

# Play, Transgression and Carnival: Bakhtin and Derrida on *Scriptor Ludens*

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To be is to do.  
(Aristotle)

To do is to be.  
(Sartre)

Do be do be do.  
(Sinatra)

Like Maypoles amid their ribbons, certain concepts constellate other concepts into cognitive networks based upon affinity and kinship. The concept that creates the constellation (a network or, in a different metaphor, a family) remains central, dominating or extending its influence over the subordinate concepts, holding them, however loosely, within its rule. To understand one of the concepts within the family it will be necessary to grasp the ruling one, but the subordinate concepts in the extended family also help to make possible a better understanding of the constellating concept itself. Such networks are instable, of course, and (as families) come together and drift apart. A ribbon may become, in a discourse that has undergone a paradigm shift, a Maypole itself. Families of concepts do often extend and contract, by conceptual marriage and remarriage as well as by births and deaths, and in so doing they acquire (or lose) cognitive affinities.

The concept of play suggests an illustrative case: in recent literary criticism it has taken on a central, though previously absent, importance. Play (drawing

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with it several subordinate concepts, e.g., move, rule, strategy, aleatory and so forth), once shifted from a vocabulary of descriptive terms appropriate to the activities of children, becomes available to describe learning procedures, social interaction, personal expressivity, cultural formation and transformation as well as a wide range of human activities that involve simulation, dissimulation, risk-taking, strategic thinking, tactical decision-making and structural experimentation.<sup>1</sup> Within the cognitive family now constellated by the concept of play, the sub-concepts of carnival and transgression (often, it seems, taken as virtual synonyms) provide a field for investigation. Within their apparent ordinariness, both terms disguise labyrinthine complexities of definition. They flow together in current usage from diverse sources: transgression from the language of law and morality; carnival from the discourse of European social history, from local fairs and playgrounds. Both, freshly reconstituted within the family of play concepts, have undergone surprising deformation and both are markedly more attenuated in their new manifestations.

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It is not certain at what point “transgression” metamorphosed into a positive term within literary criticism. As long as it remained a legal and moral concept, it must have been essentially negative and, hence, normally a disapprobative term. Perhaps only as it approaches the concept of play does transgression begin to appear in a positive light. (Play does work significant changes upon borrowed, or subsumed, vocabularies: the lethal terms of destruction, for example, are not merely neutralized in play but positively transformed into descriptions and predictions of skill as when, in chess or football, one notes that certain moves, or plays, are “crushing,” “deadly,” or will “wipe out” or “destroy” the opponent.) It is quite possible to suppose that critics of an earlier age—neo-classic critics, say—would have considered a transgression to be a violation of decorum, of correct literary behavior, or the good will of the audience, and (for all these reasons) legitimately open to chastisement and reprehension. After all, Horace begins his epistle to the Pisos with precisely this kind of advice: do not transgress either convention or audience expectation. From the perspective of classical literary criticism, transgression, if its existence could be admitted, must seem to be violation, error, fallacy, crime or madness. Yet in current literary discourse transgression has now become positive. It can even be said to signify what is most valuable (that is, most literary) in literature.

Lubomír Doležel gives the current valorization of transgression a lapidary formulation when he observes that “in the domain of literature no norm is safe.” There is, he continues, “a permanent process of norm modification, creation and destruction.”<sup>2</sup> One thread in the argument that runs through the essays in Alain Robbe-Grille’s *Pour un nouveau roman* holds that dull readerly audiences need to be shaken up and that conventions, at least those

which have been received, are a kind of bondage to be broken. Contemporary writers, Robbe-Grillet argues, "*savent, ceux-là, que la répétition systématique des formes du passé est non seulement absurde et vaine, mais qu'elle peut même devenir nuisible: en nous fermant les yeux sur notre situation réelle dans le monde présent, elle nous empêche en fin de compte de construire le monde présent, elle nous empêche en fin de compte de construire le monde et l'homme de demain.*"<sup>3</sup> Echoes of this dictum resound from many corners. Transgression can even become—perhaps, indeed, it must become—the criterion by which to distinguish post-modern (and modern) literature from its precursors. Thus David Lodge has defined post-modernism as "an essentially rule-breaking activity."<sup>4</sup> If a student of literature believes that the literature he likes best, or values most, or reads most readily, should be defined by its willingness to break rules, or to be transgressive, then it is only a quick move to the stance that transgression is both positive and desirable: it breaks, frees, opens, makes possible fictional construction and reconstruction, and guarantees authentic literariness.

In order to understand the kind of concept that transgression has become, it is necessary to consider, briefly, four distinctions. First, a transgression may be no more than a plot-step, a move to free the action. For example, in fairy tales and in many romances, an injunction or prohibition precedes a transgression but the latter is narratively desirable precisely because it frees the action: without a transgression there could be no narrative, only a static world of prohibition. In terms of narrative development, *Great Expectations* depends upon Pip's willingness to transgress domestic rules in order to steal a pie for the terrifying stranger in the cemetery.

