard (roach)
- wobble (owl)
- ghastly (stag)

They especially liked brazen, containing both zebra and bear. Before they leave in three sips, gaiter, gaiter, who wrote: distinction as Websterian; begirt, regular.

One can only game on his parts. Connecting one of the sexes, arguments explain the rest: Thurber, and

A few weeks before his death, two scribes noted (without style and chaste)

"When you gather the eye in

But one week before his death, one of the счет countrymen means to invent own interest. stories, The as Malory overcomes the guise of Superglue:

However logophile, there is some how subject of "The Country (of Superghlue) circle of life"

"The eye to him at his yester pride in middle
They leave, they tantalize Thurber with the fact that tiger is contained in three six-letter words; he spends a sleepless night searching for goiter, gaiter and aigret. Here the story ends, but Thurber appends a footnote contributed by New Yorker logophile George Rose Smith, who wrote: "Disturbed by the thought that the tiger is as near to extinction as Thurber intimates, I sent two native beaters through the Webserian veldt and quickly bagged the limit of ten -- grit, engirt, begirt, regrets, regilt, tigger, tiger, gitter, gritter, greit, gretit."

One cannot resist turning the tables on Thurber and playing his own game on his surname: is Thurber composed of the associations of its parts? Could be -- her, hurt, and rue suggest the ever-present battle of the sexes in his stories, brute his interest in dogs; and rebut his argumentativeness. (I leave it as an exercise for the reader to explain the relationship of Thurber to tube, tuber, but, rub, bet, tuber, berth, and Ruth.)

A few years later, Thurber returned to the words-contained-in-other-words theme in his haunting fable, The Wonderful O (1957). Two scoundrels, Black and Littlejack, invade an island they believe conceals a treasure. Frustrated in their search, they decree that all words containing the letter O must be modified. Confusion reigned, and confusion reigned, and confusion reigned.

"When coat is cat, and boat is bat, and goat other d looks like gathered, and booth is both, since both are bth, the reader's eye is bothered."

But one word using O -- freedom -- cannot be suppressed, and eventually the evildoers are overcome by Andreus, the poet scorned by his countrymen as no better than a pet. Here Thurber's word play is a means to a larger end, rather than something to be exploited for its own interest. Tobias argues that in The Wonderful O and similar stories, Thurber has created a romantic tale in the spirit of Sir Thomas Malory's Romances of the Round Table -- civilization is depicted in the guise of a hero struggling with his enemies, whom he eventually overcomes by the use of his creative imagination.

However, the object of this article is to understand Thurber the logophile, not Thurber the philosopher; in this narrower arena there is some hope of success. There is no doubt that word play is the subject of "Do You Want To Make Something Out Of It?" found in Thurber Country (1953), hereafter abbreviated TC. This is a look at the game of Superghost (pluralized by Thurber) as it was played in Thurber's circle of literary friends. With a keen eye, Thurber commented that

"The Superghost aficionado is a moody fellow, given to spelling to himself at table, not listening to his wife, and staring dully at his frightened children, wondering why he didn't detect, in yesterday's game, that 'cklu' is the guts of 'lacklustre', and priding himself on having stumped everybody with 'nehe' the middle of 'swineherd'. In this last case, 'bonehead' would
have done, since we allow slang if it is in the dictionary, but
'Stonehenge' is out, because we don't allow proper nouns."

Such an aficionado was his friend Bert Mitchell, a "dangerous and
exasperating player" who used to read the unabridged dictionary for
pleasure and kept one on his lap during a Superghost game to resolve
such disputes as whether or not dogger was in the dictionary (it was).
When challenged by Thurber on "abc" he patronizingly produced dab­
chick, and blandly added "It is the little grebe". It was Mitchell's
fondest hope that he could steer the Superghost game around to such
beauties as "ugug" (plugugly) or "achach" (stomachache). (Assum­
ing that Webster's Second was his authority, I would have liked to get
Mitchell in a corner with "chchh", but no doubt he knew of the exis­
tence of mlechchhha.)

Characteristically, Thurber classified himself as a dogged rather
than an able Superghost player; by this, he meant that he was much
more likely than any of his friends to spend sleepless hours looking
for as many words as possible with a certain property, such as the
trigram "hlo" (he found seven besides phlox). However, he regarded
it as a point of honor to solve problems in his head, not with the aid
of a dictionary. It is likely that he regarded dictionary-searchers as
logological fanatics much in Mitchell's mold.

