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An ad Ludendumne an ad Scribendum: To Play = To Write?

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René Galand, An ad ludendumne an ad scribendum: to play = to write?

Many authors have equated playing and writing. Mallarmé defined poetry as “le Jeu suprême”, and Herman Hesse, in his novel Magister Ludi, took the glass-bead game as a symbol of esthetic creation. This is why an examination of the links between play and literature appears to be warranted. For a study of this kind, the principles on which Roger Caillois has established his classification of games has proved especially useful.¹ There are four of them: agôn, mimicry, alea, and ilinx. Agôn (Greek for “competition”, “struggle”) is the principle on which games involving some sort of conflict are based. The conflict may be physical or mental, individual or collective. Physical and individual: wrestling, boxing, fencing, racing, tennis, etc... Physical and collective: team sports, football, rugby, soccer, hockey, baseball, polo, etc. The conflict may also take place on a mental plane: chess, checkers, cards, etc. Other games involve mimicry, i.e., the imitation of an external model, real or imaginary, or the identification with such a model. In the far off days when models of behavior were determined by gender, it was the case of the games where little boys played cops and robbers, or cowboys and Indians, whereas little girls played at being the mother of their dolls, or the hostess serving imaginary tea in miniature cups. Ilinx (Greek for “vertigo”) is the principles of games which aim at creating this state. A very simple example: the game where children put on a blindfold, whirl around and around very fast, and then attempt to stand up and walk straight. Many of the devices found in amusement parks belong to this category: roller coasters, twisters, swings, etc.. Alea (Latin for “die”), finally, involves games in which chance plays a major part. This is obviously the case of games played with dice, like “craps”. It is also the case of such games as roulette, including its variation in which the wager is life itself, Russian roulette.

It is easy to link many forms of literary creation to these various classes of games. Agôn, for instance, ruled the literary competitions which were part of the great Panhellenic Games: Olympic Games, Pythian Games, Isthmian Games, Nemean Games, or celebrations like the Panatheneae or the Great Dionysiae. This was also the case of the Jeux Floraux which were instituted in the South of France in the XIVth century. It must be recognized, however, that the agôn principle did not significantly affect the nature of the literary works created for such competitions. I will show later that there are types of texts in which it plays a far more essential role.

It is probably mimicry which, at first sight, seems to have the greatest importance in writing as play. In literature, mimicry goes by different names: imitation, parody, pastiche. It would also include false plagiarism, apocryphal writings which purport to be the work of a definite author. A fairly recent example is to be found in La Chasse spirituelle, a text which its authors presented as a lost writing of Rimbaud until the forgery was discovered. Writers associated with the literary movement OULIPO have often resorted to text-generating techniques based on mimicry, either using already existing techniques, or inventing new ones. This is the case, for instance, of the lipogrammatic imitation as it has been practiced by Georges Pérec. A lipogram is a text in which one or more letters of the alphabet are omitted. Pérec thus rewrote Rimbaud celebrated sonnet Voyelles without making use of the vowel e. This gave, for the first line, the following result: A noir (un blanc), I roux, U safran, 0 azur, / Nous saurons au jour dit ta vocalisation. Mimicry is also the principle at work in the so-called translations which the

Oulipians François Le Lionnais and Marcel Bénabou have given for Keats’ celebrated line: “A thing of beauty is a joy for ever”, which they render respectively by: “Un singe de beauté est un jouet pour l’hiver” and “Ah, singe débotté, hisse un jouet fort et vert”. Les Mots d’Heures, Gousses, Rames [Mother Goose Rhymes] written by the author who signs Luis d’Anten va n Rooten belong to the same category. Here is an example: “Un petit d’un petit / S’étonne aux Halles / Un petit d’un petit / Ah! degrés te fallen”. Mimicry, in these texts, is limited to the phonetic aspect of the text. The translation is concerned only with the sound, not the meaning. It is the kind of interpretation which might be provided by a Frenchman who would be reading the English text without having any knowledge of the language. This is a procedure well-known to students. Entire generations of French school-boys have been amused by the scatological pseudo-translation of the following Greek sentences, of which grammatical correction leaves as much to be desired as good taste: “Oůk élabon pólin. Élpis, éphê, kaka oūsa alla gar ápasi”. American high schoolers are better acquainted with homophonic translations such as “The purple emu laid another egg” for “Le peuple ému répondit” or with such examples of Fractured French as “hors de combat” for “war horse” or “Jeanne d’Arc” for “There is no light in the bathroom”.²