Second, transgression has been used to describe the force of certain narrative strategies with regard to the expectations of their readership. If readers are predisposed to look for certain conventional treatments of a theme, or of a specific aspect of the narrative materials, and to react strongly when they do not find them, then it is possible for an author to play against (and with) these predispositions. This seems like an evident kind of narrative playfulness but it can also be vastly complex (as, for instance, Proust's play with readerly expectations with regard to characterization, Joyce's with regard to plot and narrative voice, Borges' with regard to such fundamental expectations of empirical experience as the size of libraries in "The Library of Babel," or Cervantes' with his readers' expectations concerning the reliability of narrators). The problem of transgression in this sense may be adequately expressed in the terms of Doležel's analysis of the "fictional world" in Kafka: that world is, Doležel argues, "hybrid" in the sense that it allows for bizarre creatures and events; as such it cuts against expectations concerning both the natural world and the supernatural world since it is, simply but following always its own laws, both at once a space of visibility and invisibility that generates (or allows for) bizzareness.<sup>5</sup>

Third, transgression may describe an author's exploratory play with the available body of conventions at the time he begins to write. This is how

Christine Brooke-Rose uses the term in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* when she turns to the analysis of Robbe-Grillet's novels.<sup>6</sup> Rules are necessarily the matrix of transgressions (anything can be made into a plaything but only a rule-structure can be transgressed) and, to the extent that works of literature may be brought under the tempting analogy of a game, literary conventions seem to behave much like rules when they are subjected to transgressiveness.<sup>7</sup> Genette writes admiringly of Proust's "*transgression décisive*," in making so much of his narrative turn upon—what, relative to the norms of "*la théorie mimétique*," Genette calls—the paradox of "*intensité médiatisée*."<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, bearing in mind Proust's general transgressiveness, Genette writes that Proust inaugurates "*l'espace sans limites et comme indéterminé de la littérature moderne*" (p. 265). In this third sense of the term, transgression actually constitutes the freedom to write. If one accepts the distinction between story and discourse (or *fabula* and *sjuzet*) that has become basic to all formalist, neo-formalist, or textualist discussion of literature, then it seems apparent that any deviation from chronological time in an actual telling of the story—that is, in the narrative or discourse—will seem transgressive.<sup>9</sup> Story-time, while never full, is sequential and follows the sweep of human clocks; discourse-time varies this neutral, event-by-event on-goingness in several ways. The power of this distinction seems unmistakable. It requires that *all* modes of narrative telling depart, by necessity and by art, from chronological time. Considered in temporal terms, to tell is to transgress. This is the position that Brooke-Rose explicitly takes in her discussion of Robbe-Grillet. A short step further along this line of argument and any way of avoiding, turning, ignoring or subverting customary ways of telling may be seen as transgressive *and* positive. At that point one would have reached the narrative playfulness, the *ludisme*, of post-modern narrative whether written (for instance) by Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov, Robert Coover or Robert Kroetsch.

Fourth, from the perspective of post-structuralist textualism, transgression must be seen as the inevitable play of language itself. All language may be said to transgress itself: it always subverts, through its inherent abstractness and arbitrariness, the conventions of its speaking, or its writing, even if this is not readily perceived. Linguistic transgressiveness, in this sense, exceeds what Linda Hutcheon has aptly called "generative word play" as the totality of any system exceeds the particular acts, or collection of acts, within the system.<sup>10</sup> What holds for *langue* not only exceeds all that may hold for *parole*, however numerous its instances, but actually transcends it. Particular puns, for example, though they may be many-sided and frequent, do not add up to the indeterminacy of the system of language itself. What Hutcheon calls the use "of the pun as a structural linguistic model" (p. 121) in *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake* does not equal, or perhaps even approximate, the openness, the indeterminate plurisignificance, of language as such. In this fourth sense, transgressiveness is no longer an act, no longer a move (conscious or unconscious) that the writer makes. Neither move nor act, it becomes the condition of significance.

By way of turning, then, to the second key term, one might note that if carnival can be used to describe transgressiveness, then it does not function in literary discourse as straight-forwardly as it does in the language of social and cultural history. Carnival becomes not simply a collective action, or an event, however transgressive, but an essential aspect of literariness.

Carnival (and two related terms, “carnavalesque” and “carnivalization”) has reached literary theory from a surprising direction. It belongs to a system of linguistic, and secondarily literary, analysis developed by the Russian thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin. In English, Bakhtin’s theory of language (which precedes, and upon which depends, his literary theory) has come to be called “translinguistics.” That label more or less indicates his central and recurring preoccupation: meaning is created by the exchange of voices, by collaboration, willing or unwilling, in particular social contexts. As Michael Holquist puts it, if “we” do not make meaning, then “we may at least *rent* meaning.”<sup>11</sup> Holquist places Bakhtin’s translinguistics between Personalism and Deconstruction. Translinguistics, or Dialogism, occupies the space between the opposed views that meaning is the property of the speaker, a product of an intention, and that meaning is the unowned function of language, a tentative resident of language systems that must inevitably decay, fissure and then metamorphose into something radically different.

Discourse, in Bakhtin’s view, is a game of voices in which words are tokens that are played back and forth, and the final state of play is only the sum of words’ usage (the totality of the ways they have been played) in a particular exchange. Utterance then is essentially dual: at its utmost, polyphonic. For this reason Bakhtin valorizes the novel because, in a profound sense, it is not a genre at all but, always redefining itself in each new instance, a genre-in-the-making. The novel allows for the greatest amount of diversity in utterance, the greatest scope to the play of voices. In a genuinely polyphonic novel the effect of linguistic diversity, in which separate utterances reflect the different worlds behind them within a single context, must be intense. Thus Bakhtin writes of “the plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels: “What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, such forms of discourse as parody, travesty, mockery, Menippean satire, linguistic up-endings of all kinds, are all potentially novelistic and, considered separately, belong to the prehistory of the novel. The importance of “parodic-travesty forms in world literature is enormous,” Bakhtin writes.<sup>13</sup> They are important because, in incorporating a duality of voice, an inherent dialogism, they point ahead toward the novel. No one parodies another without borrowing the other’s voice for the purpose.