What was Thurber's attitude toward nonce-words? Perhaps his
most famous one is the reversal Sesumarongi, "a backward tribe
but a tribe that is all around us" in "Conversation Piece: Connecti­
cut" (LL). In the same piece, he plays around with the possible ana­
grams of music, concluding that most of them -- icsum, mucsi,
mucis, scumi, simcu, succm, umesc -- made him ill. And,
returning to Superghost, he finishes off that article with a tour de
force of nineteen bed-words invented to contain the tetragram "sgra".
A few samples:

kissgranny - a man who seeks the company of older women, es­
pecially older women with money

cussgravy - a husband who complains of his wife's cooking, es­
pecially one who does so in the presence of guests

fussgrape - one who diets or toys with his food; a scornmuffin;
a shuncabbage

lassgraphic - of, or pertaining to, the vivid description of females

Surprisingly, Thurber never delved very deeply in palindromes,
one of the commonest forms of word play. The only reference I know
of is in "The Watchers of the Night" (LL), where he confesses being
in touch with unnamed palindromic addicts who supplied him with
"defied!" and "he goddam mad dog, eh?" as well as the flawed "Plol's
lager on red rum did murder no regal sleep" (I'll bet it didn't!).
All of these examples tend to preserve word-spaceings in a symmetric
way, so that one is really looking at word-reversals. Thurber rightly
recognized the superiority of palindromes which escape this strait­

From his snarls as "The Tyrant of rain (plain)" and "witch-watcher
there is no question

It is so and the ilk.

In "Such a Capital!" Pardon
none; the usual aimless
jittery cup

For Come,
troubled
Slew What
angerie, T
In the same piece, Thurber claims that for years he has kept himself awake while courting unconsciousness by tinkering with words and letters of the alphabet and spelling words backward. Yet he gives pitifully few examples of his skill — he notes that gnip-gnop is a far more onomatopoeic word than ping-pong, and elsewhere he reminds us that "repaid" reverses "diaper".

Thurber is far more addicted to the practice of discovering unifying themes in words which begin with a common letter, devoting pages of "The Tyranny of Trivia" and "The Watchers of the Night" to this. For example, G is full of old-fashioned terrors (ghouls, ghosts, goblins, giants, gargoyles, griffins, gorgons, Gargantua, Goliath) whereas H has more up-to-date dangers (hoodlum, hooligan, heel, hooch, heroin, hitchhiker, hotrod, hijacker, holdup, hophead, hipped, hideout, hatchetman, higher-up, hangover, hooker, homicide, homosexual, hydrogen, halitosis, hysteria, and Hollywood). P is a letter he finds especially seductive, the home of fictional pixies (Puck, Punch, Peter Pan, Pinocchio, the Pied Piper, Punch, Pogo, Penrod, Mary Poppins, Puss in Boots, Pooh, Peck's Bad Boy, and Pluto the Pup), terrain (plain, prairie, plateau, palisade, peninsula, promontory), or games (ping-pong, polo, pool, poker, pedro, pinochle, parcheesi, pussy-wants-a-corner, post office). Even more startling (at least in the wee hours of the night) is the curious ambivalence, the antipathy-affinity, of the letters C and M (cat and mouse, cobra and mongoose, Capulet and Montague, Mary Celeste, Morro Castle, McKinley and Czolgosz, Marat and Corday, Madonna and Child, Chamberlain and Munich, Capitalism and Marxism, cow and moon, mountain and climber, malice and charity, Martini cocktail, Morris chair, mulled cider, chocolate mousse, cholera morbus and the Caine Mutiny Court-Martial). I believe that this sort of word play is more psychology than logology; no doubt one can, as in a Rorschach test, read almost anything into any letter of the alphabet.

From here, it is a short step to such alliterative sleep-murdering snarls as "pitching pennies with the Pittsburgh Pirates in a pitter-patter of rain outside the Pitti Palace" or "we supply wristwatches for witch-watchers watching witches Washington wishes watched". There is no question that Thurber had a keen ear as well as eye for language.

It is somewhat harder to document Thurber's facility with puns and the like, for so much of the appreciation depends upon the context. In "Such a Phrase as Drifts Through Dreams" (LL) he invents several "Pardon, Your Slip Is Showing" examples: a stitch in time saves none; there's no business like shoe business; Lafayette, we ate here; Don, give up the ship. Less successful in isolation is his list of unusual ailments: the steeplechase horse with the galloping jumps, the jittery cupbearer of the gods with the Hebe jeebies, and the three-legged descendant of Lassie with the collie wobbles.

In "The Case For Comedy" (LL) he retitles well-known plays to reflect this troubled century: Abie's Irish Neurosis, I Dismember Mama, They Slew What They Wanted, Toys in the Psychosomatic, The Glands Manangerie, The Manic Who Came To Dinner, and Oklahomosexual. In
similar vein, he retitles various literary classics for TV adaptation: Have Gun, Will Shakespeare; She Shoots to Conquer; Lady Windermere's Gun. One-liners, often parodies of famous quotations, are scattered almost everywhere: "Hell with thee, blythe spirit, bard thou never wert" (addressed to a would-be poet); "Great oafs from little icons grow" (after hearing of Khrushchev's marathon press conferences); "If you prefer 'I think, therefore I am' to 'Non sum quaestus eram' you are putting Descartes before Horace"; "The pain in Twain stays mainly in the brain"; "Hi diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, Moscow jumped over the moon" (an allusion to the Russian moon probe which circled the moon in 1959).