Mimicry is also the driving principle of Oulipian transformations of the type S + or - n. In a given text, each substantive S is replaced by the substantive which, in the dictionary selected for the experiment, occupies the nth position after or before S. In poetry, S + or - n must of course have the same number of syllables and the same ending as S. If not, it is replaced by S + or - (n+1), or by S + or - (n+2), etc., until the required conditions are met. The title of Nerval’s poem, El Desdichado, thus becomes El Desdonado, and the first line, “Je suis le ténébreux, le veuf, l’inconsolé”, becomes, for Queneau, “Je suis le tensoriel, le vieux, l’inconsommé”. Mimicry is here combined with alea, since S + or - n varies in an unpredictable way according to the dictionary used for the experiment.

Another form of mimicry is the transformation by antonymy. Under the pen of Marcel Bénabou, the initial line of Mallarmé’s poem L’Azur, “De l’éternel azur la sereine ironie” thus becomes “De la gueule éphémère la gravité soucieuse”, the word gueule being used here in its heraldic meaning of gules, i.e. red.³ In his Poésies, Lautréamont had already resorted to this kind of transformation when he turned Pascal’s aphorism, “Le nez de Cléopâtre, s’il eût été plus court, toute la face de la terre aurait été changée” into: “Si la morale de Cléopâtre eût été plus courte,

2. Such procedures were commonly used in the XVIth century. Tabourot des Accords devoted an entire chapter of his Bigarrures to what he called “Des Equivoques Latins-François”. Here are a few examples:
Natura diverso gaudet.
C’est une sentence, qui signifie, que nature se délecte de variété, qui fait cette aquivoque biberonique, Nature a dit verse au gaudet. Car au gaudet est à dire au gobelet."
"Habitavit, c’est à dire une brayette, quasi, habit à vit.
L’on dira habitaculum, habit à cul long, à mesme raison."

3. The examples mentioned in the preceding pages have been taken from the following works: OULIPO, La Littérature potentielle (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), passim, and Gérard Genette, La Littérature au second degré (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), pp. 48-54
la face de la terre aurait été changée. Son nez n’en serait pas devenu plus long.” Mimicry can also appear as the playful imitation of a form rather than of a specific text. Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire* thus parodies critical editions of literary masterpieces, with their cumbersome apparatus of introduction, commentaries, and footnotes.

In the texts where mimicry appears under its most usual form, i.e., in direct imitations, this principle is often combined with *agôn*. This occurs in texts where imitation also involves competition with the model. When Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*, he was competing with Homer’s *Odyssey*. Mimicry and *agôn* are also at work in such novels as *Thomas l’Imposteur*, in which Cocteau copied *La Chartreuse de Parme*, in *Le Bal du comte d’Orgel*, in which Radiguet imitated *La Princesse de Clèves*, and in the novel in which Joyce imitated the *Odyssey*, *Ulysses*. *Agôn* and mimicry take on a more humorous aspect in the fictional writings of the fictional writer Pierre Ménard, a creation of Borges. Pierre Ménard, who competed with Paul Valéry when he rewrote *Le Cimetière marin*, a poem written in decasyllables, in alexandrines, is also the author of a *Don Quixote*. His version is a literal transcription of Cervantes’ masterpiece. His copy is therefore identical to the original in every respect, except one: it has been written in the XXth century. The mere displacement of the historical context is sufficient, as Gérard Genette has demonstrated, to create a complete revolution in the meaning of the work.4

The combination of *agôn* and mimicry also accounts for such playful uses of writing as burlesque or satirical parodies. Typical examples may be found in Scarron’s *Virgile travesti*, in Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène*, and in the pastiches of *A la manière de...,* by Paul Reboux and Charles Müller. There is mimicry, since there is imitation, and *agôn*, since the imitator shows that he is able to take on the greatest writers and to turn their masterpieces into objects of ridicule.