It should now be possible to see how the concept of carnival works in Bakhtin’s system of linguistic and literary analysis. It marks a stage in the history of laughter. Hence it belongs to the same category of activity as the

classical saturnalia and the modern comedy show. The pantomime and, above all, the circus clown also belong to this category of mocking laughter, but no other mode of human laughter quite approaches the carnival, in its medieval and early Renaissance manifestations, for the power and thoroughness of its up-endings. For Bakhtin the carnival seems like an especially glamorous moment in the history of laughter because so many people, so many ordinary people whose voices normally would not have been heard, participated in it. The force in which carnival found “its true origin and extra-systemic sanction is,” Holquist observes, “folk laughter.”<sup>14</sup> It worked against the power and compulsion of authoritative discourse: the voices of rulers, of the clergy, of the law. As Bakhtin understands it, carnival was a ritual social event, collective and egalitarian, that played the unofficial voices of the people against the official voices of authority. It is important to observe that it was social, cultural and para-legal and not literary in itself.<sup>15</sup>

As a socio-cultural phenomenon, carnival is to Bakhtin a “syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort” (*P*, p. 122). However, it is possible for writers to borrow carnival humor (all the rude jokes, the billingsgate, the travesties, the mocking violence, the dark bodily grotesqueries) and incorporate them into written discourse. Bakhtin calls this process of incorporation “carnivalization” and it is this, not carnival as such, that lies at the heart of his analysis. For example, it is Rabelais’ mastery of the process by which the images and symbols of carnival life could be transposed into literary images that makes him not only the founder of the novel but the actual highpoint of carnivalesque usage in written discourse. He might be said to have brought to perfection the medieval conventions of carnivalized humor which, as Bakhtin puts it, constituted a “vast and manifold literature of parody” (*R*, p. 24). However, as Andrew McKenna remarks, after Rabelais it “all seems to go downhill... the festive, ambivalent laughter, both gay and mocking, assertive and denying, suffers a progressive ‘degenerative’, with a few circumscribed exceptions...”<sup>17</sup>

Bakhtin himself calls the Renaissance “the high point of carnival life” after which it begins to decline (*P*, p. 26). Thus it is carnivalization, not carnival, that is the specifically literary concept. And, in a paradox not always observed by Bakhtin’s commentators, carnivalization is the wider concept: classical writers understood the process and may be said to have carnivalized popular materials, such as the *saturnalia*, but they did not draw upon carnivals (which are medieval) any more than do modern stand-up comedians when they “carnivalize” popular, mocking humor.

As does everything else in Bakhtin’s analysis, carnival turns upon doubleness. It is dialogic (not monologically impersonal) and many-voiced. Everything serious, Bakhtin observes, “had to have and indeed did have, its comic double” (*D*, p. 58). “Carnival laughter,” he writes, “is the laughter of all the people...it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity.... This laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (*R*,

pp. 11-12). Carnival, then, is a second voice, an unofficial one, that mocks, derides and up-ends (even the laughing speaker's own voice), but it is also, and this seems essential to the definition, a double voice: authority calls it forth and gives it being. For, indeed, as Prince Hal reflects, "If all the year were playing holidays,/To sport would be as tedious as to work" (1 *Henry IV*, ii, 227-28). Carnival always plays against an official discourse: it is the mask (the overt doubleness) of the official discourse (forms, conventions, rules of formation and of expression) that it mocks.

As in the case of socio-cultural carnival phenomena, carnivalized literature displays ambivalence, duality and relativity: there is no unofficial discourse without a prior official discourse to call it forth. The popular comedy that pervades *Don Quijote* (the dialectical variations, the homespun games, the folk sayings, the many vulgarities, both within and without the inns) and that fills Sancho Panza's voice, requires for its effect the prior existence of the labyrinthinely elegant discourse of chivalric romance that, both in stylistic echoes and in essential structure, fills Don Quijote's own voice. In carnival, and in carnivalized literature, the official and the unofficial are locked together, joined in a discursive dance to make a complete, whole utterance. Carnavalesque speech does not destroy or even replace the official voice of authority, it merely completes it, brings it forward to reveal its hidden features. One might say that no one has ever known his/her face until he/she has seen it in caricature. No one knows his/her own discourse until he/she has heard it mocked in parody or lampoon.

Even this cursory account of Bakhtin's view of carnival and carnivalization should indicate clearly how much these concepts, as he understands them, differ from transgression. Even if all carnivalesque gestures (acts, masks and words) are, in some sense, transgressive, it does not follow that all transgression is carnivalesque. The distinction is, precisely, that between the completion of an utterance and its depletion. Whereas Bakhtin's concept of carnival argues for a specific human situation, social and dialogic, in which utterances are made more meaningful, completed, the textualist use of carnival as a synonym for transgression indicates a generalized linguistic condition, even perhaps automatic and inescapable, in which utterances are stripped of their contextual meaning, depleted. Once carnival is abstracted from its trans-linguistic context (as a mode of dialogism, heteroglossia and polyphony), then a number of consequences follow. It becomes, for example, a more generalized term and it loses its peculiarly Bakhtinian connotations of social involvement and wholeness: a rubric for underscoring a wide range of linguistic play. It can even become (and this is very common) thematized as merely one more of the things to look for in a literary text: a wedding feast or rodeo in Kroetsch, a mocking personification or mass hysteria in Coover, an anagram in Nabokov, or a bewilderingly deformed narrative convention in Robbe-Grillet. Michael Holquist acutely observes that the appropriation of the "specifically Bakhtinian notion of carnival" into other systems seems at first to be "quite satisfyingly polyphonic" but actually displays a powerful tendency towards monologism.<sup>18</sup>