The reader may object that most of this, although clever, is highly artificial; the above-illustrated paranomasia is highly unlikely to occur in everyday conversation (even in Thurber's literary circle). It is much more refreshing to listen with Thurber's sharp ears to the mundane mispronunciations of English. In "The Case Book Of James Thurber" (TC), he cites three beauties: The Case of the Gloucester Sympathizer (a misunderstanding of a Gloucester telephone operator who offered to connect Thurber with her supervisor), The Case of the Young Woman Named Sherlock Holmes (her name really was Shirley Combs), and The Case of the Cockeyed Spaniard (actually a well-known breed of dog). In "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, Lend Me Your Ear Muffs" (LL), Thurber is more testy than jovial, complaining of "crippled or wingless words that escape, all distorted, the careless human lips of our jittery time" -- the compression of schedule and gradual to skedjil and gradjl, the insertion of an extra syllable into participles like sparkling and struggling (and a similar lengthening of evening to ev-en-ing), the elision of the initial O (so that one talks about fishels and bituarios). (However, he forgives one of his Columbus relatives when she pronounces a word "la-yuff-ing-i-ly", a two-syllable expansion on the original.)

But Thurber heaps his greatest irony on mistakes that fog meaning. Advertisers seem to have lost the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs, as illustrated by the cigarette that "travels and gentles the smoke" and the newspaper that reads faster and livelier. Thurber suggests that it is a small step to such tortured thoughts as "the voyeur confessed that the naked model ogled hung-rily." Thurber claims he offered to sell to a brewer the slogan "We still brew good like we used to could".

However, the amateur language-botcher is also alive and flourishing. Thurber seems to meet more than his share of these people -- the woman who could sleep twenty people in her house in a pinch but could only eat twelve; the history teacher who characterized his colleagues as hard to get along with because they were always looking down each other's noses; the female whose apartment was broken into so often that she finally had to have it burglarized; the indignant lady who told Thurber that the trouble with him was that he just didn't like no children; the girl from upstate New York who assured him that they were not going to hide their heads in the sand like kangaroos.
Thurber always had a warm spot in his heart for animals, and they frequently appear in his stories. The words-in-other-words game described earlier involved animals, as did a game his wife proposed once to keep a cocktail party of opinionated writers from getting into fights: write down as many animals and birds as you can think of with a double O in their names. (This kept them quiet for about an hour, but to her dismay fights broke out concerning the admissibility of stool pig-eon, bookworm, saber-toothed tiger, micro-organism, and the like.)"The Trouble With Man Is Man"(LL), a far more interesting article, introduces Thurber's conviction that animal names are far more frequently used perjoratively (crocodile tears, kangaroo courts, loan sharks, cat burglars, cock-and-bull stories, dog-tired, cowed, hen-pecked, wildcat strikes, chickened out) than approvingly (brave as a lion, proud as a peacock, busy as a bee, gentle as a lamb). We have many disapproving terms pertaining to humans, such as scoundrel, scalawag, varlet, curmudgeon, and so on, but in the heat of an argument one is likely to call one's opponent a baboon, a jackass, a louse, a worm or a skunk. Tracking this idea backward in time or across different cultures might well be the subject of a Ph.D. thesis (or at least a further Word Ways article).

It is, I think, evident from this brief survey that Thurber's word play is remarkably varied. However, it is harder to deduce what Thurber really thought of it. The apparently serious pronouncements of a humorist or satirist are always suspect; you are never quite sure when he is subtly pulling your leg. In a way, Thurber transformed his whole life into anecdotes, and the truth is forever lost. I'll go out on a long limb and assert that Thurber saw word play as more than a time-filling exercise for an insomniac brain; he viewed it as an authentic expression of man's creative urge, as legitimate an expression of humanity as painting a landscape or proving a mathematical theorem. No doubt, Thurber would have disparaged this glittering generality, as he did when he twitted some students about their solemnity toward literature: "In the 30s, students used to ask me what Peter Arno did at night -- now they want to know what my artistic credo is!" So let's just say that he loved words in all their guises, and let it go at that.

Noticing that many of these examples come from female acquaintances, Thurber opines that the maiden spring of sense has suddenly become matron-sprung. More pointedly, says he, a living language is an expanding language, but care should be taken that the language does not crack like a dry stick in the process, leaving us all miserably muddling in a monstrous miasma of mindless and meaningless mumbling. (Would you care to guess what Thurber thinks of the letter M?)

However, is highly unlikely to keep a coffee circle). No ears to the Book Of the Winter telefoner), longer name Spaniard Country- Quite than the com- insertion jugglng billions of . (How- Thayer pronounces the original.) fog mean- in transitive "travels with tortured singled hung- slogan

and flourish- people -- pinch but he called his col- looking broken in- indignant the just didn't left him that kangaroos.