The same two principles, *agôn* and mimicry, command another conception of literature, but the play here is far more serious, serious enough for Mallarmé to call it “le Jeu suprême”. According to this conception, the literary work is in competition with reality. “*Ut pictura poesis*” was Horatius’ command. Mimicry, which should go here by the name of *mimesis*, takes as its goal the perfect imitation of the real things. Apelles took pride in the fact that birds were unable to see the difference between the grapes painted by him and real grapes. Realistic novels fostered a similar mimetic ambition, as is seen in a famous epigraph of Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir:”Le roman est un miroir qu’on promène le long d’un chemin”.* The writer sees himself as a demiurge. He believes he can compete with the Creator himself, and the failure of this ambition plunges him into despair. Baudelaire’s artist, in one of his prose poem, makes this confession:”*Nature, enchanteresse sans pitié, rivale toujours victorieuse, laisse-moi! Cesse de tenter mes désirs et mon orgueil! L’étude du beau est un duel où l’artiste crie de frayeur avant d’être vaincu.*”

In any case, to do as well as the Creator is not enough for the Promethean ambition of such artists. They want to do better. The poet who appears in some of the *Fleurs du mal* is the “architecte de [ses] féeries”. He wants to “bâtit dans la nuit [ses] féériques palais”, a “Babel d’escaliers et d’arcades” (“Paysage”, “Rêve parisien”. The impotent poet described in some of Mallarmé’s poems is driven by a similar ambition. He wants to create flowers more beautiful than “l’enfance / Adorable des bois de roses sous l’azur / Naturel”. But the garden which he is constantly spading up in his brain can never be more than a vast cemetery filled with empty holes (“*Las de l’amor repos...”*). His triumph would be to create out of nothing flowers more beautiful

than God’s creations: ”Une agitation solennelle par l’air / De paroles, pourpre ivre et grand calice clair, / Que, pluie et diamant, le regard diaphane / Reste là sur ces fleurs dont nulle ne se fane” (“Toast funèbre”). His goal is, through the magic of his verb, to bring to life what was only a dream: “Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l’oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l’absente de tous bouquets” (Avant-dire au Trait du Verbe de René Ghil). The artist who could win this kind of contest would be, as Gide put it in his Journal as he discusses the player’s joy, “le dieu de son cosmos”. For Baudelaire, the artist is a makeup artist clever enough to give a woman more beauty than can be found in any existing creature untouched by his art. Comparing two women, “l’une matrone rustique, répugnante de santé et de vertu, ne devant rien qu’à la simple nature”, and another, “une de ces beautés qui dominent et oppriment le souvenir, unissant à son charme profond et originel l’éloquence de la toilette”, he immediately chooses the latter (Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe). The rustic matron is as boring as the most banal reality. The magic of makeup is a symbol for the triumph of the artist. To the banality of nature, the artist substitutes a higher nature, nature corrected and amended (Exposition universelle de 1859). Baudelaire proclaims in the same text: “La nature est laide, et je préfère les monstres de ma fantaisie à la trivialité positive.” This is why he prefers opera scenery with its “jardins fabuleux, ses cours d’eau plus limpides qu’il n’est naturel et coulant en dépit des lois de la topographie, là n’importe quel paysage réel” (Salon de 1846, XV). What the artist imitates, in works of this nature, is not external reality, but the phantasmagoria of his imagination. He turns his dreams into reality.