Every appropriation of Bakhtin's vocabulary into formal, or textualist, systems of literary analysis reflects an initial act of appropriation. In *Semiotikē: Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, the book that more than any other first brought Bakhtin to the attention of French literary theorists, Julia Kristeva argues that carnival is a transgression, both linguistic and logical, that establishes its own law.<sup>19</sup> That is, the carnivalesque act imposes a law and does so against that to which it is a response: in effect, it replaces its antinomial object. Thus, Kristeva observes, "*le carnaval contest Dieu, autorité et loi sociale; il est rebelle dans la mesure où il est dialogique: il n'est pas étonnant qu'à cause de ce discours subversif, le terme de 'carnaval' ait pris dans notre société une signification fortement péjorative et uniquement caricaturale*" (p. 161). Kristeva does call attention to the dialogic nature of carnival as well as to the "*dyades structurales*" that it creates, but she stresses its subversive and transgressive role in combatting authority. In Kristeva's discussion of carnival, as well as in subsequent appropriations, the importance of the social context in understanding the carnivalesque act (or the carnivalized utterance) is made marginal. In textualist analyses carnival normally becomes a synonym for transgression, *and only transgression*: as its own law it becomes no longer a complement but a replacement that stands in place of that which it transgresses.

If one takes carnival as a mode of play, as equivalent to *ludisme*, say, or as a synecdoche for ludic acts generally, then the focus in which it appears must shift from one formal system to another. Concepts of play are defined differently in different formal systems, and, accordingly, carnival will occupy a somewhat different space in each. In Deconstruction *scriptor ludens* may be said to play only because the game (of writing) plays through him. He plays because the system of language, which he seems to manipulate (and perhaps actually believes that he controls), plays through him, both inevitably and as a matter of course. It is much like saying that football or chess play through the players who play: the play-system precedes the play and only manifests itself in play. One might borrow Heidegger's dictum about language to say that chess plays Capablanca or Karpov. Writing writes *scriptor ludens* whose transgressiveness, or other ludic acts, embodies purely the extent to which he has been himself transgressed.

Once one has defined carnival as transgression, or more complexly as a revolution or a war, a law that replaces another law against which it has transgressed, then it is a direct step to assimilate the concept to any extreme version of *ludisme*, including Deconstruction. In a discussion of the novels of Robbe-Grillet, Vicki Mistacco provides a forceful definition of *ludisme* at this further reach. With unmistakable echoes of Roland Barthes' uses of play in *S/Z*, Mistacco defines *ludisme* as "the open play of signification, as the free and productive interaction of forms, of signifiers and signifieds, without regard for an original or an ultimate meaning."<sup>20</sup> If carnival could be transcribed into a system of textual analysis within which Mistacco's definition functioned axiomatically, then it would become, first, a multiform element in an unending



linguistic process and, second, an involuntary (since inevitable) linguistic function. And, of course, carnival *could be* so transcribed.

This possibility points directly toward Deconstruction. In Deconstruction the “play of signification” appears both as a universal effect and as a necessary condition of language: a view of language that, whatever intellectual joy it promises, places linguistic concepts a vast distance from Bakhtin’s formulation of a translanguistics. In *De la grammatologie*, Derrida makes the point: “*On pourrait appeler jeu l’absence du signifié transcendantal comme illimitation du jeu, c’est-à-dire comme ébranlement de l’ontothéologie et de la métaphysique de la présence.*” Hence, he continues, there is a play of the world that necessarily precedes particular play within the world: “*C’est donc le jeu du monde qu’il faut penser d’abord....*”<sup>21</sup> Play, conceived as freeplay, lies beyond stable, centered structures, makes these structures untenable, decenters them and deprivileges them. (Of course, to say that it “lies beyond” falsely spatializes the problem. Perhaps even to say that it precedes, or is logically prior to, all play within the world must also falsify what does appear to be a nearly inconceivable non-relationship.) It is only a condition of its being, in the freeplay of difference, that all signification (each signifier, every chain of signifiers, any supposable complex of signifiers, in whatever shifting relation to whatever signifieds) decenters.

Derrida also argues, in “*La Structure, le signe et le jeu,*” that the field of freeplay excludes totalization: “*ce champ est en effet celui d’un jeu, c’est-à-dire de substitutions infinies dans la clôture d’un ensemble fini. Ce champ ne permet ces substitutions infinies que parce qu’il est fini, c’est-à-dire parce qu’au lieu d’être un champ inépuisable, comme dans l’hypothèse classique, au lieu d’être trop grand, il lui manque quelque chose, à savoir un centre qui arrête et fonde le jeu des substitutions.*”<sup>22</sup> The permutations of this formula are numerous. In “Living on: Border Lines,” Derrida observes that there is no “shore” or “edge” to discourse but only continuous deferral and hence a text must be taken as a “differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.”<sup>23</sup> Or, as he argues in “*La Structure,*” since concepts are taken from “*une syntaxe et un système, chaque emprunt déterminé fait venir à lui toute la métaphysique*” (*E*, p. 413). Similarly, in his interview with Kristeva in *Positions*, referring to the concept of *gramme* or *différance*, Derrida argues that this *enchaînement* of semiological traces constitutes the text (or, one might say, textuality itself) such that each text is the transformation of another text. Thus: “*Rien, ni dans les éléments ni dans le système, n’est nulle part ni jamais simplement présent ou absent. Il n’y a, de part en part, que des différences et des traces de traces.*”<sup>24</sup> Commenting upon this passage, Jonathan Culler notes that the force of Derrida’s argument (that is, the metamorphic formula of freeplay) is to undermine “the attempt to found a theory of language on positive entities either in the speech event or in the system.”<sup>25</sup> The “open play of signification” (as *différance*, as the endless semiological linkage, as the fabric of traces entailing other traces) must bring to mind that “*profit ludique*” and the

“*galaxie de signifiants*” of which Barthes speaks so lovingly.<sup>26</sup> It is both endless but necessarily linked (*une enchaînement*): that which makes signification possible. The inconceivable unplaying, unplayed linguistic system would be adamantine (monistic, monological) and mute.

Two propositions follow from this metamorphic Deconstructive position: first, play is involuntary and impersonal, a condition as well as an effect, and, second, play is universal. If carnival is assimilated to Deconstructive *ludisme* (or to any weaker formulation of the concept), then what is most distinctively Bakhtinian must become lost: the unique qualities, both personal and social, of individual human utterance. Considered as a concept within Bakhtin’s system of linguistic and literary analysis (that is, considered historically, and perhaps honestly, but not in the only way possible), carnival is not equivalent to the concepts of transgression and *ludisme*. It stands at a long remove from Derrida’s concept of freeplay. Hence evident changes occur within Bakhtin’s concept, both to its nucleus of definition and to the boundaries of its applicability, when it is abstracted and then transformed into a concept that must function within a formal, or textualist, system of analysis. Nonetheless, carnival, like transgression, and like *ludisme* itself, does belong to the conceptual family ruled by the concept of play. It is there because contemporary usage has put it there, of course; it also belongs there as an intuitively evident manifestation of human playfulness. Thus even if carnival is not (properly or validly) a synonym for transgression, it still remains to inquire what internal relationships it bears within the family of play concepts. As a play concept, and only as a play concept, how should one think of carnival? As a play concept, how does it relate to transgression, to *ludisme* and to Deconstructive freeplay?

Derrida’s writing invokes at least three distinct concepts of play. For this reason Bakhtin’s concept of carnival must bear an instable, or shifting, relationship to Derrida’s use of play depending upon which sense of the concept is in focus. Derrida actually discusses play as it has been understood in philosophical discourse. In *La Dissémination*, for instance, he discusses Plato’s understanding of play, its relation to the more generally diffused concept of the *pharmakon*, and in particular the way in which, in Plato’s discourse, the “*la singularité du jeu*” becomes neutralized by its assumption into the concept of game (“*Le jeu se perd toujours en se sauvant dans les jeux*”).<sup>27</sup> At the same time, Derrida often plays in a fairly ordinary sense of the term. Word play, glittering paronomasia, bewildering textual strategies, seemingly a Mad Hatter’s delight in the possibilities of combination and permutation, compile an anthology (or, it might be, a pharmacy) of scribal moves that suggest writers as diverse as Joyce, Nabokov, Sanguinetti, Calvino or many practitioners of *le nouveau roman* and *le nouveau nouveau roman*. Geoffrey Hartman has suggested that *Glas* is, in its “beautiful strangeness,” something like a philosophical *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>28</sup> (Later Hartman develops the analogy further in remarking that in *Glas* the reader seems “to skirt Joyce’s words within words, his ‘echoland’.”)<sup>29</sup> One might extend this

comparison to cover Derrida's *oeuvre* in general. However, it is on the level of freeplay that the contrast with the concepts of carnival and carnivalization seem both sharpest and most instructive. As a term already appropriated by a textualist system, carnival might well describe Derrida's own wordplay (and has, no doubt, been used in this way), but as a dialogic term, indicating how meaning can be created out of the agon between separate monologic and incomplete utterances, carnival opposes freeplay. It does this in an essential, deeply contrastive, way.

As a concept in the most general sense, play possesses two irreducible senses: it may be conceived as freedom or as random motion. This dichotomy constitutes a fundamental opposition (no more trivial, say, than that between liberty and bondage) though one that readily opens to conflation. Indeed, all discussion of play appears vulnerable on this point: as phenomena, play of either kind or play-acts from either category, may seem to be similar and may be given similar descriptive accounts. Whether movement, give-and-take, or plain bouncingness, expresses freedom or random motion may not be discernible from the outside. One must penetrate the phenomena in order to obtain some understanding of their intention or intentionlessness. The opposition turns upon the presence or absence of purpose. A hidden differentia (that is, one that can be known only on extrinsic grounds or by inference) may be actual enough but it must promote conflation.