This, on another level, is also what is is done by novelists such as Montherlant, a closet homosexual who, in his novels, assumes the personality of the lady-killer Costals, or Malraux, who, although he was little more than a reporter in Indo-China, allowed the legend to spread according to which, in his novel Les Conquérants, he merely described his own exploits as an organizer of the Chinese revolution. Writing is the instrument through which, thanks to this form of mimicry, man gives free play to his inner drives and manages to erase any frontier between the real and the imaginary. In Breton’s narrative, Nadja, whose name gives the work its title, is no longer a madwoman, but the reincarnation of Melusine the Fay or of the goddess Isis, and Breton himself assumes the identity of her spouse Osiris, the dark god thunderstruck at her feet. Mimicry again in the transformation through which Pierre Desnos, during hypnotic trances, assumed the secondary personality of Marcel Duchamp, Rrose Sélavy, the identity taken by Marcel Duchamp when he dressed up as a woman. It was during these trances that Desnos pronounced sentences like the following: “Phalange des anges, aux angélus préférez les phallus”, or “Plus fait violeur que doux sens”, a transformation of the proverb “Plus fait douceur que violence”. Writing gives vent to libidinal impulses, to forbidden obsessions, to erotic fantasies. This is also the case for such texts as “la lettre d’amour criblée de fautes” or “les livres érotiques sans orthographe” mentioned by Rimbaud which Breton recalls in his preface to Nadja, as well as of the works of Sade, Bataille or Robbe-Grillet in which mimicry takes for its goal the recreation of the erotic scenes which haunt the writers’ unconscious. Robbe-Grillet has used film to give still more reality to such scenes.

These forms of writing have to do not only with mimicry and agôn (to the extent that they imitate fantasmatic scenes and that they manifest the victory of the unconscious over the reality

principle), but also with the principle which governs another category of games, *ilinx*. It is significant that Gérard Genette gave his study on Robbe-Grillet’s novel *Dans le labyrinthe* the following title: *Vertige fixé*. This novel does not merely aims at recreating the protagonist’s state of mental confusion and vertigo, it aims at creating a similar state in the reader. The hero of the novel is eventually killed, like the victims less clever than Theseus trapped in the Cretan labyrinth. But the labyrinth is also one of the games used in amusement parks in order to create a feeling of confusion and vertigo in the customers who go in. To what extent, in a writer like Robbe-Grillet, is writing a game and to what extent is is the result of some inner compulsion? People who know him well tell me that they would be hard put to make the distinction.

*Alea*, chance, is the governing principle in a fourth category of games. Dada made a systematic use of it in their creation of literary texts. A typical example may be found in Tzara’s recipe for generating a text: “*Prenez un journal, prenez des ciseaux, choisissez un article, découpez-le, découpez ensuite chaque mot, mettez les dans un sac, agitez ...*” The Surrealists also made use of chance in the games which they invented for the purpose of generating texts: game of the “*cadavre exquis*”, game of the “*si*” and the “*quand*”, game of questions and answers. It is true that, for the Surrealists, the operations of chance actually revealed the intrusion of surreal forces into our reality. This is why, for Breton, automatic results from a mixture of *alea* and *ilinx*. His effort to write like a doctor who is noting down scientific observations leads paradoxically to the revelation of a “*monde comme défendu qui est celui des ... pétrifiantes coïncidences*”, of “*faits-glissades*” or “*faits-précipices*” of which he is only a “témoin hagard”. Automatic writing, in which each word is created by chance, eventually creates a state of “*merveilleuse terreur*”, of “*stupeur*”, as well as the fear of falling, that is, literally, a state of vertigo. If the use of chance was for Dada a means of destroying the concept of literary masterpiece, it was primarily, for the Surrealists, a way of gaining access to the surreal.

The OULIPO has also made considerable use of text-generating techniques based on chance. We have already seen that such techniques as S + or - n call for a mixture of *alea* and *mimicry*. Another Oulipian technique, the poem on graphs, involves the chance selection of locations designated, for instance, by the letters of the alphabet. Let the computer pick at random an itinerary, *ACFXZ*, for example. For every site represented by a letter, there are 25 segments leading to each of the sites represented by the other letter, i.e., 25 segments per site, i.e., 25E2, i.e. 625 segments. For each segment, there is a corresponding graph in a data file. The itinerary *ACFXZ* contains the following segments: AC, CF, FX, XZ. The computer program will print the corresponding graph. The four graphs put together make up the text. The Random Selection of Numbers is a computer function which makes it possible to write programs which can select constitutive elements of a text, permute them, combine them, and subject them to any type of aleatory manipulations. I have thus written computer programs which generated “*cadavres exquis*”, sentences based on the game of “*si*” and “*quand*”, poems on graphs, or, in the case of such Oulipian works as Raymond Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, as many examples

as one may wish of the one hundred billions of sonnets which his work makes possible, or any one of the possible versions of his *Conte à votre façon*.7