Play is a philosophically charged term. Though the history of philosophy contains various accounts of the concept of play, accounts that stretch back at least as far as Heraclitus, the central instance of its use, and that from which most modern thinking on the subject stems, can be found in Friederich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. In this series of letters Schiller argues that play constitutes one of three distinctive human drives (*trieb*), drives that urge human beings toward the abstract, on the one hand, and toward the sensual, on the other, with the play-drive providing a principle of mediation. Play, according to Schiller, is the means by which humankind expresses the voluntary and creative dimension of will. One exteriorizes himself in play and one realizes, in unrestricted creativity, the possibilities of imagination (or, as one might now say, in a post-Jungian age, the possibilities of selfhood). One is no longer bound by external limitations in play: though, of course, one does not become infinite in play, merely untrammelled. Schiller puts his point forcefully when he remarks that man "only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays."<sup>30</sup> Play, then, is distinctively human, the source of freedom and self-realization: what is most valuable about human nature.

Perhaps the most well-known contemporary thinker within Schiller's shadow has been Eugen Fink whose *Play as World Symbol* makes a Schillerian point in absolute world terms: in play man actually jumps out of himself and realizes otherwise unrealizable potentialities (though, since this is what Being is doing through the world, he is also a plaything as well as a player).<sup>31</sup> When one encounters the concept of play, from psychoanalysis to children's

folklore, the chances are that one is meeting a Schillerian idea, or at least the vestige of one. Against the psychological concentration of Schiller's thinking with regard to play, one can view play as a kind of random movement, impersonal and wholly natural. Thus one speaks of the play of waves, of light, of rain, of energy, of molecules, and of signification: in all cases, it connotes a random, ceaseless give-and-take, a natural mutability.

The relationship between these two evidently opposed concepts of play can be illustrated by invoking the familiar Structuralist opposition between synchrony and diachrony, between paradigm and syntagm, or to advance Jakobson's formulation, between metaphor and metonymy. These oppositions (they are, of course, modes of the same opposition) are often visualized as the diverging lines of intersecting vertical and horizontal axes. In this simple picture, the vertical axis represents the synchronic availability of choice (hence it represents the paradigmatic possibilities of language) while the horizontal axis represents the diachronic possibilities of combination, the linear sequence of a sentence (hence it represents the syntagmatic possibilities of language). Thus the one sense of play points to the human potential to explore, to play up and through the possibilities of a given paradigm, to create metaphors. The other sense of play, that which I have associated with the concept of freeplay in Deconstruction, points to the human potential to combine, to form endless series of permutations, to create metonymies. The first sense of play might be seen as both the basis for, and the fullest expression of, metaphor; the second, as both the basis for, and the fullest expression of, metonymy. Considered as opposed concepts of play, the differentia that divides them is purposefulness: the presence or absence of an intention.<sup>32</sup>

In the Schillerian perspective, play is always purposeful. Its purpose is, of course, only internal (expressible by the Kantian dictum: the purposeless purpose) but nonetheless actual. The internal purposes of play are the opposites of the compulsive, external purposes that an injunction or a prohibition imparts. The Schillerian sense of play equates play with freedom and creativity. Children in play really are, in some sense, what they play at being and this, too, holds true for the artist who, in his creativity, actualizes possibility. (This freedom may appear to be either a sublime form of sour grapes or the pinnacle of human life.) The opposed view of play, since it postulates only random permutations, makes play into a mode of bondage. Freeplay describes a necessary condition and an inevitable effect, not a willed, free or purposeful act. As suitable metaphors for the Schillerian concept of play might be drawn from any human activity of shaping, molding or forming, so, within the discourse of *ludisme*, an appropriate metaphor for play, or for the freeplay of signification, always transgressive, might be that of a kaleidoscope: an endless linear series of permutations, each spectacular in itself, each different, with no potential for correction, enhancement or culmination.

If one tries to apply the metaphor of a kaleidoscope to Bakhtin's concept of carnival, it must be immediately self evident how weakly applicable it is.

There can be no kaleidoscopism because there is neither randomness nor endlessness. Conversely, there must be correction, enhancement and, above all, culmination. There will not be an endless (nor even an open) play of difference but a wholeness composed of differences within a single utterance. For Bakhtin, "discourse is an action," as Holquist observes, and language itself is an "ecosystem."<sup>33</sup> If one *were* to seek an accurately expressive metaphor for Bakhtin's concept of carnival, then one would have to invoke images from the experience of music, dance, copulation or the movement of spirals: images that suggest necessary union, newness, completion, creativity and wholeness.

Speaking of Bakhtin's discussion of death in carnival dress (*D*, p. 194), Dominic La Capra observes that "with an alacrity that sometimes seems precipitate, Bakhtin underplays the role of anxiety in order to stress the relationship between death and renewal in carnivalesque forms."<sup>34</sup> Carnival, while certainly mocking, undercutting, upending, always a travesty, is also positive. Its positive force arises from the negative act that is its necessary first move: that mocking mask that calls into question the official, or non-carnivalesque, discourse. Thus carnival belongs to the conceptual framework constituted by other Bakhtinian preoccupations such as dialogism, heteroglossia and polyphony. It is a mode of the human double voice. Any discourse in which one monologic level of speech (any single voice, say) is mocked *and* replaced, destroyed in play but not completed, cannot be carnivalesque as Bakhtin appears to understand the term. If travesty and derision create their own laws, and in so doing outlaw the discourse that is the butt of mockery, then it is not carnivalesque. It may well be ludic.

Abstracting the concept of carnival from Bakhtin's discourse and compelling it to labor in a textualist (or neo-formalist) system of literary analysis seems to do an injustice to his use of the concept and to the complexity of his thinking. Carnival and carnivalization are, La Capra remarks, "critical dimensions of life that must coexist and interact with other dimensions" (p. 301). The ceaseless flitting of ludic transgressiveness (always the knife's-edge of infinite negatability), each momentarily stabilized position, whether of law or thought, giving way to the next, is another, and essentially irreconcilable, concept. Milan Kundera puts the authentically Bakhtinian view precisely: "The synthetic power of the novel is capable of combining everything into a unified whole like the voices of polyphonic music."<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it would make sense to distinguish a "strong" from a "weak" use of carnival. Barring that improbable convention, I think that it is clear that when carnival serves textualist analysis, it becomes a lesser concept, a tool of narrower application.

Where, then, does carnival belong in the family of play concepts? Or, what node in the cognitive network of play concepts does it fill? This may seem like a superfluous question — a question that has been sufficiently answered by the opposition between Schiller's and Derrida's concepts of play. Carnival *must be* a Schillerian concept. However, the small problems of literary

theory are seldom solved so effortlessly. In the family of concepts that play rules, not only are there distances but, as well, surprising proximities.

If, as I argued earlier, the differences between the two senses of play can be expressed as the presence or absence of purpose, then it would seem that Bakhtin's concept of carnival must belong to the Schillerian celebration of human volition in play, always both free and intentional. Among other things, carnival is free, voluntary, creative, a manifestation of the human double voice, wholemaking and unique. Yet, in being double and wholemaking, a discursive dance between at least two voices (or other semiologically coherent systems: fashion, mannerisms, architecture, cuisine and so forth), it must also participate in the seriality of all combinations and connections. Bakhtin's concept of carnival might be said, in effect, to occupy the angle between the vertical, paradigmatic axis of metaphor and the horizontal, syntagmatic axis of metonymy. There *is* something on-going about carnival, though it is limited by the finite boundaries of particular utterances.

In a genuinely carnivalesque narrative such as *Don Quijote*—which Bakhtin calls the “classic and purest model of the novel” (*D*, p. 324)—the carnivalized folk humor, the dialectical variants, Sancho's proverbs, the jokes, the crude games that are played upon both Knight and Squire, the many instances of bodily grotesquerie, all contribute, through a short series of permutations, a kind of truncated metonymy, to the completeness of the Knight's character and to that of the peculiar courtly discourse that he has elected to speak. Although the Knight might have written a continuation of the adventures of Don Belianis (so thoroughly has he mastered the system of chivalric romance), still his language requires the completive thrust of mockery. The “grandiloquent nobleman” and the “colloquial peasant,” as Borges calls them,<sup>36</sup> need each other not only for the symmetrical disharmonies of comedy but also in order to establish the nature of the language that each speaks. Thus the situations of carnivalized humor that punctuate the novel make clear the authentic properties of the discourse of the chivalric romances which speak, from the first page, through the Knight's voice. Mocked by Sancho's ironic materialism, confronted by the picaresque inelegancies of Gines de Pasamonte, humiliated by the Knight's failure, restructured freshly in each of the Knight's encounters and narrative accounts, the discourse of romance had never been clearer, nor more clearly seen, than in *Don Quijote*.

In the family of play concepts, Bakhtin's concept of carnival holds an unusual position. It appears to belong to (or to occupy the angle between) both opposed senses of play. Carnival cannot be reduced to either extreme formulation of play. A transgression in Bakhtin's system of analysis would be neither destructive nor a replacing law to itself, but completive. Its transgressiveness would create a new, and richer, situation. One might say that carnival must always enhance the context in which it occurs. Bakhtin's contemporary, L.S. Vygotsky, puts the principle of duality in play succinctly when he observes that freedom in play (the aspect of play that Schiller stresses above all others) is “an illusory freedom for [the child's] actions are

in fact subordinated to the meaning of things.”<sup>37</sup> Carnival is (to borrow Vygotsky’s phrase) “subordinated to the meaning of things” but it is also on-going and completive. The “meaning of things” can scarcely keep its original (but etiolated) clarity and straightforwardness in the face of carnival. Carnival’s essential duality and metonymical on-goingness characterize the concept as much as do its spontaneous and free travesties. Hence, carnival is, in the family of play concepts, both a distinctive and a powerful idea. It does not fare well when it is transformed into a tool of textualist analysis. As a reading of *Don Quijote* makes plain, carnival is a difference contained within, and helping to make, a whole utterance.\*