*Alea* is equally important in the opera *Votre Faust*, written in collaboration by the novelist Michel Butor and the composer Henri Pousseur. At each performance, it is the audience which determines at random the way in which the action will unfold. *Alea* played a still more important role in a novel like *Composition no 1*, by Marc Saporta (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1961). Each of the 149 pages was printed on a separate card, and the reader was invited to shuffle them like a game of cards. The text could thus generate 149! different permutations. The factorial of 149 is an extremely high number, much higher than the most advanced computers could handle even as late as fifteen years ago.8

I believe I have shown that the principles on which Caillois based his classification of games apply to many categories of texts. They even apply to types of texts which, at first sight, might seem completely beyond their compass. I take the example of “*lettrisme*”. Here are the first three stanzas of a poem by François Dufrêne, *Danse de lutin*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dolce; dolce.</td>
<td>Yulce, yulce,</td>
<td>Jalce, jalce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yaâse folce.</td>
<td>Youdouli dulce,</td>
<td>Yahanti galce,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolce, dolce,</td>
<td>Yulce, yulce</td>
<td>Jalce, jalce,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A text of this kind is obviously similar to the playful way in which a baby plays with sounds. The baby who babbles exerts his power to produce all kinds of sounds. He does not feel himself limited to the thirty six phonemes in use in the French language. The activity of the *lettriste* writer has therefore to do with the *agôn* principle. His speech fights against the constraints of the language. It was already Apollinaire’s ambition when he wanted to create a new language which would include “*des consonnes qui pètent sourdement*”, les “*divers pets labiaux*”, le fait de “*roter à volonté*”. It is not by chance that these phonemes reproduce the sounds of acts which are not socially acceptable in Western societies, farting and burping, nor that the poem bears the significant title *La Victoire*. The poet is waging a struggle against the limitations which the civilized *superego* would like to impose upon the wild *id*. One witnesses a similar struggle in Rabelais’ verbal games, in such spoonerisms as “*A Beaumont-le-Vicomte*” or “*Une femme folle à


8. The limitation of the computer is clearly illustrated by such NP problems as the traveling salesman, who must determine the shortest route, or the camper’s backpack, who must fit the items most needed within strict limits of space and weight. The traveling salesman must go to *n* different towns. The total number of the segments between the towns is *n*2, and the total number of possible itineraries is *n*! One only has to compute, for each permutation, the sum of the *n* segments involved, sort out the results, and select the lowest. The only difficulty lies in the fact that the total number of possible permutations is so high. The computer available to me when I looked into this problem did not go higher than 33!.

la messe”. Freud has made clear the meaning of this kind of mistakes. They represent a transgression of the censorship imposed by the socialized superego.

The agôn principle is also at work in other forms of conflict between the power which the writer wants to exert over language and the limits imposed by the language itself. This conflict appears to originate in the confrontation between the child and the constraints imposed by socialized linguistic expression. One finds a typical example in a passage of Colette’s La Maison de Claudine, the episode titled “Un curé sur le mur”. Colette, as a child, is tempted to rebel because she is not allowed to give the name which she finds most appropriate to a pretty snail crawling on a wall. The name she wanted was “presbytère”. Unfortunately, the word was already reserved for another use:”Hélas! le mot était réservé à un autre emploi: la maison du curé.” The real question, as Humpty Dumpty put it so well, is to know who is master. Lewis Carroll, in his poem Jabberwocky, clearly demonstrates that, for him, play language triumphs over grown up language.

It is still another form of agôn which is involved in writing practices which require the writer to triumph over various kinds of obstacles. These obstacles may have to do with such rules as the rule of three unities, in French tragedy, or the rules of versification, or the use of such prescribed forms as the sonnet or the sestina, or rarer forms such as vers holorimes, tautograms, palindromes, or lipograms.10 In vers holorimes, each syllable in a line must rhyme with the corresponding syllable of the previous line: “Dans ces meubles laqués, rideaux et dais moroses, / Danse, aime, bleu laquais, ris d’oser des mots roses” (Charles Cros). In a perfect tautogram, each word should begin with the same phoneme, but the ideal tautogram is impossible in French because of the use of articles. The following tautogram is the work of the Oulipian Jean Lescure:”Au zénith un zeste de zéphyr faisait zézayer le zodiaque”. A palindrome can be read backward as well as forward. In French, “Ève rêve”, and, in English, this sentence attributed to Napoleon:”Able was I ere I saw Elba”. The Oulipian Georges Pérec has managed to write palindromes of several thousand letters. In a lipogram, the writer may not use one or more letters of the alphabet. Georges Pérec has written an entire novel without ever using the letter e, which is the most frequently used in French. The novel was aptly titled La Disparition. A writer may also set himself obstacles resulting from the selection of extremely complex forms of writing. This is what Jacques Roubaud accomplished in his book E. The work contains 361 texts corresponding to the 180 white pawns and to the 181 black pawns of the Japanese game of go. These texts may be read in groups, each group being placed under different signs designating a particular motif represented by related themes. The reflection motif, for instance, is linked to such themes as glass, water, looking, etc... The book may also be read according to a system of mathematical signs taken in a derivative mathematical meaning, following the unfolding of an uncompleted game of go. The texts may also be read as individual entities. Similarly complex is the creation of narratives according to a matrix based on Euler’s bi-Latin squares. Claude Berge has suggested as examples narratives based on a bi-Latin square of the order of 10. A square of this type has 100 slots, each containing one letter and one integer which appears only once in

10. The Oulipian examples mentioned in the following paragraphs may be found in OULIPO, La Littérature potentielle (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), passim. A “Bibliographie sélective des membres de l’OuLiPo” may be found in OULIPO, Atlas de littérature potentielle (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), pp. 409-426.
each horizontal row and in each vertical column. Above each column is written the name of a
different character. In each row, for each character, there is a slot in which the letter represents an
attribute of the character. A, for instance, means that he is “un amoureux violent”, B, that he is
“bête à manger du foin”, C that he is “une canaille”, etc. The integer represents the dominating
action of the character: 0, that he does nothing, 1 that he steals and commits murder, 2, that he
behaves in a strange and incomprehensible manner. Each row thus generates a different story
line, according to the letter and the figure which appear together in each of the ten slots, and there
will be ten stories in all.

I have had occasion to use manipulations of this kind to generate some of my writings. In
one collection of poems, for instance I took as an initial base the 26 letters of the alphabet. 26E2
is 676, and the collection was to include 26 stanzas of 26 lines each. I admit I cheated, since the
26 line stanza proved rather unwieldy. I therefore modified the structure of the collection so that
it would contain 52 stanzas of 13 lines each, a length close to the sonnet. The gods sent me an
additional closing stanza.¹¹ In a short story titled Malinal (the name of Hernan Cortez’ Indian
mistress), I used the Aztec and Mayan gods as text-generating elements. Each god determined a
character and an episode of the story.¹²

In all of these examples, there is agôn, since the writer challenges himself, starting from a
prescribed number of rules and elements, to create a literary text, just as a bridge player
challenges himself to fulfill his contract using his partner’s cards and his own. This type of
challenge is common in such writers as Robbe-Grillet and among members of the OULIPO. The
writer must overcome the obstacles which he has raised himself. This short survey does not claim
to be complete. I believe, however, that it is sufficient to show the importance of play in
literature, and to widen our perspective when it comes to what is at stake in literary creation.

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11. R. ar C’halan, Klemmgan Breizh (Brest: Al Liamm, 1985)


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