## NOTES

- 1/ An interest in play or in simulation games in Sociology, say, or in play as an aspect of a learning process in Psychology does not reflect the same conceptual framework as does an interest in mathematical game theory in Economics or Political Science. For the latter see, Anatol Rapoport, *Fights, Games and Debates* (Ann Arbor, 1960) and Rapoport, ed., *Game Theory as a Theory of Conflict Resolution* (Dordrecht, 1974). For an interesting discussion of play in Anthropology, see *The Anthropological Study of Human Play*, ed. Edward Norbeck, *Rice University Studies*, 60, 3 (Summer 1974). The *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 12, 2 (June 1985) is a special issue on play and game concepts in literary studies which includes an extensive (but not exhaustive) bibliography that cites a number of important works written within the disciplines of the Social Sciences.
- 2/ Lubomír Doležel, “Truth and Authenticity in Narrative,” *Poetics Today*, 1, 3 (Spring 1980), 21.
- 3/ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris, 1963), p. 9.
- 4/ David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Boston, 1981), p. 15.
- 5/ Doležel, “Kafka’s Fictional World,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 11, 1 (March 1984), 61-83.
- 6/ Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of The Fantastic* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 311-38.
- 7/ For a discussion of this problem, see R. R. Wilson, “Godgames and Labyrinths: The Logic of Entrapment,” *Mosaic*, 14, 4 (December 1982), 1-22.
- 8/ Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris, 1972), p. 188; in English: *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca, N. Y., 1980), p. 168.
- 9/ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s analysis of the distinction, in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London, 1983), pp. 1-28, is succinct and acute.
- 10/ See the chapter “Generative Word Play: The Outer Limits of the Novel Genre,” in Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London, 1984), pp. 118-37.
- 11/ Michael Holquist, “The Politics of Representation,” in *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979-80.*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore, 1981), p. 164.
- 12/ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 6; henceforth abbreviated as *P*.
- 13/ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), p. 52; henceforth abbreviated as *D*.
- 14/ Holquist, “Bakhtin and Rabelais: Theory as Praxis,” *Boundary 2*, 11, 1-2 (Fall/Winter 1983), 13.

- 15/ Interesting comments upon carnival as a socio-cultural phenomenon in France are made in Natalie Zemon Davis' *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975). An examination of one historical carnival can be found in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Le Carnaval de Romans: De la Chandeleur au mercredi des Cendres 1579-1580* (Paris, 1979). The carnival in Paris during the nineteenth century is examined in Alain Faure's *Paris Carême-prenant: Du Carnaval au XIX Siècle 1800-1914* (Paris, 1978). An account of carnivals in Spain can be found in Julio Caro Baroja's *El Carnaval: Analisis Historico-Cultural*, 2nd ed. (Madrid, S.A., 1979). A general view of contemporary carnivals in Europe and South America is given in Shaitane's *Carnaval* (Paris, 1979). Marie Chicoine, et al., eds., examine popular, or carnivalesque, festivities in Quebec and New Brunswick in *Lâches Lousses: Les fêtes populaires au Québec, en Acadie et en Louisiane* (Montreal, 1982). If the history of carnival were to be written, it would necessarily be a vast and complex affair. Something similar to that end was achieved during an exhibition devoted to European carnivals held in Paris at the Centre Pompidou during the spring of 1984.
- 16/ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 4.
- 17/ Andrew McKenna, "After Bakhtin: On the Future of Laughter and Its History in France," *University of Ottawa Quarterly*, 53, 1 (January-March 1983), 68.
- 18/ Holquist, "The Carnival of Discourse: Bakhtin and Simultaneity," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 12, 2 (June 1985), 220.
- 19/ Julia Kristeva, *Semiotikē* (Paris, 1969), p. 144.
- 20/ Vicki Mistacco, "The Theory and Practice of Reading Nouveaux Romans," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crossman (Princeton, 1980), p. 375, n. 6.
- 21/ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967), p. 73; in English: *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), p. 50.
- 22/ Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris, 1967), p. 423; henceforth abbreviated as *E*; in English: *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1978), p. 289; a slightly different version of the same text, with the original questions and answers of the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference, can be found in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, 1972), p. 260.
- 23/ Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines," in Harold Bloom, et al. eds., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York, 1979), pp. 82, 84.
- 24/ Kristeva, *Positions* (Paris, 1972), p. 38; in English: *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1981), p. 26.
- 25/ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), p. 99.
- 26/ Roland Barthes, *S/Z: Essai* (Paris, 1970), pp. 171, 12; in English: *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1974), pp. 165, 5.
- 27/ Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris, 1972), pp. 181-82; in English: *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981), pp. 157-58.
- 28/ Geoffrey Hartman, "Monsieur Texte: On Jacques Derrida: His *Glas*," *Georgia Review*, 29, 4 (Winter 1975), 760-61.
- 29/ Hartman, "Monsieur Texte II: Epiphony in Echoland," *Georgia Review*, 30, 1 (Spring 1976), 174.
- 30/ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford, 1967), p. 107.
- 31/ Eugen Fink, *Das Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Stuttgart, 1960). An introduction to Fink's thinking on the subject of play can be found in "The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play," trans. Ute and Thomas Saine, *Yale French Studies*, 41 (1968), 19-30.



- 32/ The applicability of the semiological model showing the opposition between paradigm and syntagm to the analysis of play concepts was first suggested to me by Smaro Kamboureli during the Bakhtin conference held at Queen's University, October 1983.
  - 33/ Holquist, "Answering as Authoring," *Critical Inquiry*, 10, 2 (December 1983), 311; the metaphor of an "ecosystem" appears in Holquist's essay, "The Carnival of Discourse."
  - 34/ Dominick La Capra, *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), p. 294.
  - 35/ Milan Kundera, "Afterword: A Talk with the Author," in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, ed. Philip Roth (New York, 1981), p. 232. Kundera elaborates this point in an essay, "The Novel and Europe," in *The New York Review of Books*, trans. David Bellos, 31, 12 (July 19, 1984), 15-19.
  - 36/ "About The Purple Land," in *Borges A Reader: A Selection from the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Emir Rodriguez Monegal and Alastair Reid (New York, 1981), p. 136.
  - 37/ L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. and trans. Michael Cole, et al. (Cambridge, 1978), p. 103.
- \*This is a revised version of a paper first given at the international conference on *Mikhail Bakhtin, His Circle, His Influence* that took place at Queen's University, October 1983.